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# Talking about talking about death: an ethnographically informed study of Death Cafés in the UK using neo-tribal theory

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# Abstract

This thesis explores the meanings, values and practices associated with organising and participating in Death Café events in the United Kingdom. Death Café is a not-for-profit international social franchise founded in 2011 in London, UK. Death Café events are informal, pop-up gatherings where people, usually strangers, come together to engage in an unguided conversation about death and dying.

There is a lack of academic inquiry into how Death Café participant interactions unfold within the events, with many studies aiming instead to evaluate the impact of instrumental applications of the Death Café model in various educational and institutional contexts. This thesis addresses this gap by providing rich ethnographic insights into the group dynamics within Death Café meetings in the UK. It draws on data generated during participant observation in 20 Death Café events, 14 Death Café conversation recordings, and 49 interviews with Death Café organisers and attendees over a 16-month period of fieldwork. As such, this is also currently the most extensive empirically grounded study of the Death Café franchise.

The insights from this research revealed that participants primarily perceive Death Café as a convivial, sociable and invigorating activity that allows them to experience a sense of collectivity with strangers and reinforce their shared sentiment that it is important to talk about death. This thesis explores how achieving this largely positive experience is collectively negotiated in Death Café events. The key empirical topics considered are the spatial organisation of Death Cafés (Chapter 4); conversational strategies for achieving an enjoyable and valued conversation (Chapter 5); participants' emotional and cognitive efforts to relate to strangers (Chapter 6); and understandings and broader cultural meanings of intimacy emerging between said strangers (Chapter 7).

Fundamentally, this study revealed that collectively agreeing with strangers that it is good to talk about death (talking about talking about death) contributes more to the enjoyment and perceived success of Death Café than talking about death directly.

The data is examined within a theoretical framework of neo-tribal theory (Maffesoli, 1996[1988]) with a view of advancing its interdisciplinary relevance to the analysis of group social encounters. This thesis also contributes to the interdisciplinary field of death studies by suggesting that neo-tribal theory is a valuable theoretical enhancement to Michael Hviid Jacobsen's (2016) concept of 'spectacular death'. Overall, I define Death Café(s) as novel space(s) for temporary collectivity where people can share a sense of fellowship with like-minded others concerning their interest in discussing matters of death and dying.

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## **Author's declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Solveiga Zibaite

Signature:

## Chapter 1. Introduction

“Deaf Café?”

“Death Café!”

“Deaf Café?”

“Death Café?”

“Deaf Café?”

“Death! D-E-A-T-H!”

This is how Death Café organiser Victoria re-enacted what usually happens when she tells people that Death Cafés exist. According to Victoria, she often has to reassure surprised people that she has not mispronounced the word ‘deaf’. In this particular case, Victoria ended up spelling out the word ‘death’ after what she thought was an amusingly lengthy back and forth between herself and the person she was speaking to.

Victoria’s main occupation is being a death doula. It is an emerging, lay, or quasi-professional end-of-life care role in the global North that involves providing a diversity of nonmedical supports – social, emotional, practical, and spiritual – for people nearing the end of life and those close to them (Krawczyk and Rush, 2020:1). For Victoria, thinking about death and being around it is her bread and butter, and in the form of organising Death Cafés - an enjoyable pastime. For her, the idea of Death Café is straightforward and she told me she found it ‘weird’ that people didn’t know it existed or were not able to grasp its simplicity<sup>1</sup>.

Another Death Café organiser, Tina, had worked as a nurse and a teacher before training to become a funeral celebrant in her middle age. Somewhat like Victoria, she expressed bemusement that people might think Death Cafés are something else besides what they ‘obviously are’, as she put. Tina recalled an

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<sup>1</sup> The name ‘Death Café’ refers both to the overall franchise and to specific events. In the thesis, the singular ‘Death Café’ is used to refer to the umbrella organisation, idea, and philosophy. Plural ‘Death Cafes’ is used to refer to events/meetings. I also often use the specification ‘Death Café event’.

attendee who came to her event by mistake as they had thought that the invitation to a 'Death Café' meant that there would be a spiritualist séance taking place. Tina said: 'Death Café is very simple. It calls it what it is. It's a Death Café - it's about death and it's about a café. It does what it says on the tin'. And the writing 'on the tin' is as follows:

At a Death Café people, often strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death.

Our objective is *'to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives'*.

A Death Café is a group-directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives or themes. It is a discussion group rather than a grief support or counselling session (Impermanence, 2011, original italics)

Throughout my research, which consisted of attending 20 Death Café events around the UK from March 2018 to June 2019 and interviewing Death Café organisers and attendees, the prevailing narrative I encountered among organisers was that Death Café *really* is that simple. The majority of Death Café attendees I spoke to, found the title 'Death Café' and what it entailed in practice - talking about death with strangers - endearingly straightforward. Overall, Death Café was lauded for showing that easefulness and even enjoyment are possible when broaching what for many is a sensitive subject. Thus, it must be emphasised at the outset that primarily this thesis is about people who hold a positive, if not enthusiastic, attitude towards the overall value of Death Café. In this context, I was prompted to examine how the straightforwardness of Death Café conversations is understood and enacted in Death Café gatherings.

An important part of this narrative of simplicity is the role of death as a sensitive and intimate conversation topic that one usually does not talk about with strangers. This is connected to the widespread idea that death is 'taboo' in the contemporary Western world and that it is generally professionalised, sequestered, and out of sight from daily life (Walter, 1991; Zimmerman and Rodin, 2004). My research in this case directly responds to eminent sociologist and death studies scholar Tony Walter's wish to see 'more fine-grained research into different micro settings to see where death is and is not taboo' (Walter, in Jacobsen, 2021:12). This thesis questions whether Death Cafés truly are spaces

where death is not 'taboo'. Can Death Café attendees really speak about death freely? Is there anything special about death as a conversational topic that makes these conversations inherently deep? Swiss anthropologist Bernard Crettaz, the creator of *Cafés Mortels* - the events that inspired Death Cafés - seemed to think so.

Crettaz held *Cafés Mortels*, events where people would meet in a café environment, enjoy refreshments and talk openly about death, in Switzerland and France from 2004 to 2010. He observed that talking about death freely with strangers allowed 'the assembled company, for a moment, and thanks to death, to be born into authenticity' (Crettaz, 2010:124, my translation). Crettaz, just like most Death Café organisers and attendees, claimed that talking about a fate everyone ultimately has to experience can reveal something special about the people who have gathered - the depths, the 'authenticity' within individuals and the temporary bond between them. Thus, in addition to examining how the conversation is understood as simple and straightforward, this thesis also sets out to explore by what means this conversation can have a revelatory aspect.

There is also something to be said about the nature of the aforementioned 'assembled company'. In my research, I encountered many people who stressed that talking about death specifically with strangers is the main attraction of Death Café. Thus, this thesis also sets out to explore what it means to *be* strangers and be *with* strangers at a Death Café. How are these strangers, most of whom have never met and are likely to not meet again, able to engage in what they described to me as 'authentic', 'honest', and 'powerful' interactions?

These three key elements: the perceived simplicity of the Death Café conversation; the power of the topic of death to help people understand each other and themselves; and the perception of the importance of being strangers have become building blocks for the thesis. The Death Café meeting is the locus of these experiences. Collectively, my research participants brought out various aspects of the value of simply being together with others in a dedicated space, which pointed me in the direction of theories concerned with occasions of being together and the energy connected to the communal experience. Specifically, I encountered neo-tribal theory which, broadly speaking, is concerned with how

people, coming from diverse walks of life, form ephemeral yet powerfully experienced feelings of mutual affinity and belonging and how certain spaces can facilitate the emergence of these feelings. My research thus inquires into the dynamics of being together at a Death Café.

This research also thematically contributes to the field of death studies. Death studies, however, is not a subject; it does not have its own theories or methods, nor does it have a secure place within the academy (Walter, in Jacobsen, 2021:6). Death studies is an interdisciplinary field, hence a death studies researcher, as per Walter's suggestion, first 'needs to identify with an established discipline - sociology, anthropology, religious studies, psychology - and demonstrate competence in their chosen discipline' (ibid). Thus, this thesis, coming from Glasgow End-of-life Studies Group, School of Interdisciplinary Studies is interdisciplinary in spirit but is fundamentally built on the pillars of a discipline I am trained in - social anthropology.

In this chapter, I provide the necessary background for the rest of the thesis. First, I introduce the intellectual origins of Death Café and trace the franchise's development from a small gathering of friends and acquaintances in a basement in Hackney, London in 2011 to an international phenomenon. Then, I look at Death Café in the context of the Death Awareness movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the contemporary Death Positive movement. This leads to a discussion of the current academic contributions to the study of Death Café and an outline of my contributions. Finally, I provide an outline of the ensuing thesis chapters.

## 1.1 History of Death Cafés

As I touched on earlier, the idea of Death Café was inspired by Swiss anthropologist Bernard Crettaz's *Café Mortel* gatherings (Underwood, 2014b). In a book dedicated to the subject, *Cafés Mortels: Sortir la mort du silence* (2010), Crettaz explained that he had created *Café Mortel* as part of his quest to 'liberate death from secrecy' (Crettaz, 2010:87) caused by a rise of 'medico-socio-therapeutic' (ibid) control over death in the twentieth century. Drawing from culture and traditions around death in his hometown of the Valley of Anniviers, Switzerland, Crettaz conceived *Café Mortel* meetings as a nostalgic

descendent to and modern application of the declining tradition of *repas d'enterrement* (funeral meal/feast) (Crettaz, 2010:32-33, 116, my translation). The first *Café Mortel* was held in a restaurant in the picturesque town of Neuchâtel on 23rd March 2004 (Crettaz, 2010:16) and was attended by 250 people (ibid). By the end of 2009, 40 *Cafés Mortels* had taken place in each of Switzerland's districts, with 30-300 people per event (Crettaz, 2010:17). Crettaz held the first *Café Mortel* outside Switzerland in 2010, in Paris, France (Guinness, 2010). The event's coverage by *The Independent* newspaper (Guinness, 2010) was the first English language publication on the *Café Mortel* initiative. Jon Underwood, an English council worker and web developer, happened to come across it (Underwood, 2012:4).

Jon Underwood's (1972-2017) interest in death and dying was driven by his Buddhist beliefs (Tremonti, 2016). He was a student at the Jamyang Buddhist centre in London and managed it from 2000 to 2002 (Poetic Endings, 2017). Underwood wanted to expand his death-related interests based on Buddhist philosophy and used the banner *Impermanence* for his work beyond Death Café. This work includes a directory and review website for the UK funeral industry - Funeral Advisor (Impermanence, 2016), created in collaboration with the Natural Death Centre, a charity founded in 1991 and providing free advice and support surrounding death, bereavement, and consumer rights (Natural Death Centre, 2022). Underwood also volunteered in a hospice and trained in the spiritual care for the dying and he eventually 'gave up a well-paid, very boring, but secure council job to pursue Death Café' (My Wishes, 2014).

While Crettaz's *Café Mortel* model is widely acknowledged as the main inspiration for Underwood's Death Café, based on the principle that 'contemporary society doesn't make it easy for people to talk about death' (Underwood, 2012:3), Death Café does not draw extensively from the philosophy of *Café Mortel*. One reason is that Crettaz's book on the subject (2010) is only available in French and since Underwood did not speak this language, he was unable to read it (Underwood, 2012:4; Tremonti, 2016). Underwood developed the Death Café model with the help of his psychotherapist mother Sue Barsky Reid based on what was accessible of Crettaz's work in English (Underwood, 2012:4). The original guide for hosting a Death Café (Underwood, 2012) included

a history of the initiative to date, plans for future development, some tips about hosting, example event schedules, writing exercises, and a feedback form.

Death Cafés are pop-up events, indicating that it is a ‘gathering, not a physical space like a restaurant, and signifying that these events are not planned or scheduled on a regular basis’ (Miles and Corr, 2017:152). The main principles of the Death Café model are that it is a group-directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives, or themes and does not serve as grief support or counselling session. Death Cafés are always offered:

- On a not-for-profit basis
- In an accessible, respectful and confidential space
- With no intention of leading people to any conclusion, product or course of action
- Alongside refreshing drinks and nourishing food - and cake! (Underwood, 2013a:1)

There are more extensive rules outlined in the updated version of the ‘Guide to Running your own Death Café’ (Underwood, 2013a) which can be found in Appendix K of the thesis. In the guide, *Café Mortel* is mentioned only once, as an inspiration to serve cake and coffee as ‘nothing marks the community of the living like sharing food and drink’ (Underwood, 2013a:4).

The first Death Café was hosted in Underwood’s house in Hackney, East London, on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2011 and was attended by 6 people (Underwood, 2011). Underwood sent out a press release after that (Underwood, 2012:5) and the first-ever piece on Death Café titled ‘Death is the only subject at this sad café’ appeared in the *Evening Standard* on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2011 (Evening Standard, 2011). In the last quarter of 2011, Underwood held three more Death Cafés with a further 14 people attending (Underwood, 2012:5). In January 2012, Death Café was invited to be a part of a festival in Royal Festival Hall in London which featured talks, music, performance, and poetry on the subject of death. Underwood reported it was a success, as 49 people attended the Death Cafés over the festival weekend (Underwood, 2012:5). At this point, Underwood had also contacted Crettaz through a French-speaking friend and received his blessing to continue (Underwood, 2012:5; Nkemi, 2014a).

Death Café operates as a social franchise, meaning anyone who agrees and signs up to its guidelines and principles can use the name to host gatherings. The first person to pick up Death Café outside the UK was an American hospice worker Lizzy Miles (Miles and Corr, 2017:155). She organised her first Death Café in Ohio on July 19, 2012. Miles contributed to the updated version of the Death Café guide (Underwood, 2013a) to include ‘further guideline descriptions and restrictions to address modifications put in place by well-meaning hosts that changed the essence of the event’ (Miles and Corr, 2017:152). Organisers hosting Death Cafés in the USA are obligated to mention her name alongside Underwood and Crettaz (Underwood, 2013a). The international spread of Death Café was well documented in a study by Richards et al. (2020) who showed that at the point of their data collection in 2018 the Death Café concept had spread from England to at least 34 other territories/countries and that this number continues to grow each year (Richards et al., 2020:27). Death Café is particularly well established in the English-speaking ‘West’: the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia, to a lesser extent in Western Europe (Koksvik and Richards, 2021). The official Death Café Facebook and Twitter pages boast 65000 and 24000 followers respectively as of January 2022. These pages are run by an American social worker Megan Mooney. Many local Death Cafés have their own Facebook pages.

The official Death Café website ([www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)) is the main information resource for organisers around the world. It hosts an extensive guide on how to hold your own Death Café, advice about adhering to guidelines, finding a venue, publicising their events and navigating possible disagreements. Registering one’s Death Café event on the official website is one of the requirements and an interactive map depicts locations around the world where Death Cafés have taken place (see Fig. 1).



## Death Cafe worldwide map



As of today there have been 13576 Death Cafes in 81 countries:

**Figure 1. Death Café worldwide map. Retrieved from [www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com) on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2022.**

In my research, I found that the data on the website about Death Cafés taking place is inaccurate. Many people forget to post their events online as they prefer to share the details on local notice boards or by word of mouth. Already at the beginning of 2014, Jon Underwood said: ‘There have now been 450 Death Cafés listed on our website, and many more that haven’t’ (Underwood, 2014a), noting that it is impossible to control or credibly monitor the spread. This also has consequences for the international tracking of the movement, as noted by Richards et al. (2020). The authors attempted to contact Death Café organisers from every single country listed on the Death Café website - 51 at the time (Richards et al., 2020:11) - only to encounter dead links and non-responses. At the time of submission of this thesis, the Death Café website states that events have been held in 81 countries (Death Café, 2021b).

The global relevance and success of the Death Café initiative are often evidenced in the media by quoting the number of events (Tucker, 2014; Norum, 2015; Hui, 2017; Groome, 2017; Life.Death.Whatever, 2018; Appleton, 2019; Italie and Leshner, 2020 just to name a few). Pinpointing these inconsistencies

shows that these numbers should not be taken at face value, yet they form a part of a rhetoric of success. The data on the website, while not without drawbacks, nevertheless shows a general trend of growth of Death Cafés in the UK (see Appendix A).

As resistance to this new initiative, in 2013, the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England initiated The GraveTalk project, which is directly adapted from Death Café model (Kevern and Sanders, 2015:22). It was created as part of the church's response to the 'changing sociology of death and dying across UK' (Kevern and Sanders, 2015:21). The reasoning behind GraveTalk was that if the Church of England is to fulfil its role of accompanying people of all religious commitments and none through the experience of death and funerals, it must seek to develop 'death confident' congregations in which dying, and mortality can be discussed relatively openly and easily (ibid). GraveTalk is aided by 52 different question cards, designed to prompt conversations, which is a significant difference from Death Café, where conversations are intended to be unguided and free-flowing. GraveTalk cards have a mix of practical questions, such as: 'Where is your will?', 'How would you help a grieving friend?', and philosophical questions, such as: 'If you knew you were dying, what would you change in your life?', 'What might heaven be like?' (United Benefice of Norton, Crowton, and Kingsley, 2017). GraveTalk has not received as much media or academic attention (for this mainly see Kevern and Sanders, 2015; Dewar et al., 2017). Stephen Green, National Director of Christian Voice has even voiced strong disapproval of Death Café, saying that:

Death Café protagonists will deny their project has anything to do with suicide, but even if it's just a sales pitch for undertakers, popularising the idea of death, glamourising it with skulls and black icing won't exactly help vulnerable teenagers (Christian Voice UK, 2015:2:35-2:50).

Green ended his talk by saying that 'people need Life Cafés, not Death Cafés, and they are held in churches' (Christian Voice UK, 2015:3:35-3:51). Some Death Café organisers choose to use GraveTalk cards as conversation prompts (Ashworth, 2017), but in general, Death Café organisers I interviewed held a strong preference for Death Café over GraveTalk, possibly a similar attitude held by GraveTalk proponents towards Death Café.

Bernard Crettaz hosted the very last *Café Mortel* in Lausanne, Switzerland on the 31st of October 2014. Jon Underwood attended it and had a chance to talk with Crettaz about the future of Death Café (Underwood, 2014b). One of the things they discussed was Underwood's project to establish a brick-and-mortar central Death Café in London. Crettaz was apprehensive about it (ibid), and I discuss this specific disagreement in Chapter 4. The project did not gather enough funds from financial backers and was eventually abandoned.

Since 2015 there has been a significant increase of Death Café events held in May, compared to the rest of the year. This is due to yearly Dying Matters Awareness Week, an initiative championed by the 'Dying Matters' Coalition, taking place throughout May since 2010. The coalition was set up in 2009 by the National Council for Palliative Care to promote public awareness of dying, death, and bereavement in the UK (Dying Matters, 2018). Throughout Dying Matters Awareness Week, a varied itinerary of events and activities incorporating practical support, literacy, arts, and theatre are held all over the country to raise awareness about end-of-life issues. In Scotland, Death Awareness Weeks coinciding with Dying Matters awareness week in England and Wales have been organised since 2013 by Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief alliance, an initiative of the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care (Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief, 2020). Death Cafés seem to have become a staple Awareness Week event to be organised by various individuals and institutions (Hospice UK, 2021).

Jon Underwood died unexpectedly on the 23rd of June 2017 from undiagnosed leukaemia. After his death, Death Café has been run in a voluntary capacity by his sister Jools Barsky, mother Sue Barsky Reid, and wife Donna Molloy. Jon Underwood had a Buddhist funeral at the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London (Poetic Endings, 2017). Underwood's death had symbolic meaning to some Death Café organisers. For example, Victoria from East Bromwich, who held Buddhist beliefs, commented as follows:

I think of him as like a bodhisattva<sup>2</sup> actually. He came to impart this gift. He was very selfless, he never made any money, it was just his mission, and he kind of accomplished his mission and then he dropped

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<sup>2</sup> In Buddhism, one who seeks awakening (bodhi)— an individual on the path to becoming a buddha (Silk, 2016)

dead hahaha! It sounds terrible doesn't it, laughing about it? But honestly, the way that he died... He used to say: 'We only have this moment, we don't know if we have tomorrow, we need to live and recognise that one day we're not going to be here and make the most of this moment now'. And then to suddenly just die, kind of pretty much overnight, it was just astonishing. It left such an imprint. Just kind of made me smile really, you know, not as a human being, I'm not his family, but if I think for me, because I think of him as a bodhisattva, I just do a little silent bow: 'Job well done'. There's something about it that felt very symbolic.

I have broadly outlined the origins and spread of Death Cafés in the UK and the key points in the initiative's development so far. I will now take a step back and situate Death Café in the broader context of cultural phenomena emphasising the importance of discussions about death and dying. This discussion will contribute to my definition of Death Café in relation to broader death and dying activism trends of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries - the Death Awareness movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the contemporary Death Positive movement.

## **1.2. Is Death Café unique in its fight against the 'death taboo'?**

In a blog post from 2013, written in response to the publication of the article 'Death is having a moment' (Hayasaki, 2013) in *The Atlantic*, Jon Underwood pondered what led to Death Café becoming popular worldwide:

Death Café seems to have arrived at precisely the time loads of people wanted to talk about death. And there is currently a profusion of exciting and vibrant work around death. It's really wonderful to be involved. Maybe this is happening because we're all so brilliant and clever. But in the unlikely event that this isn't the case there's the question about 'why now?'. Any thoughts? (Underwood, 2013b)

The post received nine Death Café practitioner responses, all mentioning the need to fight the death taboo. This is not a new sentiment as death becoming a taboo in the modern Western world is a subject of much discussion in death studies (see Ariès, 1974, 1981; Gorer, 1965; Illich, 1976; Simpson, 1987; Seale, 1998; Walter, 1994). In this discourse, death is said to be removed from the everyday life of most people in the post-industrial global North (Walter, 2017:107), left to the professionals and overly medicalised. The general view is also that the alleged taboo on death is unhealthy and unhelpful (see Walter,

1994). Death taboo is a kindred term to 'death denial', the relationship between them explained clearly by Robert and Tradii (2017) in their genealogy of death denial narratives in historical and sociological literature. The 'death taboo' makes death invisible, inaccessible, unspeakable. The authors write that it can be understood as part of death denial, a process where the reality of death is not acknowledged and death no longer generated a social bond, nor had any spiritual significance (Robert and Tradii, 2017:251). Thus, death taboo is 'a staple of death-denial narrative' (Robert and Tradii, 2017:253). Challenging this taboo is a foundational premise of the Death Café franchise.

Many scholars are not convinced about the presence of death taboo and death denial in the West. Reactions to the death denial thesis range from it being 'at best overstated and under-nuanced' (Walter, 1991) to the 'most unhelpful and unnecessary death and dying argument that dogmatically persists today' (Troyer, 2019:xiii). The paradox that there are so many academic publications on death (see Simpson, 1987; Robert and Tradii, 2017) and that death-related imagery and themes are abundant in popular culture (Foltyn, 2008; Penfold-Mounce, 2018; Teodorescu and Jacobsen, 2019) has prompted academics to 'thoroughly challenge how and why the death taboo argument is used, abused and greatly exaggerated' (Troyer, 2019:xiv). Robert and Tradii (2017) go even further and argue vehemently against the very relevance of the question of death taboo to death studies. I will not be arguing for or against the existence of death denial and death taboo; instead, I will engage in a discussion about situating Death Café among initiatives that exist precisely because they assert the existence of the death taboo.

One of the most illuminating and longstanding accounts on how the death taboo is constructed is Lyn Lofland's *The Craft of Dying* (1978) where she scrutinised the Death Awareness movement in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. Lofland defined the Death Awareness movement as a 'sprawling, diverse, multi-structured, diffuse assemblage of individuals, organisations, and activities, concerned with promoting a change in American society with regard to its beliefs, emotional responses, and legal and normative practices about death and dying' (Lofland, 1978:77). The main features of these uncoordinated efforts have been succinctly summarised by Kenneth Doka:

It was concerned with the rights and dignity of the dying. It proclaimed the naturalness of death. It denounced dehumanising technology. It emphasised openness toward death and sharing with the dying (Doka, 2003:50).

These broad efforts to effect individual, cultural and institutional change have been dubbed by other scholars as ‘the natural death movement’, ‘death and dying movement’, ‘death with dignity movement’ (Lofland, 1978:101). Lofland had her own name for this phenomenon - the Happy Death movement (ibid). Lofland critiqued the emphasis on positivity and expressivity and ‘utilisation of talk’ as a reform activity (Lofland, 1978:100), which ‘demands transforming and accepting death/dying/mortality at all costs’ (Troyer, 2019:xvii). She considered this a ‘fashion’ (Troyer, 2019:xiii), befitting the ideals of ‘presumably secular middle-class professionals’ (Lofland, 1978:94), who were also the main proponents of these efforts. Despite this critique, the Death Awareness movement has made exceptional strides in the formation of hospice and proliferation of higher education courses on death, dying, and bereavement. While death studies overall show a lack of engagement with social movement literature (with a notable exception of the right-to-die movement, studied extensively as a New Social Movement (McInerney, 2000)), following Lofland, it is not my goal to ‘argue for the appropriate “type” classification for the phenomena at issue here’ (Lofland, 1978:77). What calls for attention, however, and has been picked up by Lofland, is the idea that social movements need *enemies* (Lofland, 1978:88, emphasis in text).

Lofland (1978:88) argued that death denial was just such an enemy - continuously consciously constructed as something to actively denounce, without any concrete evidence of its existence in daily life. Lofland argued that the absence of death in public discourse needn’t have been analysed by constructing the notions of death taboo and denial. Such silence could be accounted for by looking at demographic and other changes, such as the prolongation of life through technology and medicine, the bureaucratisation of death, and the secularisation of the process of dying. Consequentially, people had more choice over end-of-life and a new category of ‘the dying’ (Lofland, 1978:34-35) was created. It took time for the category to become aware of itself and its new

unique position in the human lifecycle, but once ‘a critical mass’ (Lofland, 1978:37) was reached, the discussions spilled over to the wider public.

This compelling academic narrative applies to the continuing contemporary crusade against the death taboo, most widely known as the Death Positive movement. Akin to the Death Awareness movement, the Death Positive movement is an amorphous concept that spans ‘many initiatives and subcultural lifestyle trends’ (Koksvik, 2021:951) that advocate various measures against the death taboo. Elsewhere I have described it as ‘originating and operating predominantly in the global West, specifically the United States, connecting death workers, educators, artists, journalists, etc., and geared towards encouraging open dialogue about death and dying’ (Zibaite, 2020:157). As Francis claims in the epilogue to the 40<sup>th</sup>-anniversary edition of *The Craft of Dying* (2019), participants in the contemporary Death Positive movement adhere to two of the basic tenets Lofland identified: ‘If we are to die better, we must talk about it and we must legislate for it’ (Francis, 2019:88), which can be seen especially in the efforts to diversify body disposal options and promoting green death technologies (Recompose, 2011; Ask a Mortician, 2017). Familiarisation with the biological processes of death and dying is emphasised with a view of accepting death as a natural event. Manifestations of death denial for Death Positive activists include transhumanist technologies such as cryonics, which Cohen (2020) observed were also considered spaces of privilege for white, upper-class males. This example shows how the rhetoric of the existence and fight against death denial persists and evolves alongside death technologies.

The term ‘Death Positive’ was coined in 2013 by a millennial LA-based mortician Caitlin Doughty who spearheads an activist and artist collective The Order of The Good Death (founded in 2011, the same year as Death Café). She is also the face of the ‘Ask a Mortician’ YouTube channel with 1,7 million subscribers as of January 2022, where she posts humorous educational videos about death and dying. The meaning of Death Positive comes from ‘sex positive’, as she explained, meaning not being ashamed of your interest in a taboo topic and educating yourself and others about it (The Order of Good Death, 2016). There are Death Positive computer games, such as *A Mortician’s Tale* (Laundry Bear Games, 2017), apps like *We croak* (We Croak, 2019), which sends a reminder one is going to die five times a day, merchandise, such as t-shirts with words ICONIC

CORPSE and coffee mugs with an outline of Caitlin Doughty's signature long black hair with thick fringe (Doughty, 2020). Despite its relatively short existence, the Death Positive movement has been critiqued for being performative instead of disruptive (Francis, 2019) - exactly what Lofland would call a fad or a fashion. Mostly appealing to young white internet-savvy creatives (DeathRookie, 2016), and spear-headed by middle-class white women, the Death Positive movement has been accused of being 'terribly tone-deaf to the realities of those groups of people who are not overwhelmingly participating in the movement' (ibid).

Death Café is often reported to be a branch of the Death Positive movement by journalists (Bateman, 2017; Penrose, 2019; Italie and Leshner, 2020) and scholars (Morgan, 2017; Baldwin, 2017, Koksvik, 2021). It is often clumped together with various other initiatives such as the Death Over Dinner initiative which promotes guided dinner conversations with friends, family, or colleagues (Hebb, 2018), the rise of the death doula profession (Leland, 2018), green death movement (Rumble, 2017), among others. As Koksvik (2021) pointed out, because definitions are not clear cut, it is fair to reasonably disagree as to whether something comes under the umbrella of the Death Positive movement. Koksvik, for example, considered various contemporary phenomena, such as the increased popularity of dying memoirs, a proliferation of popular literature to encourage planning for the end-of-life (Koksvik, 2021:956) to be part of the Death Positive movement even if such initiatives did not explicitly position themselves as such. Equally then it is possible to argue that the Death Positive movement is just a more visible, hip, younger version of the Death Awareness (or the Happy Death) movement and not a separate entity.

Francis noted that many participants experience the Death Positive movement as new, which is a misconception that news accounts continuously reinforce (Francis, 2019:91). Tony Walter, for example, does not address 'Death Positivity' as a term in his textbook *What Death Means Now* (2017), instead, he refers to the whole broad cultural move to incite change in attitudes and practices concerning death, dying, and bereavement as 'Death Awareness'. Koksvik provides a compelling argument about the difference between the Death Awareness movement from the 1960s and 70s and the contemporary Death Positive movement. She writes that the former coincided with a wider critique



of modernity, while the latter is intimately linked to identity politics, lifestyle industries, and commercial interests (Koksvik, 2020) and is wrapped up in processes of neoliberal governance through individual responsabilisation (Koksvik, 2020:952).

I argue that it is important to acknowledge the significance of these definitions when it comes to the study of Death Café. In the specific UK context, placing Death Café under the umbrella of the Death Positive movement is inaccurate. Only a few organisers and attendees I interviewed knew what 'Death Positive' was. Only one organiser, Millie from Akenfield, the youngest of those I talked to, identified as Death Positive. Even if Lofland mentioned the varying degrees of 'consciousness' towards participation in the wider movement, 'Death Positive' is simply too specific a term, appearing to be relevant mainly to younger, internet-savvy, US-based demographics' (Žibaitė, 2020). Somewhat contrary to this, Richards et al. (2020) in their international study of the Death Café movement noted that some international organisers explicitly referenced the Death Positive movement as part of their views. I hypothesise that it is so because the international organisers were overall younger (40-50 years old (Richards et al. 2020:14) in comparison to the mean age of organisers in my research which was 53) and likely used the internet to discover both initiatives, which helped to conceive them as kindred. Thus, the global image of Death Café can differ very significantly from its local understandings. In the future, it might be possible to talk more confidently about the proliferation of the Death Positive movement initiatives in the UK, as exemplified by the scheme of Death Positive libraries started in 2018 in Redbridge, Newcastle and Kirkless (Bryant, 2021), but at this point, caution needs to be exercised.

Besides these ongoing definitional debates, whether as part of Death Awareness or Death Positivity discourse, Death Café remains nevertheless enmeshed in these broader narratives that it is good to talk about death. Even further, the two most cited academic publications define Death Café as a standalone social movement (Fong, 2017; Miles and Corr, 2017). While these accounts have been described as uncritical and romanticised (Richards et al., 2020), interrogating them allows defining more clearly the understanding of Death Café as a social phenomenon.

### 1.3. Is Death Café a social movement?

Fundamentally, the term Death Café identifies ‘both the broader movement and individual gatherings that occur as part of that movement’ (Corr, Corr and Doka, 2019:3). In the previous section I discussed the broad cultural narratives of challenging the death taboo and death denial and to correspond with that broadness, I choose a broad definition of social movement. A prominent figure in social movement studies, Mario Diani, synthesising the main approaches within social movement analysis since the 1960s, defined social movements as ‘consisting of networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity’ (Diani, 1992:3). Death Café could very well be analysed in this framework and this has been explored to an extent by Richards et al. (2020). In the next section, however, I wish to highlight that in much of the existing academic publications Death Café has been defined as a ‘movement’ uncritically and the use of this term needs to be considered carefully.

Death Café is often defined as a social movement in academic literature to convey its perceived importance (Richards, 2020:5). Sociologist Jack Fong (2017), in his monograph *The Death Café Movement: Exploring the Horizons of Mortality* did not give any context to the emergence of Death Café and fashioned Death Café as an autonomous movement that is unique in addressing both contemporary and perennial concerns about death. His narrative, based on empirical data from 5 Death Cafés is also rather grand, claiming that Death Café is a ‘bona fide transformative and existential social movement’ (Fong, 2017:29). Fong claimed that Death Café became popular primarily due to demographic changes. He explained that the populous generation of Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) is ageing, and the generation’s specific features, such as greater civic and political engagement (Fong, 2017:45), ‘anti-systemic’ attitudes (Fong, 2017:37) make Boomers particularly inclined to be proactive in approaching end-of-life conversations. While the demographic changes have undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of Death Café, I argue that Fong’s analysis did not sufficiently engage with the specifics of Death Café, resulting in a conceptualisation of Death Café that is almost indistinguishable from more

general narratives about the growth of the Death Awareness movement (Doka, 2003).

While in Fong's analysis Death Café emerges as a unique movement, aiding 'decolonisation of people's lifeworlds' (Fong, 2017:32) from being usurped by the triad of the market, medicine and media, Miles and Corr (2017), on the other hand, in their oft-cited article were quick to draw parallels between Death Café and the hospice movement, the spread of academic courses on death and dying and bereavement support groups (Richards et al., 2020:5). In doing so, as Richards et al. (2020:5) noted, 'they stake a claim for its importance as more than just a 'passing trend' by anchoring it historically amongst other worthy social movements'. It is worth noting that Miles established Death Café in the US so spearheads the movement in that country. Another example of a celebratory narrative comes from Flegel and Patrick (2016), medics trying to find how to approach death conversations with patients in Canada. They argue that Death Café:

As a global social movement has allowed talk of death to become mainstream and positive, a buttress to the living of a full life. So-called death education courses are now offered in some universities and medical schools (Flegel and Patrick, 2016:707).

They seem to imply that the courses are offered because of Death Café. All in all, the existing academic writing about Death Café as a movement has not been especially carefully measured.

Richards et al. (2020:27) found that international organisers felt free to be flexible with the Death Café model because they felt it was still serving the bigger purpose of a broader mobilising message they identified with, whether it be the Death Positive movement or compassionate community (Kelleher, 2005) approach. This is key - Death Café is but one activity enmeshed in broader narratives of social action whether they can be called Death Awareness, Death Positivity, or government policy goals to get people to talk about end-of-life. Uncritically talking about Death Café as a 'movement' of the same nature and scale as Death Awareness and Death Positive movements - which are first and foremost *assemblages* of practices and attitudes - omits the fact that Death Café, first and foremost, is one specific practice. To help clarify this distinction, I draw from Romany Reagan's doctoral thesis (2018) on heritage in Abney Park

cemetery, in which she together with her informants discussed the distinction between ‘Death Awareness’ and ‘Death Positive’. Reagan wrote:

The perception from people who work within the field of death work (funeral directors, death doulas, palliative care nurses, etc.) is that ‘death awareness’ is on-the-ground and practical, that this aspect of the movement is for practitioners who are working with people who are bereaved or dying themselves. /.../Whereas the term ‘death positive’ is used most often by the wider community: academics, artists, and activists within the general public who do not have hands-on experience with death work, but who identify with the ideology of open conversation around death topics. Whereas ‘death awareness’ is a toolkit for practitioners, ‘death positivity’ is a toolkit for a wider range of social activists from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. (Reagan, 2018:287)

A significant detail here is the word ‘toolkit’. Put simply, if Death Awareness and Death Positive are toolkits, Death Café is a tool in that kit. It is a specific event that organisers, who broadly think that ‘it is good to talk about death’ adopt as part of their existing professional or personal proclivities. In Miles’ and Corr’s (2017) and Fong’s (2017) narratives, this distinction was overlooked and it is also often ignored in media articles, resulting in an overly grand view of Death Café, conflating the initiative with the narratives of social action of Death Awareness and Death Positive movements. Doka’s (2003) observation that Death Café refers to both the event and the broader movement is correct. The problem is that in the existing literature on Death Café, neither has been particularly carefully explored. While Richards et.al. (2020) provided a valuable entry into studying Death Café as a social movement, studies focusing on Death Café as an event are not only sparse, but I argue also take the metaphor of a ‘tool’ too literally, which is another pitfall. I will turn to review this now.

#### **1.4. Current academic contributions to the study of Death Café**

This thesis thematically contributes to a relatively small pool of academic publications on Death Cafés. The most ambitious published endeavour to make sense of Death Café to date, American sociologist Jack Fong’s (2017) monograph *The death café movement: exploring the horizons of mortality* presents a wide sweeping and enthusiastically positive account of the Death Café initiative. Fong argues that we are living in an age where:

‘macro-level institutions have constrained the ability to openly and culturally engage in conversations about death and dying, providing for the population instead extremist views on death and dying from the media, market, and medicine’ (Fong, 2017:4).

Death Cafés, Fong claims, provide a free communicative space where participants can explore what reclaiming death from this trinity of authorities might mean for themselves, so they can author not only their deaths but also the rest of their lives in the light of their mortality. He claims that as such, Death Café participants are engaging in decolonization of their lifeworlds. Ultimately, Fong argues that Death Café is a bona fide transformative and existential social movement.

Fong also ‘attempts to make visible existential themes and social critiques that underlie death talk in our sample of Death Café attendees’ (Fong, 2017:5). For this he presented a number of cloud images made up of clusters of words, created from Death Café conversation transcripts, where the more frequently the word was used, the bigger in size in the cloud it appeared. The clouds show that the most prevalent words were ‘people’, ‘like’, ‘just’, ‘know’, ‘going’, etc. While Fong provides some analysis of these comments, the value of this visual exercise is unclear.

For his in-depth theoretical analysis of Death Café, Fong uses such varied authors like Habermas, Eric Fromm, Kurt Wolff, Ray Oldenburg, Anthony Giddens. I also draw on very varied literature and theories in my thesis so am not criticising this eclecticism in itself. However, Fong’s ambitious theoretical goal is supported with thin empirical material from only 5 Death Cafes. Furthermore, Caswell (2019:369), reviewing the monograph, noted that because Fong paid particular attention to the American context, it is hard to warrant his wide sweeping generalisations about the international relevance and whether it has similar meanings in different countries and contexts.

The vast majority of existing journal publications on Death Café are concentrated in medical journals (Adler et al., 2015; Clark-McGhee et al., 2016; Browne et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2018; Hammer et al., 2019; Bateman, 2020, Oliveira et al., 2021) and nursing journals (Carter, 2018; Parry et al., 2021), especially those with a focus on palliative care (Browne et al., 2017; Nyatanga,

2017b; Howorth et al., 2018). Many of these publications are in the form of conference abstracts (Adler et al., 2015; Green et al., 2016; Bell, 2018; Herring and Purser, 2018; Allen, 2019), reflections on hosting Death Cafés (Skilbeck, 2015; Clark-McGhee et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2021), interviews (Moynihan, 2015), podcast summaries (Morgan, 2017), commentaries (Hammer et al., 2019) and editorials (Flegel and Patrick, 2016; Nyatanga, 2017a). Only two papers are published in death studies journals - Koksvik and Richards (2021) in *Mortality* and Miles and Corr (2017) in *OMEGA. Social Policy and Society* published Richards et al.'s (2020) article on the international spread of Death Café. *Behavioural Sciences* published Baldwin's interview study. Only a small number of studies are about Death Café outside the UK and USA: Browne et al. (2017) introduce an adaptation of Death Café in Chile, Oliveira et al. (2021) - in Brazil, Olives et al. (2020) - in Spain (paper in Spanish with an English abstract).

Richards et al. (2020:555) noted that the majority of papers on Death Cafés are 'sparse in number and scope, with low objectivity ratings'. As mentioned earlier, the only monograph on Death Cafés is by sociologist Jack Fong (2017) and is based on thin empirical data (5 Death Cafés). Baldwin's (2017) interview study of a sample of 15 Death Café facilitators was arguably the first study to offer some insight into Death Cafés through thorough empirical research. However, Baldwin's attitude towards Death Cafés was 'markedly uncritical' (Richards et al., 2020:555) as she likened Death Café facilitators who initiate death conversations to 'doulas helping birth new lives into the world' (Baldwin, 2017:6). The empirically richest exploration of Death Cafés so far is Richards et al.'s (2020) Wellcome Trust Funded project at the University of Glasgow. The authors were concerned with mapping the scope of the movement and organisers' motivations and perceptions and conducted 43 interviews with Death Café organisers worldwide.

As part of this study, Richards et al. (2020:567) distinguished between 'instrumental', or 'strategic' and outcomes-driven usage of the Death Café model; and the use that is more akin to the original ethos of imparting 'a sense of *carpe diem*' (ibid), where any tangible effects, such as making an advance care plan would be considered 'incidental' (ibid). Miles and Corr (2017:152) claim that Death Café is 'truly unique as compared with other end-of-life

community initiatives in that there is no ideology or agenda for the gathering'. This is the ideal of Death Café philosophy, but in practice, many events that are called Death Cafés go beyond Death Café's non-directed, voluntary philosophy and have been applied in various contexts with a goal of getting people to talk about death, especially in the context of compassionate communities (Abel and Clarke, 2020:67), broader policy objectives, public health campaigns (Public Health England, 2016:14; Guy's and St. Thomas NHS Foundation Trust, 2018), various charity and coalition public-facing activities in the UK and beyond. Significantly, most of the existing academic publications focus on the instrumental use of Death Café.

Many studies examine using Death Cafés as 'debriefing sessions' (Bateman et al., 2020) to combat clinician burnout (Oliveira et al., 2021) and enhance workplace culture in a healthcare setting (Nelson et al., 2018). These studies argue that the Death Café model can be adapted to professional medical settings and the approach may be useful for institutions seeking to provide additional learning opportunities for students and healthcare professionals (Howorth, Thomson, and Paes, 2018; Olives et al., 2020). This, however, does not offer any insight into what actually happens at Death Cafés and takes how the model operates for granted. On a rare occasion that Death Café events are researched for peer-reviewed publications, the findings are limited to simple content summaries (Parry et al., 2021).

More importantly, Death Cafés are not intended to serve as educational or community engagement forums yet are often reported in publications to be used as such. Herring and Purser (2018:A28-A29), for example, aimed to use Death Café events to 'tackle the misconceptions surrounding hospice culture'. Similarly, a palliative care interest group at Sheffield Hallam University reported holding a Death Café in partnership with a local hospice to promote public knowledge about palliative and end-of-life care (Sheffield Hallam University, 2015; Beard et al., 2017). Their Death Café provided a range of activities and discussions with different organisations including Grave talk conversations, creation of memory boxes, and lists of end-of-life wishes; had solicitors, funeral directors, and chaplains as speakers. In this case, Death Café acted as a catch-all physical forum for all of these activities, not a standalone activity as Death

Café was originally imagined to be. Mitchell et al. (2021) organised Death Cafés to evaluate their impact on third-year student nurse learning and concluded that an external and skilled facilitator should be hired for these sessions ‘despite any cost implications to the institutions’ (Mitchell et al., 2021:360). Requirements for a professional facilitator and remuneration for hosting both are problematic in the context of Death Café’s original egalitarian and not-for-profit spirit.

Another way that Death Café appears in academic publications is as a method of data collection. For example, Sharon Young (2017) utilised Death Cafés as focus groups to gather data for her doctoral thesis exploring the centrality of human rights discourses to the debates on assisted death in the UK. Ingagni, Chandler, and Collins (2021:340) used Death Cafés as a method to ‘provoke conversations about political and personal responses to disability and death’. Adler et al. (2015:386-387) defined Death Cafés as extremely effective educational tools that can be ‘used strategically as points of entry for a much-needed societal reappraisal of how we approach - and how we want to approach - the end-of-life’. Fisher et al. (2019) outlined their design of Life Café - an event extraordinarily similar to Death Café, with a goal to scope out the possible future developments of end-of-life care. Researchers reported attending a number of Death Cafés for inspiration but found that they were ‘largely attended by individuals who weren’t afraid of talking about death’ (Fisher et al., 2019:449). The fact that the name Death Café is not universally appealing, appeared to be an issue for collecting the desired data, thus they changed the name of the event.

Similarly, McLoughlin et al. (2016) reflected that in order to reach more people in their Compassionate Communities conversation in the Mid-West of Ireland, their chosen name Café Conversation was considered to be ‘less threatening than the growing trend in the use of the phrase Death Café’ (McLoughlin et al. 2016:9). They were also open about the fact that for their purposes they adapted the World Café (Brown, 2001) concept, which is an approach to participatory research to provide solutions to specific problems. Howorth, Thomson, and Paes (2018) even state that Death Cafés are examples of modified World Café methods. The origin story of Death Café is clear (it is inspired by Bernard Crettaz’s *Café Mortel*) so I argue that equating Death Café with World



Café or claiming one comes from the other is incorrect and doesn't take enough account of the specifics of Death Café interaction and, most importantly, is a fundamental misappropriation of the Death Café philosophy.

In line with the Death Café philosophy, Browne et al. (2017) specified that their Chilean Death Cafés were not meant to be spaces to collect representative data on perceptions of death in Chile. While they touched on conversation topics that came up unexpectedly, overall the authors focused on describing personal interpretations of these social gatherings. So far, Browne et al., however, are in the minority in taking care to respect the concept in that way and a significant amount of academic research on Death Cafés has purposefully or by oversight equated Death Café with the World Café model to use for public engagement or to gain insight into issues outside the Death Café.

Richards et al. (2020:568) noted that even though Death Café, as a 'cultural attempt to generate lay responses to death and dying outside of the dominant healthcare structures, faces strong pressures of convergence towards them', it can exist both within these structures and outside of them and that its 'imaginative and innovative potential cannot be entirely subsumed or dismissed' (Richards et al. 2020:569). My brief literature review on an existing small number of publications on Death Cafés revealed that they mostly focus on how to operate Death Café *within* these structures. Further, this is done without a strong empirical basis about what is going on within Death Café events.

In response to this, my research is unique among the existing literature in that it aims to capture the dynamics of Death Café events that from the outset attempt to operate as intended in the Death Café guidelines: to talk about death with strangers with no defined outcome. It combines insights on how this is negotiated from Death Café organisers who organise it in a voluntary, not-for-profit, individual capacity and those who host it in their professional role and setting. Participant accounts on Death Café were sourced from events that were available for anyone to attend, akin to what Hammer et al. (2019) defined as 'open-community' Death Cafés. In the context of their research, they used the term 'open community' in opposition to 'hospital-based' Death Cafés - events only available for healthcare professionals with shared experiences and with a

view of combating burnout. As a result, the meanings of Death Café in this thesis are as articulated by participants who elected to attend Death Café events voluntarily, in their local towns, for their own reasons, which is another contribution to knowledge. Moreover, my research is the first to offer such an empirically extensive account, combining both first-hand observations across 20 Death Café events and a total of 49 semi-structured interviews with organisers and attendees. My participation in Death Café events and recording conversations provided invaluable insights about the dynamics of Death Café events that go beyond organiser self-reporting (Richards et al., 2020), email responses (Miles and Corr, 2017), or a small sample of interviews (Baldwin, 2017) and Death Café events (Fong, 2017).

The general stance that I take from the outset of this thesis is that considering the literature published on Death Cafés so far it is most appropriate to take a step back and take stock to ask: ‘What really is Death Café?’. Kevern and Sanders (2015:6), who conducted a pilot for the GraveTalk project wrote that what is perhaps more important about Death Cafés than grand objectives or measurable outcomes is ‘the way it has crystallised a popular sense of the need for such conversations’ (2015:6). They claim that in particular:

It has demonstrated that the creation of a dedicated space, specifically for the conduct of conversations about death and dying, enables participants to be prepared for the challenges of the conversation while reassured that the other participants share the same expectations (ibid).

Early in the history of Death Café, Kevern and Sanders identified the value of social interaction that for some reason has been overlooked or taken for granted in many of the later publications. Researching what actually happens at Death Café events seems to be relegated to bachelor’s (Tupper, 2015) and master’s thesis (Karrel, 2018; Heald, 2020; Blanch, 2021). All of these small ethnographic studies from Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and the UK arguably show a better grasp of how Death Café works than many other existing publications. While Death Café is part of a bigger push to talk about death which can be differently nuanced in different countries and cultural contexts, as evident from the model’s continued varied applications, there is little exploration about Death Café as a form of social interaction, instead of part of broadly understood social action to ‘liberate death from secrecy’ (Crettaz, 2010:122).

One example of moving away from narratives of action when looking at Death Cafés is Koksvik and Richards' analysis (2021). There, rather than viewing Death Cafés primarily as spaces for death awareness-raising, they draw from Bauman (1992, 2000, 2002) to conceive them instead as spaces for striving for human connection in late modern societies in response to the dislocation and loneliness experienced due to a failure of communion. Indeed, Death Cafés have arisen at a similar time to other initiatives emphasising the importance of being together in conversation, such as Happy Café (Action for Happiness, 2015), Memory Café for dementia patients and their carers (Miesen and Jones, 2014), Climate Café (Pepper, 2015; Gribkoff 2021), Talking Café (Abel and Clarke, 2020:67) Menopause Café (Weiss, 2017), even some educational initiatives, such as *Café Scientifique* (Grand 2014), mental wellbeing focused Frazzled Café (Wax, 2017), Chatty Café to battle loneliness (The Chatty Café Scheme, 2020). The growing attention to the lack of, the need for, and the benefit of social interaction also means acknowledging that some people might attend Death Cafés to fulfil the need for socialising. Thus, I argue that the social aspect of Death Café meetings must not be overlooked in favour of focusing on the frequently evoked notion that people have gathered to 'break a taboo'. In other words, researchers must not lose sight that Death Café is as much about people, as it is about death. Ten years after the creation of Death Café, it is my goal to contribute to this overlooked aspect of the franchise by providing an ethnographic study that focuses on the unfolding group dynamics in Death Café events. I will now turn to outline how this is going to be achieved in the rest of the thesis.

## 1.5. Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 details my research design and provides information on the Death Cafés I attended and my research participants. It addresses issues of negotiating access, researcher positionality, and ethical concerns about conducting research on a sensitive topic.

Chapter 3 sets out the theoretical framework for the thesis. French academic Michel Maffesoli's (1996) theory of postmodern sociality and neo-tribes is the primary theory I draw on to make sense of social interactions at Death Cafés. This chapter introduces the key concepts and criticisms of Maffesoli's original

theory and presents how it has been adopted and developed in the disciplines of sociology, tourism and leisure, and marketing. The chapter ends with showing the relevance of neo-tribal theory to the context of contemporary death studies. It argues for a fruitful synthesis between neo-tribal theory, aspects of Tony Walter's (1994) revival of death thesis, Walter's (2020) postmaterialist critique of the Death Awareness movement, and Michael Hviid Jacobsen's (2016) concept of the age of spectacular death,

Chapter 4 focuses on the spaces Death Cafés occupy. It gives an overview of the most popular venues, times of day and ideas about the most appropriate atmosphere for Death Café. Partially spurred on by sociologist Jack Fong's promising, yet ultimately unhelpful attempt to apply Oldenburg's (1999) concept of third places to Death Café gatherings, I look at Death Cafés via a dynamic development of third places - 'third-placeness' (Calderon, 2016). Third-placeness refers to the quality of interaction within a space and its significance to its participants, rather than the designated purpose of the structure in which people are gathering. I argue that evoking third-placeness, characterised by informality, conviviality, conversing as equals (among other third place qualities) is central for each Death Café event no matter the type of venue. I also engage with one of the recent advancements of the neo-tribal theory that space is not just a platform for neo-tribal behaviours to be enacted, but rather *space itself* is the reason for a particular neo-tribe to emerge (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:201).

Chapter 5 focuses on Death Café conversations. It deepens the understanding about what kind of behaviours and interactions are valued at a Death Café and what behaviours stand in the way of achieving collective enjoyment. The key concepts in this chapter are Georg Simmel's social form of sociability (1950a) and Maffesoli's neo-tribal aesthetics, defined by Maffesoli as a 'way of feeling in common' (Maffesoli, 1996:74). I argued that 'talking about talking about death' is a discursive tool that attendees often evoke, collectively reminding each other that they are all there for the same purpose - to talk about death (to 'break the taboo'). This allows them to navigate arising tensions and conflicts. More so, I argue that in many instances talking about talking about death transcends its role as common ground in conflict resolution and becomes a collectively enjoyable activity for the group and forms the basic Death Café's neo-tribal

bond, which is an 'aesthetic' bond. This chapter shows that Death Café is a valued form of social interaction, grounding it in the enjoyment of the social interaction, beyond the attempts to discover Death Café's instrumental utility.

Chapter 6 continues exploring the notion of neo-tribal aesthetics by addressing the ethical aspect of the Death Café interaction, delving deeper into questions of not only how people talk to each other but also how they are able to and strive to *relate* to one another. One of the most enigmatic features of Death Café is the levels of intimate verbal disclosure achieved among strangers in a very short time. This chapter employs anthropologist Douglas Hollan's (2008) ideas about the imaginative and illusory aspects of empathy to show how Death Café attendees 'fill in the gaps' when attempting to relate to other attendees' accounts without knowing anything else about them. I argue that empathic understanding in Death Café events is situational and emerging, a reflexive, stylised, and curated engagement, sometimes fraught with tension, but fundamentally constituting the elusive Death Café 'magic'. In this chapter I attempt to describe this 'magic' by developing further Maffesoli's concept of *puissance* (collective dynamic vitality).

Chapter 7 brings the insights from preceding chapters together by problematising the foundational premise that Death Café is a gathering of 'strangers'. While experienced mostly positively among those involved, using Lofland's (1998) distinction between biographical and cultural strangers, I argue that the way 'being strangers' is understood at Death Cafés is deceptively simple and inclusive. Even more, it ultimately calls into question the cultural relevance of Death Café beyond its postmaterialist, expressive and curious crowd. This chapter builds on sociologist Elias Le Grand's (2018) call to incorporate the 'darker' sides of neo-tribal sociations, rarely addressed in existing neo-tribal research. As such, it explores some subtle forms of exclusion present in Death Café, otherwise characterised by the main neo-tribal features of inclusion, belonging, and solidarity.

Chapter 8 is the thesis conclusion where I synthesise my findings, restate my contributions to the knowledge, and suggest avenues for further research.

## Chapter 2. Researching Death Cafés: A Methodological Discussion

### 2.1. Introduction: research aim and objectives

This chapter outlines my research approach and the methods used to collect and examine data about the meanings, values and practices associated with Death Café for organisers and attendees in the UK. As outlined in Chapter 1, during my fieldwork I discovered the three elements on which this thesis is based: the perceived simplicity of the Death Café conversations; the power of the topic of death to help people understand each other and themselves; and the perception of the importance of being strangers. Before that, however, I was driven by the following research questions:

1. What can be said about the social dynamics within Death Café events? Is there anything specific about the interactions within that contributed to the popularity of the franchise?
2. Are there any normative features of Death Café organisation and participation and how are they negotiated in different sites?
3. Are Death Cafés self-contained events, or are there any effects of Death Café attendance that extend beyond the boundaries of the event?

The first question is concerned not only with what is revealed in the content of Death Café conversations but also through the decision to participate in Death Cafés itself. Bearing in mind the international uptake and popularity of the initiative, it is worth considering whether Death Café is responding to some sort of a felt need. Underwood insisted that ‘Death Café seems to have arrived at precisely the time loads of people wanted to talk about death’ (Underwood, 2013b), but is the success of the initiative really due to death being the topic of conversation? In this broad line of inquiry, I looked at how people interact within Death Café events, which required immersing myself in the interaction. I attended 20 Death Cafés around the UK and engaged in participant observation to participate, observe, and record conversations and interactions.

My second research question grapples with the heterogeneity of Death Café events. The guiding principle of Death Café - no set agenda or topic - is not

always in evidence and the events largely depend on the organisers' personalities and the way they choose to direct the event, as well as who is going to show up to participate in the conversation. Going beyond this, I analyse whether there are commonalities in practice and what behaviours are desirable in Death Cafés for them to be considered a success. To answer this, I made extensive use of participating, observing, and recording as well. I also conducted 24 interviews with Death Café organisers to examine their specific attitudes and practices.

The third question was based on the official Death Café goal 'to increase awareness of death with the aim of helping people make the most of their (finite) lives' (Death Café, 2013a). To evaluate the possible impact of Death Café attendance I conducted follow-up interviews with attendees and organisers, where I asked the key question: 'Why do you continue to attend/organise Death Cafés?'. I used it to prompt interviewees to think about what attending Death Cafés brings to their lives that prompt them to schedule these events in their diaries (semi)regularly. I conducted 25 interviews with attendees.

During the fieldwork, I found that some of these questions became more relevant than others. For example, by asking the third question I found that generally my research participants placed more value on the social interaction of Death Café itself, rather than any specific lasting impact on their lives. An ethnographic approach allowed me to adjust my research focus based on the prominence of meanings I discovered in the field. I will turn to detail that now.

## **2.2. Locating the ethnographic research field**

For anthropologist Agar (1996:127), a prerequisite of good research is 'a sense of our goals'. He suggests that only after asking ourselves 'just what are we trying to accomplish when we do ethnography?' (ibid) can we properly evaluate specific methodologies. My goal, broadly, was to show how people engage with the Death Café ethos and negotiate it in practice - in the events they organise or attend. Achieving this was not merely a concern of goal-appropriate methods, but first and foremost, an appropriate epistemology. Because my research was

concerned with subjective, historically and situationally bounded meanings and practices, epistemologically this implies taking an interpretivist approach, which deals with the way people interpret, experience, understand, and (re)construct the social world(s) they live in (Mason, 2002). This perspective is also constructionist, in the sense that it takes the view that these social worlds are socially produced. This view can be exemplified by Taylor's (1987[1971]:46) urge to 'think of man [sic] as self-interpreting animal... There is no such thing as the structure of meanings for him independently of his interpretation of them'. The interpretivist perspective in anthropology was developed by Geertz (1973, 1988) Clifford and Marcus (1986), Rabinow and Sullivan (1979), Denzin (1997) among others.

Fundamentally, my methodological approach to this research was informed by the discipline of social anthropology as I've been formally trained in it. Hence, this research is an ethnographically informed study. This framework was chosen as it provided a suitable toolset from which to garner a broad range of in-depth qualitative information about the intricacies of Death Café practice. The ethnographic tools anthropologist use - participant observation, interviews, researcher participation were selected in order to capture the nuances of the Death Café event experience, to gain a first-hand experience of the Death Café which in turn would inform a deeper look via interviews about Death Café organisers and attendees practices and motivations for these practices. Fieldwork is at the very heart of the ethnographic method (Wolcott, 2005; Okely, 2020) and as a practice itself carries interpretivist meanings. Willis and Trondman provide a useful and comprehensive definition of ethnography as a practice:

It is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events (Willis and Trondman, 2000:5).

This definition highlights that ethnographers have numerous methods at their disposal for representing the realities witnessed. Ultimately, Willis and Trondman's (2000) definition encourages the ethnographer to acknowledge the unfinalizeability of one's disciplinary project to capture a holistic account of



human life, which corresponds to the interpretivist epistemology. Falzon describes how this methodological choice:

Privileges an engaged, contextually rich, and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine-grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced (Falzon, 2009:1).

The existence of 'fine-grained daily interactions' here rests on the traditional understanding of ethnographic fieldwork as a long-term immersion and building long-term relationships in physically bounded field(s) (Gupta and Ferguson, 1977). My research is by no means an entirely ethnographic study in this conventional sense, in that I did not spend a prolonged time embedded in a culture or site of study to produce knowledge, like what is usually associated with traditional, or classical ethnographic works in anthropology (Malinowski, 1922; Mead, 1928, Strathern, 1989 among many others). However, calling my study 'ethnographically informed' is warranted as it is consistent with the trend of ethnographic methods being increasingly used across various social science disciplines (O'Reilly, 2011; Pink, 2009, 2012), as a way of utilising the practices of participant observation and immersion without relying completely on the classical notions of a long-term single-place fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

In general, the contexts in which ethnographic research is conducted and the researchers' relationships to those settings have changed (Marcus, 2006; Faubion and Marcus, 2011). Increasingly, ethnographers work in multi-sited (see Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003), digital (Murthy, 2008; Blasco, 2012) settings, complex global assemblages (Tsing, 2015), and ethnographic approaches have changed accordingly. The Covid-19 pandemic, restricting movement, travel, and physical interaction is the most recent situation presenting definitional challenges for ethnographic field-sites (Chambers, 2020). In response to the increasingly varied definitions of field-sites, ethnography has also changed its temporal aspect and has been increasingly utilised for shorter-term research, such as focused ethnography (Wall, 2015), when researchers enter a defined field with clearly framed research questions (Kitchen et al., 2017); or address a specific problem among small groups of people (Rashid et.al., 2019:2). A similar idea is that of 'rapid' ethnography (Handwerker, 2001; Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros, 2018). This is either a lone-researcher-led (Vindrola-Padros, 2021) or team-led

multi-method, relatively low-cost approach to data collection that relies on methods like interviews, focus groups, mapping, observations, and brief surveys (Sangaramoorthy and Krueger, 2020). Often in these ethnographies, the researcher is aware of and knows the cultural context (Maxwell, Woods and Prior, 2013:201), i.e., is part of the team whose practice they are trying to evaluate.

As the world itself becomes more mobile and fragmented, this calls for creation of additional relevant and accepted ways to produce work that is ethnographic in essence. Topic-wise, the use of ethnographically-informed, shorter term research is very prevalent in empirical research using neo-tribal theory. Oskaras Vorobjovas-Pinta (2017, 2018a, 2018b) have studied the temporary space of gay resort, Vorobjovas-Pinta and Lewis (2021) - pride events, Kriwoken (2018) - antarctic cruise tourists. All of these studies show how short term and mobile engagements with participants can generate a wealth of rich ethnographic data.

I selected the ethnographically informed research approach also with an awareness that I was only capturing a 'snapshot' of the Death Café initiative in the UK, representing experiences of a relatively small number of people involved in this activity. Further, I was looking into a variety of Death Café practices as they existed at a certain point in time, that point in time being both in relation to the development of Death Café in the UK and the temporality of my fieldwork. I examined the Death Café practices in the UK when it was already an established recognisable name among death awareness initiatives nationally and internationally, after Jon Underwood's death in 2017, and before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which prompted a proliferation of online Death Cafés.

My research field-site was constructed as a contingent window into how Death Café operated in the UK over a particular period. The ethnographically-informed approach, because of its inductive, open-ended, constructionist nature and attention to lived experiences is well suited to attempt to make sense of complex reality; and multiple realities of multiple subjects, as the interpretivist approach suggests (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000). The ethnographic sensibility was important because I knew I had to engage with a variety of people and practices, which together make up the rich world of Death Café. Ethnographically informed approach allowed me to capture this diversity in a

flexible way. This resulted in a relatively broad study, which provides rich insights into a sample of Death Café practices at work in the United Kingdom and what does a variety of people engaged with Death Cafes think the value of this initiative is.

Death Cafés, as research sites, are short-lived phenomena. As Death Cafes were transient, temporary, emergent sites of interaction, traveling to them and participating in them was the appropriate data collection method. Death Cafés I attended were separate events in different locations and throughout fieldwork I found that very few organisers actually knew each other or interacted in any way. Similarly, the vast majority of attendees did not interact outside the Death Café events. As one or two-hour-long events, Death Cafés barely cut into the fabric of participants' lives. They were ephemeral occasions that I did not revisit (apart from Riseholme Death Café which I attended twice). Dahlén (1997), writing his doctoral thesis on the making of the new interculturalist profession, found that international conferences, including ritual events, workshops, exhibitions, and parties were central to his ethnography. Maxwell, Woods and Prior (2013:200) proposed 'pop-up' ethnography as a method, whereby creating pop-up research sites reflects the increasingly interstitial nature of interaction in workplaces, knowledge exchange, and social meetings. Theirs is a case of organising pop-up events for research purposes, while mine is an ethnographically informed study of pop-up events. I argue this presents an interesting dilemma regarding the researcher's relation to these temporary sites in comparison to the participants. In my case, both the researcher and the participants experience 'the field-site' simultaneously; the researcher, however, accumulates a collection of these temporary experiences, while many participants experience the field-site (and the research) once. Hannerz (2003:210) noted a similar predicament in Dahlen's research process: 'By the time his study was over, he [Dahlen] had surely attended more of these conferences than most interculturalists'.

Just as Dahlen likely had more extensive experience in the temporary sites than that of many attendees he observed, my experience of Death Cafés was more extensive than that of many of the people I had talked to. My research participants almost always asked how many Death Cafés I had visited and when that answer began surpassing ten, it was usually greeted with astonishment by

attendees and organisers alike. Many Death Café attendees I encountered only had participated in their first, second, or, very rarely, third Death Café. Organisers have generally been a part of more Death Cafés, but even organising them monthly requires a good amount of time to accumulate 20 events. I have interviewed organisers who have been involved with the initiative since 2012, thus the 20 Death Cafés I attended is in no way the highest number, but that still points towards a more extensive level of engagement with the Death Café event as a field-site than many other participants. How many Death Cafes each organiser has held is recorded on the table in Appendix LLL.

I attended 20 Death Cafés over a relatively short period (October 2018 to June 2019, with two events in March 2018) which again is unusually intense. These 19 different sites (I returned to one Death Café for a second time) operate on their own cycles, some monthly, some once every six months, and are not significantly connected in other ways besides all being under the umbrella of Death Café. This means that by attending each Death Café I entered a different microcosm with its own rhythm and learned a little bit about each one. Some Death Cafés I attended were happening monthly throughout my fieldwork and beyond, while in other cases I attended pop-up events that have not been repeated since. Thus, fundamentally my fieldwork is characterised not by the length of it, but rather by diversity and intensity.

I also collected data from the official Death Café website. I used the website not only as a way to source my Death Café organiser responses, but also as a complimentary information source, information repository as well. Having grown from being Underwood's personal blog, this website now also hosts practitioner's page, links to press articles about Death Café. It is important because it serves as a source for guidance to those who consider hosting their own Death Café, as well as a repository of upcoming (Death Café, 2021a) and past (Death Café, 2021c) Death Cafés for advertising and growth tracking purposes. It hosts arguably the most iconic and most frequently in media accounts on Death Cafés quoted aspect, which is the worldwide map of Death Café events (Death Café, 2021b). It is also where the organisers are required to sign up to a terms and conditions document called 'Working with us' (Underwood, 2013a), which then

allows them to use the Death Café name and branding for their events and post them on the official website.

While the website is not the main way of advertising and connecting with their attendees and each other, for a significant number of organisers the decision to register the Death Café exhibits adherence to the guidelines and alignment with the initiative's values, thus is a site of 'formal' interaction with the franchise. The website also has a practitioners' page (Death Café 2013a), where organisers can post questions to the community. However, the engagement on that forum is close to none. This highlights that the Death Café website is not a virtual world, where people socialise (Boellstorff, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2016), but is rather a centralised information repository.

I also encountered instances where the website was an agent in Death Café participation. For example, Laurie (change name) who was organising a LGBTQI+ Death Café and to avoid attracting people who were merely interested in these problems and to want to attract people with lived experiences, he left it very late before the event to post it on Death Café page. Some people engage with the website, some none at all, but it is an important agent as well.

Supplementing data collected from the physical world with online data is an increasingly popular research trend (Dirksen et al., 2010; Hinder and Greenhalgh, 2012; Potter, 2017 to name a few). Orgad (2005), reflecting on her study of how breast cancer patients experienced the disease, concluded that having face-to-face interviews as well as observing her informants' online chats helped contextualise and improve the validity of her findings. Similarly, in a study of a California-based organisation that served undocumented immigrants, Hallett and Barber (2014) reported that though they had begun the study using interviews and participant observation, they were drawn to their informants' digital interactions. They concluded:

Had we overlooked the role of online spaces in the lives of our participants, our ethnographies would have failed to capture the 'multiple levels' of human interaction (Hallett and Barker, 2014:323).

Akemu and Abdelour (2020:296) argued that ethnographers can benefit from digital artefacts affording them different modes of being co-present with

research participants: ‘digital as archive’ and ‘digital as process’. As part of the first mode, ‘digital as archive’, which I mostly utilised in my own research, Akemu and Abdelour suggested that ethnographers could improve the authenticity of their research accounts by obtaining longitudinal records of informants’ digital interactions. The Death Café website was especially valuable in that regard as an archive of Jon Underwood’s reflections on the development of Death Café throughout the years, as the website grew from being his personal blog. His regular posts on the website (2011-2017) provide an overview of various milestones reached, future plans for Death Café, adjustments to the model, etc. (Underwood, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b). I also systematically gathered details on Death Café events in the UK from 2011 to 2020 (venue, time of day, organisers).

To summarise, my ethnographically-informed study captures a ‘snapshot’ of the Death Café initiative in the UK, and represents experiences of a relatively small number of people involved in this activity. My field-site was constructed as a contingent window into how Death Café operated in the UK over a particular period. Next, I will further unpack my relation to the field.

### **2.3. Anthropology ‘at home’?**

Anthropologists generally refer to ‘anthropology at home’ as studying one’s own culture, usually by conducting fieldwork in one’s own country (Jackson, 1987; Peirano, 1998; Munthali, 2001). Breglia (2011:134) defined anthropology at home as a situation when the researcher is already embedded in his or her field-site as an already ‘native’ subject. Knowles (2000:56) argued that to understand the relationship between ‘home’ and ‘field’ it was necessary to examine the researcher’s intellectual, political, and transnational autobiography and this is what I will do in this section.

My positionality towards conducting research in the UK was not clear-cut. I am an Eastern European (Lithuanian) person with an Eastern European name and accent; however, all of my higher education had been attained from Western European institutions and in the English language. Intellectually I am closer to the British tradition of anthropology because that’s the only anthropological tradition I have been trained in. A comprehensive review of the history of

anthropology in Lithuania can be found in Ciubrinskas (2006), but to summarise - 'anthropology' in Lithuania had been long synonymous thematically with folklore and historical studies, while the more methodologically rigorous anthropology, brought over by academics who gained their degrees from Western European Universities, is in its infancy.

Godina (2003) delineated three established variants of anthropological fieldwork in relation to the location of anthropological knowledge. First, she distinguished what she called a traditional variant of fieldwork, in which a West European anthropologist (denoting Western Europe, USA, and Canada) works in a non-Western field. Second, she distinguished anthropology at 'home' (Western European anthropologist working in Western Europe) and native anthropology (non-Western anthropologist in non-Western setting). Godina argued that this had produced a condition where the West held the monopoly of knowledge about the West and called for non-West European anthropologists (she emphasised Eastern-European anthropologists) to do fieldwork in West European countries.

While it's been nearly two decades since Godina's plea and different institutional, intellectual and political (among other) combinations of relations between anthropologists and their fields have exceeded her tripartite delineation, it nevertheless reminds us that it is necessary to critically evaluate the relationship between producers of knowledge and the context of knowledge production. I cannot accurately estimate how common my specific positionality is - a non-Western European person, taught in a Western European context and doing research in the UK, under a University of Glasgow, Western European institution umbrella - but it certainly seems less prevalent than Mughal's (2015) observed popularity for non-Western researchers to study at Western institutions and gain their qualifications by doing fieldwork in their home countries. This is what I noticed as well, skimming scores of doctoral theses from different universities in the UK, albeit such observation was anecdotal, rather than systematically obtained.

In terms of British anthropology in Britain, Degnen and Tyler (2017) in a special issue of *Sociological Review*, passionately claimed that 'the time is over for thinking reductively of the anthropology of Britain as "anthropology at home"'

(2017:20) and urged to ‘move forward from the derision within British social anthropology towards the anthropological study of Britain that lasted for most of the twentieth century’ (2017:24). I must admit that I had never felt that the study of British social life contributed any less to anthropological knowledge because throughout my learning and development I had been influenced by the work by Daniel Miller (2008, 2010, 2017), Nigel Rapport (2000, 2002), and Peter Collins (2002, 2009), among many others. I also acknowledge that this could be one way of my ‘foreignness’ manifesting because when I started my undergraduate studies at the University of Edinburgh, I felt that I entered a Western anthropology field, in opposition to folklore-oriented Eastern European discipline, thus valuing all Western anthropological knowledge equally. While I am aware of the debates surrounding anthropology of Britain (Cohen, 1982, 1985; Rapport 2000, 2002), especially in the context of trying to establish a separation between the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (Degnen and Tyler, 2017), it is beyond the scope of this thesis to directly contribute to this specific debate.

In terms of fieldwork practicalities, in his commentary about the ‘New anthropology of Britain’, Nigel Rapport (2000) considers those researchers ‘who are at least thoroughly bilingual’ (Rapport 2000:21) as credible producers of British anthropology at home. One can only approximate what counts as ‘thorough’ bilingualism, which can cause issues of confidence for the researcher. Overall, the communication between me and my research participants was clear and swift and the information gathered was rich. I was almost exclusively the single foreign person in Death Cafés I attended, and Death Café attendees commented on my foreignness only on two occasions, by asking questions along the lines of ‘How do you do death back home?’. More generally, during Death Café conversations, attendees often evoked essentialised notions of other cultures, such as that Latin American and European Catholic cultures had death ‘figured out’. I could not contribute to the widely held assumption that my own largely Catholic country had what was considered a ‘better’ relationship to death, because I grew up in a non-religious household, moved to the UK when I was 18, and have only ever attended two funerals. Overall, I found that in Death Cafés, my personal attitudes and experiences carried more weight in how I was perceived than my nationality. This might have been because I do not have much



knowledge about the specific cultural Lithuanian and Eastern European death and dying systems, thus did not bring up anything that was specifically concerning my region of origin. The situations I brought to the table were from my childhood and were not culturally specific which might have added to my belief that my ethnicity was not part of my Death Café interactions.

Overall, my positionality as a researcher in Britain is neither that of doing anthropology 'at home', nor doing anthropology in an entirely foreign context. At this point in my education, I feel that doing research in Lithuania would feel more foreign as I have been out of touch intellectually and socially. However, the definite markers, instantaneously differentiating me from my research participants - name, accent, limited understanding of cultural references - remain and have the possibility to affect the research process. Continuous self-reflection on this is necessary as increasing mobility of academics produces numerous translocal, transnational research positionalities. While these debates on the relationship between notions of knowledge producer and the context of knowledge production are perennial in anthropology, in my approach to this I follow Mughal's (2015) argument that even though doing research in one's home country has some advantages concerning field practicalities, 'following ethnographic methodology demands particular skills and management that may be invariable between doing research in one's own as well as any other country' (Mughal, 2015:130). In other words, sufficient methodological expertise forms an adequate basis for producing credible research in various cultural contexts. I will turn now to outline how I went about producing mine.

## **2.4. Methods of data collection**

In this section, I will present the rationale for my chosen methods of data collection: participant observation and interviews. I begin by detailing how I navigated gaining access to Death Cafés.

### ***2.4.1. Selecting and negotiating access to the research sites***

The first two Death Cafés I gathered data at were organised in collaboration with a local college lecturer as part of the students' course in March 2018. I had obtained separate ethics approval from the University of Glasgow Ethics

committee to record the conversations and write an essay for Applied Qualitative Methods course (2018 Spring semester) at the University of Glasgow. The ethics application and the consent form for participants specified that I would also use these recordings in this thesis, but I did not conduct any follow-up interviews. This ethics approval can be found in Appendix E. After gaining further ethics approval from the University of Glasgow Ethics committee in July 2018 (also Appendix E), my main source of information about upcoming Death Cafés was the official Death Café website ([www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)). There, I was able to see Death Café advertisements posted months in advance. The advertisements were uploaded on the website at varying times before the actual event, thus a periodical scoping of the website was required to ensure I was continuously updating the pool of contact opportunities. I contacted Death Café hosts about potential attendance and research through the official Death Café website contact form.

I had contacted the Death Café estate before beginning my fieldwork to inform them of the research taking place. They were happy that the decision of whether to allow research to take place in specific Death Cafés was down to each organiser or team of organisers, despite the guideline highlighting that Death Cafés should not be used for research purposes (Underwood, 2012:2). Indeed, this guideline seems to act more like a suggestion than as a rule, because as I have outlined in my literature review in Chapter 1, there have been several studies that use Death Cafés for gathering data. In the initial emails to Death Cafés, I did not disclose that this research was in principle approved by the Death Café estate to avoid organisers possibly feeling pressured to participate. What follows is one of the first email responses I got when I began contacting organisers:

I'm sorry, but we won't be taking part as it would be in contravention of Death Café guidelines. Please see here from the website (my bolding): • ***Death Café doesn't work as a method of community engagement, research or consultation. It shouldn't be used for these purposes*** [emphasis and parentheses in the original response].

Organisers gave a variety of reasons for declining research to take part in the research, but Death Café guidelines ended up being cited only once. Weatherfield Death Café hosts were the only ones that sought out advice on my

participation from the Death Café estate. The research was generally unwelcomed in newly established Death Cafés as organisers told me they preferred to have a sense of average attendee numbers and to become more comfortable in organising the events before allowing research to take place. For others, the dimension of research was problematic not because it was against Death Café guidelines, but because it ‘could add unpredictable complexity to the event’, as one organiser put. Thus, the most common reasons organisers gave for declining participation were concerns about confidentiality and sensing that the attendees would not feel they could talk freely, which would counteract the purpose of Death Café. One organiser’s reply encompassed this sentiment:

The group is for those who wish to discuss things personally in private and of a highly emotional nature. I am trying to build the group and wouldn’t want to have people worrying about what they were saying. My very strong feeling is that for many people who come it is their first experience of opening up to talk about what death and dying means to them and I feel that what you propose would change this dynamic.

I reassured the organisers that throughout the research process, from note-taking all the way to the production of the final thesis, I would adhere to research anonymity regulations. For some organisers this was insufficient and they declined to participate. I contacted Death Cafés I could reasonably reach with public transport (total of 43). Three did not respond; five responded saying that they needed to think about it only to never respond again. Nine declined to take part. I was not able to attend six Death Cafés that have agreed to have me for reasons of ill health, adverse weather, and last-minute scheduling changes. I ended up participating in 20 Death Cafés in total. Six cafes I attended were run under the organiser’s professional role. I believe this was affected by the way I decided to go about contacting the Death Cafes - via the official website. Death Cafes organised in professional capacity, under the name of a charity or organisation more frequently tended to be placed on there to follow the conventions set out by Death Café, are likely to be advertised via proper channels to follow procedures and to attract more attendees.

To preserve confidentiality, all the Death Cafés will be referred throughout the thesis in names of fictional towns from British culture. This list can be found in

Appendix B and is in the chronological order in which I attended Death Cafés in March 2018-June 2019.

### **2.4.2 Participant observation and participant listening**

Participant observation has long been considered the cornerstone of the ethnographic enterprise. However, some academics have questioned whether participant observation is essential to ethnography (Shah, 2017) and even whether ethnography is essential for anthropology (Ingold, 2008, 2014, 2017). Hockey and Forsey (2012) in their impassioned chapter *Ethnography is not participant observation* argue that participant observation is but one way among several approaches (such as interviews, artefact, document or literary analyses, etc.) that enable the social researcher to produce an ethnography. With that in mind, I will delineate the rationale for using participant observation and its application to my research.

The primary justification for using participant observation was to witness and collect observational data on how strangers interact when engaging in discussion about death in an informal Death Café setting. To use a sentiment I continuously encountered throughout my fieldwork, I wanted to grasp ‘the magic of the Death Café’. Participant observation also helped me to identify relevant issues to address in the interviews. I was able to observe a behaviour or an interaction and during a follow-up interview I could clarify the meaning of the interaction or how something affected the participant. Further, this approach, emphasising participation, allowed me to build relationships of at least surface trust and facilitated an appropriate level of rapport for follow-up interviews. I did not take notes during Death Café conversations because I wanted to emphasise my participation in the interaction. I vigorously jotted down unstructured notes as soon as possible after each event, detailing all I could remember about the atmosphere, the details of the venue, movements, interactions, conflicts. To immerse myself in conversation and to avoid distractions of taking ‘mental notes’, I generally preferred to record Death Café conversations. I felt that being able to revisit the conversations would provide ‘a much more accurate and detailed account of what has taken place than would be provided in hand-written notes’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:157); and would also allow me to accurately trace the developments of specific interactions, such as conflict.

As my view of Death Cafés matured with increasing numbers of events attended, the way I understood participation in Death Cafés evolved as well. My participation in a lot of Death Café conversations was less than other participants'. I am naturally shy and did not try to act in a way that was unnatural to me. My lack of verbal contribution as compared to other conversation participants might have been perceived as observing, or participating but not earnestly, however I do not have proof of that or a sense that that happened. As time went on, I became more comfortable with the Death Café interaction and, in a way, this slight shift from observing to participating affected the data collection process, wherein I felt I started taking fewer mental notes and allowed the recorder to capture the verbal data and otherwise submerged myself in the conversation. I jotted down copious notes during the first listens of recorded conversations to capture my memories and observations of the event.

'Participation' shifted from making sure I constantly contribute to the discussion verbally, to 'participation' as listening and being present. Beaulie (2010), contrasting the terms 'co-presence' and 'witnessing' regarding fieldwork, writes that 'co-presence' is an emergent and interactive accomplishment by participants and ethnographers alike, and it does not share the unidirectional and oculo-centric connotations of 'witnessing' (Beaulie 2010:457, citing Woolgar and Coopmans, 2006). The figure of the anthropologist as a witness is more prominent in research on tragic events, violence, and social suffering (Beaulie, 2010:457), while co-presence is built on the co-construction of shared meaning *during* the interaction, a method to facilitate the creation of experience. Fieldwork is a profoundly social activity and throughout it, I discovered the value of co-presence and attentive listening from both a professional and a personal point of view. Listening, as an important part of the ethnographic project, according to Forsey (2010a) encourages participation in, and engagement with, the lives of our fellow human beings. Death Café attendees often remarked how pleasant and important it was to be listened to and for their concerns to be taken seriously. By easing into listening as an active role, I was able to enact my understanding of participant observation as contributing the co-creation of a pleasant and supportive atmosphere.

### **2.4.3. Interviews**

Alongside participant observation at 20 Death Café events, the 49 follow-up interviews with Death Café attendees and organisers formed a significant part of my research. I began interviewing Death Café organisers and attendees in February 2019, starting with those I met at Death Cafés in October-December 2018. By conducting interviews, I sought to answer one of my research questions specifically: are Death Cafés self-contained events, or does their influence extend beyond them? As transformative responses to events are not bound by the place or time of the happening (van Dooremallen, 2017), semi-structured interviews were immensely helpful in capturing a fuller picture of Death Café meaning-making dynamics.

I also interviewed several organisers whose Death Cafés I did not get a chance to attend for they were outside the timeframe of my fieldwork. This way I got to talk to seasoned organisers who have been hosting Death Cafés since 2012-2013. Death Café attendees who agreed to be recorded during the event also had the chance to leave their contact details for a possible follow-up interview further down the consent form. Thus, all the attendees to be interviewed were identified via attending Death Cafés and meeting them in person - this helped to establish rapport and I believe was a factor in the high response rate to requests for follow-up interviews. All the conversations were transcribed by me. The list of Death Café organisers and attendees I interviewed can be found in Appendix C. The semi-structured interview question guides can be found in Appendix D. Five attendees and one organiser preferred to respond to my interview questions by email. These exchanges provided additional demographic data on research participants, but I did not count them towards the total interview number.

Death Café organisers I talked to worked mostly in healthcare, deathcare (funeral celebrants, death doulas), mental health and bereavement (psychotherapists, bereavement counsellors), community/social work roles. Less frequently I encountered organisers from faith-based professions (hospice chaplains, ministers), artists, writers. If not professionally involved with grief, death, or dying, most organisers engaged with it in a personal capacity, such as taking counselling courses or volunteering. Similar career patterns were observed

by Karrell (2018) in her master's dissertation on Death Cafés in Canada, Baldwin's (2017) interview study of 15 Death Café facilitators in the USA, and Richards et al.'s (2020) international study. Organiser age ranged from 31 to 75 years old. The mean age of Death Café organisers I interviewed was 53. This is close to the age range of Baldwin's (2017) facilitators (55-64); and older than the mean age of international organisers (40-50), identified in Richards et al.'s (2020) study. Ninety percent of the organisers I talked to were female. The advertisements on the Death Café website (Death Café, 2021a) indicate that while the percentage of male and female organisers in the UK might not be as stark as in my research, most organisers are women.

A significant proportion of Death Café attendees also came from health and social care backgrounds but generally their backgrounds were more heterogeneous. There were more teachers, academics, writers and artists among attendees than among organisers. Many attendees said they also volunteered in their community, for befriending services for example. Out of 66 Death Café attendees that have provided me with their contact details, 47 were female and 19 were male. This does not necessarily reflect the general trend of attendance because sex proportions vary widely from event to event. For example, in St. Mary Mead Death Café 18 out of 19 participants were female. Interviewed attendee ages ranged from 21 to 82. The mean age of Death Café attendees was 59 years. This is somewhat congruent with Fong's (2017:xi) finding that most Death Café attendees belong to the Baby Boomer generation (defined as born in the period between 1946 and 1964).

While participant observation provided me with an exceptional amount of data, even more data came from the interviews. This posed a question: In what way are interviews - some conducted over the phone - ethnographic? Hockey (2002), writing as one engaged in 'anthropology at home' and 'anthropology of Britain', stated that many researchers in these circumstances:

Feel their disciplinary identity to be slipping away from them as a consequence of doing interview-led studies rather than 'proper' ethnography (Hockey, 2002:209-210).

Eminent anthropologist Sherry Ortner, for her book *New Jersey Dreaming* (2003), conducted research with her former classmates. She was concerned that interview-based studies suffered from a loss of richness and depth when compared with full-scale participant observation. For follow-up research Ortner:

Tried to think of something more ethnographic, more place-based, if not actually in a single site, that would also allow to get back to a more cultural perspective, compared to the heavy sociological bent of this book (Ortner, 2003:261).

Here we can see a disciplinary slippage - that interview-based studies are not just non-ethnographic, but even non-anthropological. Forsey (2010b), in his analysis of papers published between 2007 and 2009 in key British, American and Australian anthropological journals, found that 'a little less than half of them were based on a roughly equal mix of what was seen and heard in the research process, 45 percent on interviews and informal conversations, and only 7 percent on what was observed by the ethnographer' (Forsey, 2010b:73). Forsey did not claim that interviews were more significant than other forms of anthropological research but suggested a 'democracy of the senses' (Forsey, 2010b:56), acknowledging that interviews and conversations as methods need not be necessarily embedded in, or accompanying the activity of participant observation to be considered ethnographic.

Hockey (2002) also argued a case for interview-based studies to be considered ethnographic, asserting that research interviews are culturally appropriate ways of participating in British society. She suggested that the experience of the research interview could resemble a world in which relationships are often conducted in the bounded time slots of phone or email contact, or in and around cultural activities that transcend local and global spaces. Fetterman (2010) highlighted the use of interviews in ethnography in relation to issues of validity and rigour. In this sense, the purpose of conducting interviews in ethnography is about accurately representing and triangulating insights gained via participant observation; that is, 'comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes' (Fetterman, 2010:40). Similarly, Madden (2010:73) suggested that the purpose of using interviews in ethnographically informed research is to elicit descriptive, structural, and comparative responses from research participants. I found that interviews played exactly the role that



Fetterman and Madden suggested: I was able to gain context for observed actions, compare people's motivations and attitudes, and expand my conceptual understanding of Death Cafés beyond the event itself.

## **2.5. Ethical considerations**

There were several ethical knots to be untangled before I could begin my fieldwork. In Death Cafés, attendees are invited to 'break the taboo' about talking about death and some of them might already feel apprehensive about participating in such an unusual activity. This was reflected in some organisers' hesitance to participate in my research, as outlined in the gaining access section. Death Cafés usually have a high turnover of participants; thus it was likely I would be asking first-time (for some, only time) attendees to also take part in academic research. It was crucial for me to ensure that no one felt pressured into participating and that the effect of my presence as a researcher on their Death Café experience was minimised.

### ***2.5.1. Sensitive nature of talking about death***

The most significant potential risks for research participants were that the research dealt with sensitive personal issues and explorations of death and loss. My strategy to mitigate any emotional distress to participants was by invoking what I called a 'shared humanity' approach to the topics discussed and experiences shared. I draw from a certain epistemological aspect of researching death and dying, poignantly articulated by anthropologist Douglas Davies: 'We are all participants in mortality, not just observers' (quoted in Woodthorpe, 2011:100). This echoes Death Café ethos that participants come together 'simply as people who are going to die' (Underwood, 2013a) thus in participating in Death Cafés, I primarily trusted my own reactions and decisions for showing empathy and support as a fellow mortal human being.

All Death Café participants have elected to attend the event and as such come to some extent prepared to talk about issues around death and bereavement. However, I carried a printed sheet of bereavement support resources, based on NHS recommendations and as advised by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee. This can be found in Appendix J. If I were to provide this support

list, I was always to ensure that I would not be seen as an advocate for any support organisation. Death Cafés are spaces where talking about death and dying is intended to be normalised and for this reason it was important to not give the impression that professional help is always needed when dealing with or talking about these topics. Additionally, according to Death Café regulations, attendees are not allowed to explicitly educate, promote a service or a product.

To that extent, my 'shared humanity' approach, the engaged listening disposition I took up during the events appeared to be more important than any signposting to official support organisations. In the end, I never used the support resources sheet not because signposting was never needed, but because organisers and sometimes other attendees possessed a wealth of knowledge on organisations, initiatives, events, groups, that people with a question or a need were signposted towards.

### ***2.5.2. Gaining consent at the event***

During initial email communication, I presented the organisers with two main options on how my research could take place in their events. These could be further tailored according to what each organiser thought was best suited to their Death Café. In the first approach, the organiser would contact several of their regular attendees to form a separate group - a designated 'research table' - that would participate in my research, with the rest of the Death Café operating normally. In the second approach, I was allowed to simply show up to the venue and introduce myself to all participants at the start of the event and then ask each table if they agreed to be recorded. Both approaches have benefits and drawbacks. The first approach was selected mainly by organisers whose Death Cafés were locally well established, who felt that the regular attendees might appreciate the opportunity to talk with me, and that this way first-time attendees would feel less affected by research taking place. The first approach ensured that all participants were comfortable and prepared beforehand, but it could affect the very nature of the conversation. In Weatherfield Death Café, for example, the research group was pre-selected and the conversation ended with the group commenting that that was the best Death Café conversation they had participated in. Facilitator Doris later wrote me an email:

I thought it proved to be a more 'satisfying' conversation than many at Death Café (whether that was to do with the effect of 'being observed'/recorded or combining of people into the 'research group' or other factors).

Doris' reflection pointed out how outspoken and proactive personalities brought together at one table can co-construct a more impassioned engagement than usual, even a performance. Monahan and Fisher (2010), in their discussion on observer effects and their relation to debates on the merits of ethnographic research argue that 'staged performances' are important because they are deeply revealing of how individuals perceive themselves and would like to be perceived (Monahan and Fisher, 2010:6). Researcher input and reflexivity here is pivotal as it is she who distinguishes what is a 'staged performance' and what it attempts to communicate. For example, 32-year-old John told me during the interview that he recently had been invited to re-enact a Death Café conversation on a radio show, so he looked up some death-related literature to appear more scholarly. He drew on some of the same sources in our Death Café group conversation but said that there he did so 'naturally'. I have gained many similar insights in my fieldwork and I concur with Monahan and Fisher who argue that these 'performances' should be 'warmly accepted as gifts from informants; they are valuable treasures of meaning, abundantly wrapped in multiple layers of interest, assumption, and concern' (2010:12).

In the second approach, I would enter the Death Café with the groups already formed amongst themselves and explain my research to the whole room, asking each table for their consent. I would then join one table for conversation. The biggest drawback of the second approach was that there was a risk of peer pressure at each table. I felt that if four out of five participants enthusiastically agreed to be recorded, there was a possibility that the fifth person might not want that but felt too awkward to move tables. However, I do not have proof of that and did not feel it was happening. I took care to (re)emphasise to participants that they could withdraw from the research at any point and ask for the voice recorder to be stopped. As I noted in my earlier discussion on organisers' attitudes towards recording and my flexible strategies on data collection in each Death Café, the presence of the recorder was not compulsory.

Death Cafes are spaces where people come willing to communicate with strangers about sensitive matters. In Death Cafes with a pre-arranged research group, attendees came prepared to engage with a researcher. In Death Cafes where I asked for permission to conduct research at the beginning of the event, participants did not have that mental preparation. The primary decision lay with the organiser who allowed me into their space and knew their space well enough to trust that even first-time attendees would not be immediately against the idea.

I asked the interview participants whether they thought my presence affected the Death Café conversations. Most of the replies were that they thought it wasn't the case. However, one facilitator responded that the Death Café I was at was a better, deeper conversation, which she considered to be in part because people were aware of participating in research. The Riseholme Death Café group also reflected that the conversation was particularly insightful, but did not mention research itself, instead highlighting the fact that they were selected by organiser Edith to join the research group due to their vast interest, knowledge and willingness to share their thoughts on matters relating to death and dying.

One attendee in the Weatherfield Death Café was a GP and at the point where the conversation turned to physician assisted dying he said: 'I won't share this because there is a tape and I need to be careful'. Similarly, to this participant not wanting to share his personal opinions on a political matter, any confidential or especially sensitive information could have been withheld by participants due to the conversation being recorded. In the same Weatherfield conversation, however, another participant was talking about a legally dubious event that happened in their life. Thus, it was up to the individual what they chose to disclose. All in all, my thesis focuses less on the content of the conversations and more on the participant interactions beyond the topics discussed.

### ***2.5.3. My personal contributions to Death Café conversations***

I attempted to bring my own experiences, fears and thoughts to all Death Café conversations instead of assuming a more detached role of an observer,

contributing merely with my academic knowledge. This was both a part of the participant observation strategy (to immerse oneself in the activity of study) and ethical duty to research participants, who were engaged in an often-intimate sharing of thoughts and experiences. However, I found it harder than expected. I have not experienced significant losses in my life so far, neither do I have particularly strong personal thoughts about my mortality. When the conversations took more confessional turns, on several occasions I resorted to telling the same two (and only) personal stories. This made me feel self-conscious that my contributions were not personal or emotional 'enough' to fully justify my presence at the Death Café. By this, I mean that in these instances I felt more acutely that the primary reason I was there was to collect data, which in a way made me feel less honest. This, of course, is a personal feeling because the people I interacted with at a Death Café had all knowledge that I was there for the purposes of conducting research. Yet, I felt bad that I couldn't give more personally, especially when this was coupled with such passing remarks from attendees like 'You must be the expert', or 'You must know so much more than me', referring to my academic background.

Valentine (2007) wrote about how she realised she had been unconsciously 'editing' herself out of the interviews because she felt embarrassed about her own responses, which seemed clumsy and intrusive, and not the 'real' data. I found I felt similar not only when transcribing interviews but also listening back to recorded Death Café conversations, exactly as Valentine put:

Instead of listening to myself with the attitude of openness and inquiry that I was assuming with interviewees, I was quite shocked to discover the extent to which I seemed to be measuring myself against some idealised image of scientific detachment. Yet once I was able to take a step back and listen to myself more sympathetically, I was able to acknowledge and cultivate my own role in facilitating the interview (Valentine, 2007:167).

Even though all conversation participants at times dealt with interruptions and awkwardness, I felt acutely embarrassed and like I should have 'performed' better when *my* contributions were not picked up for further discussion, a reaction to *my* joke was not as I expected, or when *I* interrupted a person mid-sentence.

Accounts, unpacking researcher's subjectivity and emotions, especially in the context of researching death, dying and bereavement, like Valentine's (2007), Woodthorpe's (2009, 2011) and Visser's (2017) made me feel more secure about navigating my own identity as a researcher and my personal identity. Only in the second half of my fieldwork did I become truly confident that my words and stories were as valid as everyone else's. I realised that it was the intensity and frequency of talking about death that made me overly aware of the lack of variety in my contributions. Alongside this, it is also important to consider the personal impact of doing death research, because failing to acknowledge it, as Woodthorpe (2009, 2011) noted, may leave subsequent analysis disconnected from the reality of the mortal human condition.

In a lengthy email interview, Michael Hviid Jacobsen asked Tony Walter how studying 'morbid' (Jacobsen, 2021:23) and 'harsh' (ibid) realities of death and dying had affected his own views on mortality. Walter gave a sobering answer that death studies are not 'necessarily traumatic' (Jacobsen, 2021:23), and researchers often are more affected by researching genocide, violence, and racism among other traumatic phenomena because 'evil is more disturbing than death itself' (ibid). Many of the stories about death and loss I encountered in Death Cafés were emotionally moving but I wouldn't say affected me especially profoundly, neither negatively nor positively. I am still moved, however, by one participant kindly gifting me her beautifully hand-tied poetry book. Throughout fieldwork, similar interactions with Death Café participants, sharing a laugh, eating together (as I did in several interviews) imprinted on me more than death being the topic of conversation.

#### **2.5.4. *My non-presence***

Another related issue came up when I began listening and transcribing recordings of conversations I was not a part of. While I had the participants' written consent, I still felt like I was eavesdropping on what I was not supposed to hear. Without my bodily presence to confirm that I was engaged in the sharing, I felt like I had not laboured in the conversation with the other participants - I had not given, I had just taken. From both a personal and a research ethical point of view, from the very beginning stages of drafting the thesis, I was more comfortable writing about conversations that I had been a part of. I felt that

when I had been present, I could rely both on the verbatim transcript of the conversation and my impressions and memories, in other words - both 'hard' and 'soft' data generated in ethnographic fieldwork (Pool, 2017:281). The conversations I was only experiencing for the first time while transcribing, on the other hand, felt extremely partial. I include these conversations in the thesis, especially as they were very valuable in capturing the group dynamics without the researcher present, but I threaded their content matter especially carefully. When intimate knowledge was shared in a conversation I wasn't present for, I chose not to use those interactions for my ethnographic vignettes. I made this decision to ensure that without my presence acting as a background reminder of research activity, I was not benefitting from instances where people, possibly in an emotional moment, forgot that they signed a consent form. Even though I always received permission and informed consent from research participants, I acknowledge that in those conversations when I was on the other side of the room, engaged in a different conversation, they could have forgotten that a researcher was in the room.

## **2.6. Data Analysis**

My fieldwork period was March 2018 - June 2019. I attended Death Cafes from March 2018 (starting with two Lochdubh Death Cafes) to June 1<sup>st</sup> 2019 and conducted interviews from February 2019 to June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019. During fieldwork, I had time in between Death Café events to transcribe recorded conversations and interviews. I continuously identified patterns and themes within them and was able to tailor follow-up interview questions to respond to the developments. In this way, analysis was an integral part of fieldwork.

In many cases, ethnographic data collection ends in a pragmatic manner, when time and resources have been exhausted, resulting in withdrawal from the field (Spradley, 1980, in Jones and Smith, 2017:99). My fieldwork year was supposed to end in September 2019 but I brought this forward to June 2019. This was because the expansion of my list of themes I was discovering in interviews slowed down until I was left gathering more examples of the same theme. The same thing happened with Death Café conversation recordings - their content was still varied because attendees brought their unique perspectives and experiences, but the list of general characteristics of interactions and

behaviours within Death Café was no longer expanding. This could be defined as 'data saturation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:61), which is a desirable (Bowen, 2008; Fusch and Ness, 2015), but contested (O'Reilly and Parker, 2013) conclusion of data collection. Further, as Guest et al. (2006), noted, the concept of data saturation may be easy to understand, but the execution of it is another matter entirely.

Doing ethnographic research, which inherently deals with the complexity of lived experiences and multiple meanings, it was hard to be certain that 'just one more' Death Café would not reveal something entirely new. However, because I was noticing a level of repetition across all of my data sources (interviews, conversation recordings, participant observation notes, Death Café website), I was satisfied with my decision to finish my fieldwork in June 2019. Instead of engaging in lengthy debates about the definitions of data saturation, I wish to highlight that my use of multiple methods of data collection as well as continuous reflection on the strategy of conducting interviews to enhance participant observation data I gathered from Death Café even and conversation recordings, contributes to the validity of my findings and can be considered akin to methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Denzin (2012) provided an evocative metaphor of triangulation - employing multiple methods to explore different levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon (Denzin (2012) in Fusch and Ness, 2017:1411) - being somewhat like 'looking through a crystal to perceive and recognise that there are many sides from which to approach a concept' (ibid:1412). The validity was further enhanced in the later coding stages.

I coded all the Death Café conversation and interview transcripts using NVivo software. This required me to examine the data closely to identify recurrent themes and important issues within research participants' accounts (O'Reilly K., 2012:188). This also allowed for thematic analysis across data from different sources, which Fetterman (2010:97-98) argues is an important form of ethnographic reliability. Emerson et al. (2011) made a useful distinction between two stages of coding: open coding, necessary 'to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate', and focussed coding, focusing on 'a smaller set of promising ideas



and categories to provide the major topic and themes of the final ethnography' (Emerson et al., 2011:172). I had concluded the stage of open coding almost simultaneous to the end of my fieldwork as I had been engaged with transcribing and coding continuously. The open coding process provided a long and still messy list of codes on general themes.

Preparation for the second stage of coding consisted of re-reading; further thematisations; identification of key sentiments; recalling events and interactions; and interpretations. Focused coding took two additional months as I was looking for cross-cutting themes across different data sources: conversations; interviews with organisers; and interviews with attendees. I focused on themes that would help to answer my research questions. This was also the point of the process where I identified the rich fieldwork moments that would later be used as descriptive passages to provide vivid vignettes and a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the Death Café experience. The main thematic codes have become clusters of themes that eventually informed chapter themes. As I did the majority of coding while simultaneously collecting data, I take the view that coding saturation in my research was secondary to 'meaning saturation' - the point where viewpoints, variations, accurate and deep understanding of information are all reflected in the data (Hennink et al., 2017, 2019; Saunders et al., 2018). In other words, coding saturation itself is a deficient measure, because 'the codes can be saturated but vital information remain unconsidered' (Sebele-Mpofu and Serpa, 2020:4) and I argue I have achieved reasonable meaning saturation through a concurrent process of fieldwork and analysis.

## 2.7. Writing up

As I was immersing myself in data, I felt overwhelmed by the realisation that not only could I not present all the fieldwork encounters that I initially selected due to word limit, but also that I could not write about *everything* I found in the field. Forsey (2019:120) urged for more explicit acknowledgment that intensive ethnographic research 'creates more data than we can ever deal with'. Forsey felt it acutely, noting that all publications from his own 15-month research in a high school exhibited a distinct absence of high-school students. He explained that despite sensing his focus shift, he continued research among students up

until the end of his fieldwork because he felt encouraged by his training to embrace the holistic vision of ethnographic research and to:

Uphold a commitment to an open-ended inductivist approach to data collection, which is often portrayed as a 'vacuum cleaner approach' to research involving capturing as much data as possible on just about any topic arising in conversations and observations (Forsey 2019:120).

Throughout the thesis writing process I was aware that what was eventually going to be presented in my thesis, and indeed what would remain unearthed in my office drawers, would never be a truly a holistic account of the Death Café initiative.

Willis and Trondman's (2005) definition of ethnography I referred to at the beginning of this chapter emphasised the importance of respecting, recording, and representing human experience. Which experiences of Death Café I chose to present in my thesis, and even more, which stories from fieldwork I utilised to further my theoretical arguments was entirely my decision. There have been instances, for example, where I could not verify where an emotional outburst had come from, or why people were antagonistic or indifferent, which then calls for a discussion about interpretation and issues of representation and 'speaking for the other' (Alcoff, 1991). The limits of interpretation have been a prominent topic for ethnography. For example, Geertz famously argued that gaining first-person knowledge of others and representing it in ethnographic writing is a fallacy, with the anthropologist merely projecting her own thoughts and feelings onto the unsuspecting subjects of study, thereby mischaracterising them in the process (Geertz, 1984:126). Part of the issue of representation, I argue, is accounted for by the transformative nature of the fieldwork because in this way 'part of the data is embodied in the researcher' (Pool, 2017:283). Those instances I found fascinating, illuminating, engaging when participating in Death Cafés and talking to people, warranted further exploration because I was part of the co-creation of it and felt that they were significant. In the same way, I explored the instances that I found others felt significant. This eventually led me towards discovering my theoretical framework, which focuses on the individual's relation to the collective and thus further narrowed the extent of my interpretation of my research participants' meanings. Thus, my interpretations

and representations of fieldwork data are partial and necessarily selective but that is the disciplinary curse, as well as a blessing, of being an anthropologist.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

In this chapter I accomplished several pivotal tasks. First, I examined to which extent my research can be considered multi-sited. I defined it as a combination of researching the pop-up physical Death Café events and engaging with the developing archive of the Death Café website. I also defined it as an examination of a spatiotemporal cross-section of the Death Café initiative in the UK, meaning that my fieldwork and the research itself were characterised by diversity and intensity, rather than traditional ethnographic values of prolonged and sustained social contact with research participants.

I discussed my specific cultural and intellectual positionality towards doing research in Britain, on (mostly) British subjects, resulting in an ambiguous placement of neither being entirely foreign nor doing anthropology 'at home'. After outlining how I negotiated access to Death Café events, I moved on to justify my selection of data collection methods. I argued that the combination of participant observation of Death Café events, recording Death Café conversations and conducting follow-up interviews resulted in a methodologically robust and rich account of Death Café event dynamics and the broader values and meanings associated with organising and participating in Death Cafes. I also discussed the ethical concerns within this study and justified taking a 'shared humanity' approach, both as a commitment to my research participants and as a strategy for navigating between my identity as a researcher and personal identity in Death Café events.

Discussing all of these features of my research was necessary so that the reader could fully grasp how I brought these different types of data and research experiences together to create the thesis narrative. This work continues in the next chapter, where I focus on the theoretical tools I selected to examine Death Cafés in the UK.

## Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the theoretical framework for the thesis. The neo-tribal theory is only one of the ways of sociologically framing contemporary experiences of belonging (Hardy, Bennet, and Robards, 2018:5). I discovered the theory as I was trying to find a framework to make sense of the data gathered during my fieldwork. My research participants frequently expressed that Death Cafés gave them more than just an outlet for conversations that they felt they couldn't have elsewhere; Death Cafes also made them feel exhilarated by the human connection they found there. Thus, I decided to hone in on the dynamics of being together in conversation about death. Because of the relatively low uptake of neo-tribal theory in social anthropology and death studies, I argue it is necessary to discuss in detail the origins of neo-tribal theory, as well as the current interdisciplinary debates about its applications to empirical research. What follows in this chapter is one of the most comprehensive existing summaries on the matter (alongside Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017; Hardy, 2021).

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part introduces Maffesoli's theory of postmodern sociality and neo-tribes, developed at the end of the twentieth century (Maffesoli, 1996 [1988]). First, I focus on locating Maffesoli's views among narratives of modernity and postmodernity and his conceptualisation of the relationship between individual and society (Maffesoli, 1996). This part defines the conditions of social life in which Maffesoli's neo-tribes are said to emerge. I then introduce the theoretical inspirations for Maffesoli's explanations of how neo-tribes operate. I mainly focus on the influence of Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. In this section, I introduce the core concepts of *puissance*, ethics, and aesthetics that I will use throughout the thesis. I then go on to address the main criticisms of Maffesoli's grand narrative.

The second part of the chapter focuses on how Maffesoli's work has been applied and developed by other scholars, specifically in Anglophone academia. I outline the debates within the disciplines with the largest uptake of neo-tribal theory: sociology and tourism and leisure studies. Then, I move on to synthesising the commonly accepted interdisciplinary understandings of the neo-tribal theory

that emerged both as a simplification of Maffesoli's often vague excursions, as well as fruitful developments of the theory gained through empirical studies.

The final part of the chapter argues for the relevance of neo-tribal theory to the context of contemporary death studies. I argue for a fruitful synthesis between the neo-tribal theory, aspects of Tony Walter's (1994) thesis on the revival of death, his evaluation of the Death Awareness movement as a postmaterialist movement (Walter, 2020), and Michael Hviid Jacobsen's (2016) concept of spectacular death. I will now move on to introduce neo-tribal theory.

### **3.2. Neo-tribalism: origins as a response to narratives of individualisation and alienation**

The key text for neo-tribal theory is French sociologist Michel Maffesoli's (1944-present) *Le Temps des Tribus*, which was published in France 1988, with the English translation *The Time of the Tribes* following in 1996. Maffesoli created neo-tribal theory fundamentally as a response to dominant scholarly discourses about postmodernity, broadly characterised by the prevalence of highly individualistic and increasingly alienated societies (Dawes, 2016), although he did not direct his critique at specific scholars. Maffesoli broadly agreed with the narratives that permanent social bonds grounded in notions of physical community, kinship, and class that characteristically shaped industrial society were not readily available to individuals living in a post-industrial, globalised climate (Hardy, Bennett and Robards, 2018:2). He, however, held a more optimistic view of postmodern sociality, emphasising the 'ongoing desire among individuals to realise themselves as social beings' (ibid:3) in a fragmented social terrain.

As part of his project to 'develop a sociology oriented towards a recognition of sociality as a central aspect of social life' (Maffesoli, 1996, in Malbon, 1998:39) Maffesoli criticised his contemporaries by saying that:

In placing too much emphasis on *society* and the purely rational, intentional and economic elements which constitute it, we have left aside *sociality*, which is, in a way, *communalised empathy* (Maffesoli, 1987:71, emphasis in original)/.../ we have dwelled so often on the dehumanisation and the disenchantment with the modern world and the solitude it

induces that we are no longer capable of seeing the networks of solidarity that exist within (Maffesoli, 1987:72).

Maffesoli claimed that postmodernity was characterised by ‘short-lived flashes of sociality (Shields,1996:xii) that took place in small ephemeral groupings, characterised by ‘fluidity, periodic assemblies and dispersals’ (Maffesoli, 1993: xv; St John, 2008; Xue et al., 2018) he called neo-tribes. Neo-tribes are:

Without the rigidity of the forms of organisation with which we are familiar, [tribe] refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form (Maffesoli, 1996:98).

Neo-tribal groupings are centred around their members’ shared lifestyles and tastes (Shields,1996:x); shared experiences and emotions (Maffesoli, 1996:72, 2016; Evans, 1997; Dawes, 2016). They also might be based around transient and interim identities, lucrative commodities, brands, labels, or locations (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021:115). In other words, they are ‘not limited in the nature of their associations’ (ibid) but are grounded in sociality. For Maffesoli, ‘sociality’ refers to all those social phenomena of being together because of a shared sentiment.

This shared sentiment is the basis for the emergence of an important concept in neo-tribal theory - aesthetics. Maffesoli describes the aesthetic as ‘the taste, the admiration, which is held in common and which cements the collectivity’ (Maffesoli, 1991:16). The neo-tribal concept of aesthetics is rooted in not simply good or bad taste, but in a common faculty of feeling and experiencing (Maffesoli, 1996:74, 77, 85). In other words, members of neo-tribes have certain sentiments they share as individuals but the purpose of neo-tribes is to experience having those individual sentiments *together*. In neo-tribal theory ‘what is ultimately being experienced through shared objects, emotions and activities is the community and therefore the self that is produced in that context’ (Green, 2021:35). I will discuss the specific etymology of Maffesoli’s aesthetics in section 3.3. and it will also be the focus on Chapter 5.

Participation in neo-tribes creates temporary feelings of belonging, group solidarity, enthusiasm, and emotional charging. Walby and Spencer (2018:16) explain that this collective achievement is based on the ‘simplest of

foundations: warmth, companionship-physical contact with one another'. They claim belonging to neo-tribes also acts for the participants as a 'veritable re-enchantment with the world' (ibid) and is a manifestation of the 'ever-renewed game of solidarity and reciprocity' (Maffesoli, 1987:71), a challenge to the alienating, atomising, rationalised modernity. This gives rise to what he terms *puissance*, which refers to "the inherent energy and vital force of the people, as opposed to the institutions of 'power' ('pouvoir')” (Maffesoli, 1996:1). The predominance of this creativity or *puissance* is the characteristic difference between postmodern sociality and the preceding modern society. The origins and full definition of this nebulous concept will be attended in section 3.3.

Maffesoli suggested that because these effects are achieved collectively, 'the group - not the individual, nor "society"' (Maffesoli, 1987:62) is 'the primary unit for sociality in contemporary life' (Walby and Spencer, 2018:16). As such, within neo-tribal framework *the group* it is the primary object of study. This holds a significant appeal for the study of Death Café because it is a group gathering<sup>3</sup>. Further, for Maffesoli, this voluntary group sociation also has an ethical aspect - Maffesoli specifies the ethical as a:

morality with no obligation other than coming together and being a member of the collective body, and with no sanction other than being excluded should the interest which brought me into the group come to an end(Maffesoli, 1991:16-17).

In other words, the members of the neo-tribe feel an obligation to act according to the group's standards because the group's standards are also what is being enjoyed in the process. I will give a more in-depth discussion of Maffesolian ethics in section 3.3. and it will also be the focus of Chapter 5.

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of Maffesoli's concern with groups in everyday life and interacting in public, it is worth noting that he bears similarity to Goffman (1963). However, Shields (1996:ix) noted that Maffesoli 'transcends Goffman's focus on the interpersonal to consider the sociological implications of the plethora of small groups and of temporary groupings which we are members of at different times during our day'. Brown (1986:537) put it slightly differently: 'Goffman provides a lexicon for describing everyday life, Maffesoli attempts a grammar of it, one that could be used to decode macro-structural phenomena as well'. Hence, I am aware that some interactions at a Death Café I present in the ensuing chapters could be interpreted using Goffman's framework but in this thesis I specifically aim to further the relevance of neo-tribal theory.

In the original French text, Maffesoli called these gatherings *tribus*. The English language term 'neo-tribe' appeared first in Rob Shields' foreword to the first edition of *The Time of the Tribes* (1996). Maffesoli continuously reiterated that *tribus* is a metaphor which cannot be reduced to the concept of tribe or tribalism as anthropologists use it. He claimed that while neo-tribes 'are determined as much by space and locality as the archaic versions' (Dawes, 2016:737), they do not have the fixity and longevity of tribes (Shields, 1996:x). Instead, neo-tribes form around 'transitivity and questions of taste and are embedded in the rituals and performances of everyday life' (Dawes, 2016:737). According to neo-tribal theory, people are members of multiple neo-tribes as they go about their daily lives and these belongings need not carry much significance to their individual lives either.

Despite Maffesoli criticising individualisation, the opposition between 'individualism' and 'neo-tribalism' is 'not as stark as might be thought' (Evans, 1997:239). Evans' reasoning for this claim is that:

Neo-tribalism first and foremost depends upon a highly individualised society where people are released from the chains of tradition and are therefore in a position to consciously or semi-consciously choose between the lifestyle alternatives offered up to them by the new conditions of consumer capitalism' (ibid).

In a similar vein, media theorist Simon Dawes (2016) has noted that Maffesoli's grounding thought on the blurring of the boundaries between the individual and community has obvious resonances with the concept of reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Both neo-tribal theory and reflexive modernity emphasise the decline of stable identities. For proponents of reflexive modernity, the heightened level of reflexivity of post-industrial, rational society upon itself has engendered a new level of liberation for individuals (Giddens, 1991), in which individuals are able construct identities of their choosing, drawing on the increasing range of cultural commodities that resulted in the shift from industrial to consumer capitalism (Hardy, Bennett and Robards, 2018:2). Maffesoli does not follow the idea of individual identity as a conscious project, he instead describes neo-tribal identity as a floating, relative, and even chaotic condition, depending on situations and surroundings (Maffesoli,



1996:64, Green, 2018:171). This is because individuals are members of overlapping groups, and there are various roles that an individual inhabits as ‘they take their place each day in the various games of the *theatrum mundi*’ (Maffesoli, 1996:76). The ‘obvious resonance’ that Dawes (2016) identified between neo-tribalism and reflexive modernisation is the emphasis on reflexivity, although it must be said that Maffesoli’s conceptualisation is quite specific and will be discussed later.

The chaotic contemporary condition that Maffesoli describes bears resemblance to Zygmunt Bauman’s influential concept of liquid modernity, which defines a change from ‘solid’ into ‘liquid’ modernity, characterised by constant change, uncertainty, loss of trust (Bauman, 2000:82). Bauman is also sometimes associated with the reflexive modernity thesis. Maffesoli himself, however, defined his engagement with Bauman as follows: ‘I esteem Zygmunt Bauman enormously /.../ He cites me in his books; I don’t cite him because I don’t really read his books’ (Dawes, 2010). Koksvik and Richards (2021) have taken a Bauman-inspired stance on Death Cafés in their claim that the intentional ‘staging’ of Death Café atmosphere to foster social connection between attendees concerns more the lack of human connectivity in late modern societies than the advertised human need to talk about death. This valuable critique is in essence kindred to how I view Death Cafés. However, I have chosen to not explicitly focus on Bauman because the synthesis of Maffesoli and Bauman in the context of Death Cafes would not be particularly fruitful for two reasons. First, it would not develop much that is new from what already has been written by Shaun Best (2013) when he explored the interplay between these authors in his study on football fandom. Second, I wish to focus more on the positive aspects of contemporary human sociality, and Maffesoli’s approach is more celebratory and relativist than Bauman’s (Dawes, 2016:735). Hetherington (1998, pp. 31, 42, 53) also identified Maffesoli’s focus on the expressive realm of feeling and emotion as its main virtue, in contrast to theories of reflexive modernity that tend to marginalise this dimension ‘celebrating a subject whose individuality is self-defining, rationally motivated and reflexively assured’ (Green, 2018:171).

Presenting findings from ethnographic research in a series of music scenes in Brisbane, Australia, Ben Green (2018) showed that neo-tribal sociality can interact with reflexive, rationalistic individualism. Green's respondents described their 'peak' (ecstatic) music experiences in ways that exemplify neo-tribal sociality, involving the transcendence of self in affective communion with music and crowds. However, Green found that peak music experiences could also be used to construct coherent self-narratives, in which long-term projects and coherent identities were explained by reference to the ecstatic experiences. A similar but more critical view of neo-tribes was presented two decades earlier by Malbon (1999) who researched the London clubbing scene. While he observed the presence of an empathetic neo-tribal sociality, emphasising tactility, proximity, atmosphere, and ephemerality, Malbon asserted that Maffesoli overstated the ease of movement between and within neo-tribes, arguing that there are various competencies, techniques, and awareness that clubbers must develop in order to belong. Malbon concluded that neo-tribal identification does not replace reflexive identity, but rather that both are important to understanding the attractions and practices of clubbing. In this thesis, I do not take a view that one theory of post-modernity takes precedence. It is a conceptual choice, in which I am applying neo-tribal theory to aspects of Death Café to break away from psychological (Nyatanga 2017a, 2017b) and instrumental explanations of Death Café to focus on the moments of 'being together' of Death Café, as outlined in Chapter 1. The neo-tribal theory is especially pertinent to achieving my goal of exploring what the collective experience offers the Death Café group and how that is created and facilitated.

I will now move on to discuss further the origins of this specific notion of neo-tribal sociality, as well as Maffesoli's other main theoretical inspirations, which will elucidate the basis for his concepts of *puissance*, aesthetics, and ethics.

### **3.3. Main theoretical inspirations for neo-tribal theory**

In an outstanding review of Maffesoli's inspirations, sociologist David Evans (1997:225) noted that Maffesoli's work is connected through many tangled threads to an extraordinary number of sociological and non-sociological thinkers, which makes his work difficult to classify and define. With such a wide-ranging

array of scattered references - Bataille, Baudrillard, Debord, Schutz, Bakhtin, Foucault, Durand, Morin, Lyotard, Schopenhauer and De Certeau among many others - it would be hard, and somewhat futile to outline all the threads that weave into Maffesoli's grand narrative. Most relevant to the context of this thesis is to chart the theoretical inspirations that are pertinent to my study field - social anthropology - with some input from classical sociologists (mainly Georg Simmel). Maffesoli's ideas have not had much uptake in anglophone anthropology; however, there are echoes of several quite significant anthropological concepts within his theory of postmodern sociality and neo-tribes. In the next sub-sections, I examine the influence of key thinkers on Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory.

### **3.3.1. Emile Durkheim**

In one of the earliest English language reviews of Maffesoli's work (*La Conquête du Présent. Pour une sociologie de la vie quotidienne* (1979)), sociologist Charles Brown (1986) suggested that Maffesoli's work might be best called 'neo-Durkheimian, the 'neo' connoting:

A rejection of Durkheim's positivist self-justifications, an acceptance of his focus on symbols and ritual, and an augmenting of this aspect of Durkheim with recent phenomenological, semiotic, and structuralist thought (Brown, 1986:536).

This elegant articulation captures the essence of Maffesoli's core theoretical leanings. Specifically, by drawing heavily on Emile Durkheim's work on ritual and collective effervescence, Maffesoli attempts to locate the non-rational foundations of social life in the powerful, transformative emotions and sensations recurrent within human sociality (Shilling and Mellor, 1998:205). Durkheim originally used the word 'nonrational' to refer to the emotional side of social life (Fish, 2003:257).

Maffesoli places great importance on something he calls *puissance*, translated from French as 'power from below', the inherent energy and vital force of the people, as opposed to the institutions of power (*pouvoir*)' (Maffesoli, 1996:1). *Puissance* is the basis of Maffesolian sociality. This bears a striking similarity to Durkheim's (1995[1912]) concept of collective effervescence, which can be defined as a 'force binding people to the ideals valued by their social group'

(Olaveson, 2001:98). Being rooted in emotion, collective effervescence is characterised by certain ephemerality and is recharged mostly through rituals where members of a community 'both create bonds of solidarity and produce meaning or purpose for collective action' (Ammaturo, 2016:19). The contagious emotional energies in these rituals also form the basis of Maffesoli's notion of the ethical bond that binds members of neo-tribes:

*Tribus* becomes the highest social good for their members. Individuals are transformed into social beings through the ethical need for sympathy and companionship, which accompanies this divine feeling of warmth as the very life-blood of each tribal group (Fish, 2003:264, referencing Maffesoli, 1996:16,20; Shields, 1996:X).

Maffesoli specifies the ethical as a 'morality with no obligation other than coming together and being a member of the collective body, and with no sanction other than being excluded should the interest which brought me into the group come to an end' (Maffesoli, 1991:16-17).

The experience of collective effervescence might vary significantly. It can be extremely powerful, even serve as a source of revolutions, but it can also be found in more mundane situations as well, e.g., a 'rush of energy' evident in acts 'that express the understanding, esteem and affection' characteristic of positive neighbourly relations (Durkheim 1995[1912]:215 in Shilling and Mellor, 1998:196-197). This variation allows for Maffesoli to recognise it in daily life.

Overall, Maffesoli's (1996) work develops themes explored initially by Durkheim, although sociologist Elias Le Grand recently (2018) argued that Maffesoli had overstated the role of solidarity, conviviality, and other non-hierarchical relationships in neo-tribal communality. Le Grand considered the main 'culprit' for this unwavering positivity to be Maffesoli's selective interpretation of Durkheim's concepts of ritual and collective effervescence, which built only on the emotional bond and group solidarity produced in ritualised gatherings, neglecting simultaneously emerging hierarchies, conflict and symbolic boundaries (also see Fish, 2003 for broader discussion). I engage with Le Grand's critique further in Chapter 7. In summary, Durkheim's ideas were Maffesoli's primary inspiration for reinstating the power of the collective and from Durkheim emerges the Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal *puissance* and collective ethics.

### 3.3.2 Georg Simmel

In his oeuvre, Maffesoli drew loosely on Simmel's writing on social forms (de la Fuente, 2008), especially as an inspiration for his ideas about the aesthetic nature of the social bond of neo-tribes (de la Fuente, 2011). Simmel (1950a:57) is seen as the founder of sociological aesthetics 'in that he argued the forces of deepest reality were present in aesthetic phenomena and that social situations became purely social as their aesthetic qualities increased' (de la Fuente, 2011:60).

Simmel called the purely aesthetic social form 'sociability'. Sociability is described as a play-form of sociality, where a communal 'being together' supersedes the specific reason for getting together in the first place (Simmel, 1950a, in De la Fuente, 2008:348), thus losing all its utilitarian considerations. In its pure form, sociability requires leaving rank and personal motives (called 'external content' (ibid)) behind so that the sociable interaction flows freely. Engaged in sociability, everyone acts 'as if they are there to be sociable and nothing else' (de la Fuente, 2011:62).

Maffesoli has his own take on how something akin to sociability emerges. He writes that besides the 'political, economic society, i.e., social bodies, gatherings that have a definable purpose, there is an 'unqualified reality' (Maffesoli, 1996:81), what he called a 'play-form of sociality', which:

In the framework of the aesthetic paradigm is not bothered by finality, utility, practicality, or what we might call 'realities', but rather it is what stylises existence and brings out its essential characteristic. Thus, I believe that the being-together is a basic given. Before any other determination or qualification, there is this vital spontaneity that guarantees a culture its own puissance and solidity (ibid).

This also accords with Durkheim's assertion that the spread of effervescent vitalism, and its effects on social solidarity, occur irrespective of utilitarian considerations (Durkheim 1995[1912]:209 in Shilling and Mellor, 1998:203). Maffesoli's use of sociability differs slightly from Simmel's. The difference is that Maffesoli considers this playfulness and the pleasure taken in being together

to be the underlying, fundamental desire for human nature, while for Simmel it is just one of his social forms (albeit the one he has written about the most).

Simmel explains how sociability acquires an aesthetic character by way of analogy with art. For Simmel, sociability and art take a similar form in that their 'content becomes autonomised' (de la Fuente 2008:350). In other words, enjoying art for art's sake, without any relation to reality, same as enjoying being sociable for the act of being sociable, for Simmel provides a 'sphere of freedom' (de la Fuente, 2008:351), where everyday life becomes 'sublimated' (Simmel, 1950a:57). For Simmel, this is how the 'feeling of liberation and relief' (ibid) emerge within both sociability and art and he suggests that affects, similar to that of aesthetic experience, occur within the sociable event.

While Simmel's notion of aesthetics is closely linked to how people experience art, Maffesoli's approach is quite different. By aesthetics, Maffesoli means the 'common faculty of feeling, of experiencing' (Maffesoli, 1996:74); shared emotional experience' (Maffesoli, 2003:138); an emotional attraction and shared sentiment between people, with the emphasis upon the collective rather than the individual aspects of experience (Osborne, 1997:127). As Shields had commented, this is an appropriate use of the classical notion of aesthetics (*aesthesis*) which focuses on questions of beauty and correctness as defined by collective experience, not transcendental principles of beauty (Shields, 1996:x). Rather than questions of universal right or wrong, one deals with questions of appropriateness and 'fit' within situations (ibid).

A helpful elucidation of how aesthetics can apply to a social situation in both Maffesolian and Simmelian contexts is offered by sociologist Eduardo de la Fuente, who quotes aesthetician Arnold Berleant:

A social situation displays the characteristic of an aesthetic situation when it involves a heightened perception, recognition of the uniqueness of the situation and each person participating, mutual responsiveness, and the tendency for an occasion to be experienced as connected and integrated (Berleant, 2005:31, in de la Fuente, 2011:60).

In this thesis, especially in Chapter 5 on Death Café conversations and ‘good form’, I utilise a synthesis of Maffesoli’s and Simmel’s ideas in an attempt to define the specific ephemeral social bond among Death Café attendees.

### **3.3.3. Similar concepts – *Bund*, *communitas***

The English edition of *The Time of the Tribes* (1996) opened with Shields’ discussion of similarities between the work of Herman Schmalenbach<sup>4</sup> (1922) and Maffesoli (Shields, 1996:ix). Significantly, Shields related Maffesoli’s work to Schmalenbach’s development of *Bund* (often translated as ‘communion’) i.e., an elective affinity group - a third category of social bond developed as a critique of Tönnies’ (1955[1887]) dual categories of ‘Gemeinschaft’ (traditional community) and ‘Gesellschaft’ (associational society). Schmalenbach (1922) had gone so far as to suggest that a new kind of society would come after modern society and the key form of association within it would be the *Bund* - a small scale, elective, unstable, affectual, highly self-referential form of sociation. Even though there are remarkable similarities between Schmalenbach’s *Bunde* and Maffesoli’s *tribus*, it does not figure anywhere in Maffesoli’s text beside the odd reference. Hetherington (1994) claimed that Schmalenbach was an overlooked thinker and went as far as to say that Maffesoli, alongside the prominent anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 1974), with his seminal anthropological concept of *communitas* were ‘only some of many who have reinvented the concept of the Bund’ (Hetherington 1994:15).

An important sidenote here is that Maffesoli was apparently not aware of Victor Turner’s work (St John, 2001:61), even though parallels between concepts of *communitas* and *puissance* appear to be multiple. While *puissance* and *communitas* are similar in that they both refer to a certain sense of dissolution of the individual into the collective, *communitas* for Turner is the condition of heightened emotional belonging that people experience when they are engaged in liminal rituals and rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960), which often result in a change in identity, social structure, etc.<sup>5</sup> The liminal stage is the middle stage of

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<sup>4</sup> Who was a student of Simmel.

<sup>5</sup> In this section I refer only to Turner, not to Van Gennep who wrote earlier and on whose ideas Turner built on. This is because the relationship between Van Gennep, Turner and Maffesoli has been explored in anthropologist Graham St John’s (2001, 2008) work and he found

a tri-partite ritual process in between a temporary dismantling and re-aggregation of social structures (St John, 2008:164), a transgressive stage, or ‘point at which activities and conditions are most uncertain, and the normative structure of society is temporarily overturned’ (Hetherington, 1994:15). While the clearly delineated boundaries of neo-tribes, exiting and returning to ordinary behaviour (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a, 2018b) are in essence similar to the concept of liminality, the emergence of *puissance* need not accompany a *liminal* experience. The neo-tribal theory, hence, is positioned to study the collective production of solidarity and sociability that do not fracture a fabric of everyday life but occur continuously within it. I argue Death Café is an example of such an occasion.

To sum up this section, I argue that despite being kindred to several other existing understandings of being together (*Bund, communitas, tribus*) Maffesoli’s approach is distinctive because of the emphasis he placed on aesthetics (in the sense of the recognition of common feeling). To avoid theoretical slippage and with a view to advance the relevance of neo-tribal theory specifically, I henceforth continue to exclusively use neo-tribal terminology.

### 3.4. Main criticisms

Maffesoli’s sweeping theory of postmodern sociality has been heavily criticised. Besides the commonly chastised Maffesoli’s meandering writing style (Brown, 1986:537), I distinguish two broad branches of criticism. The first is that Maffesoli provides a one-sided, optimistic and esoteric view of human sociality. The second broad criticism is directed to Maffesoli’s lack of method and empirical contextualisation. This thesis responds to both of these criticisms by enhancing the methodological and analytical value of neo-tribal theory.

Maffesoli is unwaveringly optimistic about the richness of human experience emanating from everyday social activity, which is often claimed to be one of the main attractions of his theory (Hughson, 1999:13). For many critics, however, it is precisely his ‘naïve optimism and ‘essentialist view of human sociality’ (Melling, 2020:110) that is the main obstacle for taking up his theory as a fully-

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Turner’s developed theory of *limen* specifically more fruitful to engage with in the neo-tribal context.



fledged framework to make sense of contemporary social life. Melling (2020) noted that Maffesoli assumes that emotions emanate from the animalistic and instinctual, and that *The Time of the Tribes* resembles recent sociological studies on the evolutionary background of human cognition (Melling, 2020:110). Weaver (2011:57) noted that the form of solidarity Maffesoli located within neo-tribes was almost 'cabalistic'; and Best (2013:84) took issue with Maffesoli's 'biological conception of instinctual solidarity', arguing that 'if Maffesoli wants to argue that people are herd animals, or have an instinctual need to form groups, he needs to do much more than simply name this as *puissance*'.

Evans (1997:220) underlined that some of Maffesoli's key ideas were 'certainly destined to make a significant contribution to sociological debates in the future around the problematic relationship between modernity, postmodernity and reflexive modernity'. Dawes (2016:317-318) warned that Maffesoli's ideas needed a critical eye, avoiding 'both full application and outright refusal'. In the Foreword to *The Time of the Tribes*, Shields (1996:xii) compelled the readers to treat the text 'not so much as setting an agenda, as opening up an arena of research'. Taking both Evans and Shields' points on board, applying a Maffesolian lens is a complicated issue, not merely because Maffesoli did not provide much direction for future scholars, but also because Maffesoli's theory is almost completely lacking in empirical contextualisation (Malbon, 1998:39). Alongside this criticism, Malbon also admitted that being so 'unashamedly theoretical' (Malbon, 1998:39) was one of the seductive features of Maffesoli's writings.

Maffesoli's vivid depiction of neo-tribes as 'keeping warm together', as a process which one-sidedly shields people against the impersonality and 'cold winds' of modernity (Schilling and Mellor, 1998:203) has been criticised heavily. Shields (1991: 183) noted that Maffesoli spent little time on dangers of 'neo-tribal groups', meaning that the 'effervescent solidarity' of neo-tribes can also be an opportunity for new conflicts, dangers and fears to emerge. Shilling and Mellor took up to enhance the temperature metaphor by highlighting that Maffesoli overlooks the fact that sensual associations may not involve a 'keeping warm together' in a world which too often appears out of control and morally bankrupt but may result in 'getting burnt together' and an enjoyment of 'burning others

together' (Shilling and Mellor, 1998:203) prompting a 'passionate intensity, hatred and blood revenge' (Mellor and Shilling, 1997:20). This refers to instances of religious cults, fascism, racism and neo-fundamentalism that are not only present now, but also were prevalent in France when Maffesoli was writing. In short, 'the sacred (that Maffesoli espouses community is<sup>6</sup>), can be virulent, violent, and unpredictable' (Williams, 1998:448).

There is another aspect of the utility of Maffesoli's theory that was questioned. Maffesoli's original world of sociality is profoundly de-politicised (Osborne, 1997:128). Indeed, even proponents of neo-tribal theory have drawn attention to the fact that Maffesoli's attempt to reinsert a sense of the social into the narratives of individualising and alienating 'was achieved at the expense of attaching any sense of political or subversive agency to the individual actor and in the capability of the neo-tribe to offer a basic social action' (Hardy et.al. 2018: 3-4). Zygmunt Bauman called neo-tribes 'much too loose as formations to survive the movement from hope to practice' (Bauman, 1991:25), emphasising this detached de-politicized aspect. I did not engage with this critique in the thesis because again, I did not want to perpetuate the narrative of Death Café as action oriented. More recently, however, some strides have been made regarding this: Riley et al. (2010) observing everyday politics of electronic dance music culture (EDMC) in Southeast England, found that the neo-tribal forms of social gatherings in EDMC produce communitarian subjectivities, but are also made sense of by participants within the neoliberal discourse of self as a biographical project, marked by responsibility, rationality and rights. This prompted the authors to call for broader definitions of political participation, including those that do not have a social change agenda. Similarly, Canosa (2018), Canosa and Bennett (2021) have discussed EDMC's more resistant and political dimensions of neo-tribal youth cultural gatherings, while Sotirakopoulos (2016) looked at protest camps via a neo-tribal lens.

Another angle of criticism is that the definition of neo-tribes is not specific enough, which makes the analytical relevance of it questionable. As Dohnal (2007:14) writes:

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<sup>6</sup> My note

the impression may arise that almost any group could be called a neo-tribe if it meets two conditions at once: it functions within a postmodern mass society and its members may be ascribed the intention of seeking emotional identification with others. The problem lies in the fact that both criteria are vague and leave an unlimited scope for arbitrary interpretation. If every community, regardless of its size, range, level of internal integration, or even what its members think of it, may be considered neo-tribal, this means that all cats are black. It does not seem that such a diagnosis would help us better understand the world we live in.

Indeed, it is quite surprising that this criticism is not more prevalent. It seems that the work on further classifications, creating clearer division lines about what groups are neo-tribes and which are not, is being done by scholars adopting the theory from their own disciplinary perspectives, i.e. subculture and youth studies and tourism and leisure. Thus, it can be said that the analytical relevance of the theory is discovered within Maffesoli's basic premise of postmodern sociality, then tailored to be applied to empirical material. In the case of my thesis, I see neo-tribal theory as a particularly suitable theoretical framework to make sense of the popularity of Death Café and the pleasant ambience and feeling of collectivity it is lauded for. It is not the only way to look at Death Cafes, but just as neo-tribal theory was drafted at first as a challenge to the narratives of postmodernity as devastatingly individualist and alienating, my thesis also primarily is a challenge to existing instrumentalist, goal-oriented academic narratives of Death Cafe.

A more scathing evaluation of Maffesoli's method came from sociologist Thomas Osborne, who claimed that Maffesoli 'clearly regards empirical evidence as being in itself rather vulgar' (Osborne, 1997:127) and instead is 'demonstrating his prowess with the Ancient World or other pre-modern social formations' (ibid), making his point by way of 'hasty lists and offhand allusions' to the contemporary world (ibid).

My decision to use an ethnographic approach preceded my selection of a neo-tribal framework. While Maffesoli did not explicitly outline a method for approaching neo-tribalism empirically, the theory has been adopted in various disciplines and developed in various directions, with a plethora of ethnographic

accounts contextualising neo-tribalism, and in many ways, ‘rescuing’ (Hardy, Bennett and Robards, 2018:4) the concept from redundancy. I turn to outline the recent adoption of neo-tribal theory now.

### **3.5. Developments of neo-tribal theory after Maffesoli**

This part of the chapter aims to discuss the broad ways neo-tribal theory has been adopted and developed by scholars in various disciplines, as well as to outline the most valuable responses to several shortcomings of Maffesoli’s theory. This will show that critical engagement with Maffesoli’s work, as Evans (1997) suggested, can produce fruitful outcomes.

While Maffesoli is considered a social scientist, inspired by classical French sociologists like Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, some aspects of his sociology have not made it into the way his theory of neo-tribes is utilised in contemporary writing. Essentially, it is the more ‘eccentric’ and ‘esoteric’ influences that have been broadly abandoned by scholars resonating with neo-tribal theory and I also follow that attitude. One reason is because Maffesoli’s interest in the occult, ritual incantation, crystal gazing, theosophy and other proto new age phenomena’ (Evans, 1997:222) lacks empirical grounding even more than his oeuvre in general. Evans also noted that Maffesoli was ‘fond of quoting Bakunin’s remark that in all history there is a quarter reality and at least ‘three quarters imagination’ (Evans, 1997:222), which permeated his approach to grounding his own theory. Indeed, in my own reading of Maffesoli had to battle with what Evans dubbed one of the main paradoxes of Maffesoli’s sociology:

while it claims to be a more hermeneutic, empathetic sociology which is less abstract and therefore, more close to the ground than others, it still makes use of abstractions which, while useful for heuristic purposes, are nevertheless, too general and simplistic to take too seriously sociologically (Evans, 1997:231).

One good example of this is Maffesoli’s quasi-Nietzschean use of classical tropes such as the Prometheus/Dionysus binary opposition as analogies for the modernity and postmodernity. Maffesoli wrote that productivist modernity

(‘energetism’) whose key figure is Prometheus is giving way to a non-productivist post-modernity symbolised by Dionysus and the Dionysian; that is, from a society governed by an instrumental, rationalising logic of ‘performativity, classically analysed by Max Weber in the protestant ethic, to a society, or rather, form of sociality, governed by an empathetic logic of emotional renewal and expressivity governed by ‘collective effervescence’. Evans argued that:

the postulation of a transition from a promethean world to a Dionysian world while suggestive enough, is hard to verify or falsify at the empirical level and, moreover, could be contested at a atheoretical level as well, in a world where work, productivity, science, technology and so forth are hardly disappearing as major forces in social organisation despite all the talk of ‘downshifting; and New Ageism (Evans, 1997:231).

To the extent of postmodernity, I take on board Maffesoli’s main premise that the forms of social connection are less rigid, as well as Maffesoli’s concern about:

how what is termed tradition still remains at the heart of the modern era in a multiplicity of ways, which is perhaps best summarised by his use of the Durkheimian social divine’ (Evans, 1997:228).

As noted on page 73, I use neo-tribal theory more as a conceptual tool to analyse Death Cafes, rather than a totalising argument for a shift from functional modern society to empathetic postmodern sociality.

There has been no shortage of groups that have been analysed through a neo-tribal theory lens. Some examples are recreational vehicle users (Hardy, Hanson and Gretzel, 2012; Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson, 2013), Antarctic cruise tourists (Kriwoken and Hardy, 2018), electronic dance music clubbers (Malbon, 1998; Bennett, 1999), music and celebrity fandoms (Weaver, 2011), football fans (Hughson, 1999; Best, 2013), online health care groups (Johnson and Ambrose, 2006), bourgeois bohemians (Wang, 2005), online daters (Clay, 2018), peer shared households (Heath, 2004), gay resort visitors (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a, 2018b), vegetarians (Bertella, 2018), garden and allotment groups (Purdue, 2000), gap year travellers (Bennett and Johan, 2018), fashion consumers (Aung and Sha, 2016), freedom campers (Caldicott, 2021), scientists in laboratories

(Spencer and Walby, 2013), bird watchers (Steven, Rakotopare and Newsome, 2021) among many others.

Hardy (2021) provided a broad overview of cross-disciplinary applications and conceptualisations of neo-tribal theory. Most prominently, the concept of neo-tribes found critical support in the disciplines of sociology; tourism and leisure; and marketing and consumer behaviour studies. It is worth noting that the concept, and theory as a whole, has had a predominantly Western application<sup>7</sup> (Hardy, Bennett and Robards, 2018:7), but recently academics have been expanding it to address social life in other rapidly changing economic and political climates. Namely, Lv and Qian (2018) applied the concept of neo-tribes to examine how coffee houses in urban China acted as a socio-spatial milieu for negotiating cultural change within their country for young, wealthy urbanites; while Wang and Xie (2021) used neo-tribal theory to analyse group relations among Chinese road travellers.

For my analysis of Death Café in this thesis, alongside Maffesoli's original work, I draw on recent work in two out of three fields that Hardy (2021) has outlined: tourism and leisure studies, and sociology. Hardy also pointed out that neo-tribal theory had been applied in marketing and consumer behaviour studies (Cova and Cova, 2001, 2002; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007), but I do not draw from it for the following reasons. O'Reilly (2012:342) argued that marketing and consumer behaviour literature shows a surprisingly weak theoretical link with Maffesoli's original ideas, even though authors claim to be building directly on Maffesoli's theoretical contributions. Hardy, Bennett and Robards (2018:5) noted that as the concept of neo-tribes was enthusiastically taken up, this led to a 'significant degree of conceptual muddling as scholars from different disciplinary areas sought to define and apply neo-tribe within the parameters of often quite distinct research frameworks and agendas'.

In the marketing literature, for example, the term *tribe* is used in several different ways. *Brand tribes* describe social relationships formed around consumer brands (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and *consumer tribes* describe neo-

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<sup>7</sup> The authors also include Australia in this definition

tribes with the primary focus on encouraging consumption (Bennett, 1999; Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding & Shankar, 2011). Even though Maffesoli himself has contributed a chapter (titled 'Tribal Aesthetic') to Cova et al.'s edited volume *Consumer Tribes* (2007:27-34), his musings and the vocabulary he uses there are completely detached from the context of the volume. There have also been some questionable theoretical excursions, such as Taute and Sierra (2014) examining the applicability of Sahlin's (1961) anthropological theory of tribal behaviour to consumers in developing brand relationships. This shows an intellectual gap from Maffesoli as he was adamant that the concept of neo-tribes (*tribus*) was not to be conflated with the traditional anthropological definition of tribes.

In their recent edited volume *Consumer Tribes in Tourism: Contemporary Perspectives on Special-Interest Tourism*, Pforr, Dowling, and Volger (2021) make a distinction between 'consumption tribes' (Cova et al., 2007) and 'tourism tribes' (Hardy, Bennett, and Robards, 2018). This way, they are showing they are aware of the different theoretical developments of the application of the concept of neo-tribe in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour, and tourism and leisure studies. This is a welcome development, but to avoid theoretical slippage, for my analysis of Death Café I do not draw on any particular case study or theoretical development of neo-tribal theory in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour. I do cite some marketing scholars where the authors' descriptions of neo-tribal terms happen to be particularly clear and helpful, namely Otnes and Mclaran (2007). I will now turn to outline the application and developments of the two scholarly fields I do focus on.

### **3.5.1. Sociology: subculture and youth studies**

Sociologist Andy Bennett (1999) was one of the first to experience the growing pains of using Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory in anglophone academia. In contrast to Ben Malbon (1998, 1999) who also wrote about dance music cultures but was apprehensive about the concept of neo-tribes, Bennett enlisted the concept enthusiastically and had to defend his position numerous times. He employed the concept in an attempt to reframe a view of collective youth identities (Bennett 1999, 2000) by claiming that 'those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of

temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships' (Bennett, 1999:600). According to him, 'neo-tribal theory allows for the function of taste, aesthetics, and affectivity as primary drivers for participation in forms of collective youth cultural activity' (Bennett, 2011:495). Introduction of neo-tribal theory was one response to theoretical debates in sociology at the turn of the twenty-first century about the lessening 'conceptual potency' (Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson, 2013) of subculture, defined as 'relatively homogeneous individuals held together in politically resistant, relatively stable, anti-mainstream groups (ibid). Bennett's position vis-à-vis the application of neo-tribal theory in youth cultural research was critiqued extensively (Blackman, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2005), and highlighting certain aspects of this specific critique is helpful for locating neo-tribal theory in the context of sociology and post-subcultural studies.

Blackman (2005) criticised Bennett for abandoning theories of subculture in favour of the neo-tribal theory, which according to him was an uncritical celebration of consumerism (Blackman, 2005:13; Bennett, 2005:255). Responding to this, Bennett clarified that his intention was not to 'celebrate' consumerism, but rather to 'situate it as a motor-force in late modern society and a key resource for individuals in the construction of social identities and forming of social relations with others' (Bennett, 2005:55). Indeed, neo-tribal theory was at the forefront of debates around consumer society and lifestyle in the mid-90s but since then its popularity has waned (Hetherington, 2011:1035). Hetherington explained that the association of neo-tribes with consumption and consumer society emerged due to its inherent association with postmodernity. This was further conflated with one of the entrenched assumptions about the shift from modernity to postmodernity, meaning a shift into a post-industrial, service-based society of which consumption was a prominent feature. Blackman's view was that the concept of neo-tribe acted as a carrier for postmodern theory or ideology (Blackman, 2005:12). Maffesoli's own examples of neo-tribes, rooted in individual self-expression and a strong, yet fleeting sense of social solidarity were: youth cultures, punk or retro fashion groups, sports enthusiasts, street performers, consumer lobbies, and those involved in environmental movements (Maffesoli, 1996:76; Shields, 1996:x). This understanding of neo-tribes seemed to fit well with the values of choice associated with consumerism (Hetherington,



2011:1035). A good example of such application is Shields's edited volume *Lifestyle Shopping* (1992) which 'epitomised a position in which shopping and the emotional communities associated with it rather than work and social class came to be seen as the defining characteristic of postmodernity' (Hetherington, 2011:1035).

Bauman (1991; Bauman and May, 2001) also engaged with the concept of neo-tribes and considered neo-tribes to be part of his consumer-driven liquid modernity. Bauman criticised the positive, solidarity-inducing and inclusive aspects of neo-tribes by saying that because they were often based on style and taste, neo-tribal lifestyles were mediated by socio-economic factors, and those lacking purchase power to participate were excluded from neo-tribes (Le Grand, 2018:20). Indeed, this can be seen in *Death Cafés* as there is often an implicit requirement to purchase refreshments and to attend a café establishment, which in itself carries specific cultural capital undertones. However, not everything can be reduced to consumption. Best (2013) criticised Bauman's assumption that consumption provides the foundation for powerful feelings of solidarity between football fans. Only a small number of football supporters are consumers of official club merchandise or more indirectly, success (as not all teams go on to win titles, yet many have faithful fanbases), thus Best argued that fandom was not a form of liquid modernity. However, Best also claimed that as an alternative, Maffesoli's offering of a 'biological conception of instinctual solidarity' (Best, 2013:90) was questionable, thus also insufficient. I concur with this specific point.

A further issue with Bennett's application of neo-tribal theory to contemporary youth culture was raised by Hesmondhalgh (2005). He claimed that Bennett ignored factors that might limit young people's access to and choice of commodities and resources, such as 'poverty, addiction, mental illness, social suffering, marginalisation, disempowerment, unequal access to education, childcare, and healthcare' (Hesmondhalgh, 2005:25). Bennett explained that in his research, these sorts of factors, although very real, were in no way as rigidly defined or experienced as Blackman and Hesmondhalgh had suggested. Bennett then also proposed that individuals often selected lifestyles that were not indicative of specific class background and Hesmondhalgh's criticism undermined

the agency of youth in creatively resisting the circumstances of their everyday lives (Bennett, 2005:256).

Since then, Bennett has written extensively on neo-tribes (2011; Robards and Bennett, 2011; Driver and Bennett, 2015; Hardy, Robards and Bennett, 2018; Bennett and Johan 2018; Canosa and Bennett, 2021). The issues Blackman and Hesmondhalgh found with Bennett's work seventeen years ago, however, remain a source of criticism for much of the contemporary writing utilising neo-tribal theory in general. For example, sociologist Elias le Grand (2018) called to incorporate processes of exclusion, symbolic boundary formation, and social differentiation, particularly as related to class distinction, to writing about neo-tribes as a response to a longstanding overemphasis of the inclusive, vivacious and consensual aspects of neo-tribal lifestyles (Le Grand, 2018:17).

In subculture theory, neo-tribes represent more fluid groupings than subcultures, with less deep lines of division and more fleeting associations which reflect recent consumer-based identities (Bennett, 1999). However, some authors emphasise that there is 'methodological controversy around the notion of neo-tribalism as a separated aspect of subcultural theory' (Seraphin and Korstanje, 2021:87). Hardy (2021:33) argues that further work and debate are needed to distinguish the two concepts of neo-tribes and subcultures and determine where they align and differ. With regards to locating the utility of Maffesoli's ideas in the context of subculture studies, I rely on Schmeier and Gook's (2019) articulation. They suggest that there is 'simply more to subculture - and to the experience of participating in a subculture - than the experience of monadic subcultural subjects that have lots of biography, but no social life' (Schmeier and Gook, 2019:191). They argue that the critical potential of neo-tribal framework could help 'pit the "social" against "sociality", the intense unfolding of group life and group experience against external structural powers and forms of organisation' (ibid). This is an analytical point I take on board. I investigate the dynamics of participation in Death Cafés as it unfolds within the meetings but am also attentive to structural backgrounds that influence that participation.

### 3.5.2. *Tourism and leisure*

Tourism and leisure studies is another field with a strong uptake of Maffesoli's ideas (Hardy et al., 2018; Kriwoken and Hardy, 2018; Canosa, 2018; Canosa and Bennett, 2021; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a, 2018b; Bennett, 2020; Hardy and Robards, 2015; Caldicott, 2021; Hardy, Dolnicar and Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy, 2021 to name a few). Hardy (2021), however, pointed out that the application of neo-tribal theory to the field of tourism and leisure studies *at large* is relatively uncommon. The research efforts seem to be concentrated in Australasian universities. Compared to the highly theoretical use of neo-tribal theory, and more specifically, the concept of neo-tribes in sociology (Bennett, 1999, 2000; Hetherington, 1998; Best, 2003), tourism and leisure literature's approach is more instrumental and strategic. This is exemplified by the goal of Pforr, Dowling, and Volger's (2021) volume, aiming essentially to better understand the passions, values, and experiences of tourism consumer tribes which would lead to a better market to them and provide more enjoyable and profitable tourism experiences.

The main feature of neo-tribes that appears across neo-tribal applications to tourism and leisure literature is the fluid and transitory nature of neo-tribes. It gives tourist scholars a theoretical way to engage with the facts of transition and travel. Vorobjovas-Pinta notes that tourism researchers have tended to 'focus upon commodities, as broad demographic and psychographic segmentation' (2017a:7). Neo-tribal theory steps beyond these traditional domains and:

centres intangibles such as belonging, social interaction and association, mobility, and membership in the conversation. To conventional modes of tourism inquiry, these facets are regarded as wholly inaccessible, and are omitted from attempts to sort and categorise tourists. This omission might result in substantial failures in the effort to distinguish one type of consumer from another, and creates a set of assumptions - both underlying traditional research methods, and then in turn perpetuated by them - which are wholly insensitive to why some tourists choose to travel, to what end, and with whom (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021:27).

Neo-tribal theory broadens the understandings of tourist decision making in the context of tourism scholarship as it acknowledges that 'their departures from

their homes and daily environments carry complex emotional, social, economic, and symbolic meanings' (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:7).

I draw from Hardy, Bennett, and Robard's edited volume *Neo-Tribes, Consumption, Leisure and Tourism* (2018) extensively in this thesis. This volume brings together perspectives from a range of interdisciplinary and international scholars who utilise neo-tribal theory in the analysis of ethnographic data. The book is structured around the disciplinary contexts from which new conceptualisations of neo-tribal theory have formed, rather than thematically based on original conceptualisation of neo-tribe. This was done in order 'to recognize the interdisciplinary work that has led to new conceptualisations and ultimately, set a new agenda for neo-tribal theory' (Hardy, Robards and Bennett, 2018:6). The sections are: consumption and leisure; tourism and sport; music and belonging; and digital media and social networks. This volume includes chapters from the most prominent scholars using neo-tribal theory: Andy Bennett, Oskaras Vorobjovas-Pinta, Ben Green, Elias le Grand, Brady Robards. While including work from sociological nature, this volume transcends the 'typical subcultural perspective centered on conspicuous (clothing) style and music' (Schiermer and Gook, 2019:188). Overall, the interdisciplinary efforts of scholars in this volume to amalgamate sociological approaches to neo-tribal theory within tourism and leisure contexts illustrate just how widely neo-tribal theory has been applied, and also provide a valuable meditation on its further potentials.

I draw from Hardy, Bennett, and Robard's edited volume *Neo-Tribes, Consumption, Leisure and Tourism* (2018) extensively in this thesis. This volume brings together perspectives from a range of interdisciplinary and international scholars who utilise neo-tribal theory in the analysis of ethnographic data. Empirical studies have done much to bridge the distance between Maffesoli's highly theoretical concept of neo-tribes and its application to the real world. However, as Hardy, Bennett, and Robards (2018:4) pointed out, there are risks associated with empirically focused work continuously 'rescuing' the concept of neo-tribe from being accused of being merely 'postmodern dandyism or the celebratory speak of neo-liberalism (ibid). Hardy, Dolnicar and Vorobjovas-Pinta (2021:2) also issued a warning that the concept can become watered down or modified by disciplines focusing on specific aspects of neo-tribal theory.

Some papers in tourism and leisure studies using neo-tribal theory have succumbed to this already, taking the shape of a ‘tick-box’ exercise whereby several neo-tribal features are discovered in a group, thus in the conclusion of the paper the group is christened a neo-tribe, without much further engagement on why that matters, or without any further theoretical development. For example, Heath (2004), writing on peer-shared households, selected to focus on proxemics, ritual, and shared space (some other examples are Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson, 2013; Xue, Gao, and Kerstetter, 2018). Hardy, Bennett, and Robards (2018) were aware of this and in their edited volume included more theoretically oriented studies (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018b; Green, 2018). However, Schiermer and Gook (2019), reviewing the volume also raised concerns about most authors in Hardy, Bennett, and Robards’s volume still placing too much focus on the aspect of mobility and transience of their studied groups. Schiermer and Gook (2019:188) called for even more theoretical engagement, especially ‘a deeper exploration of the concept of sociality as an organising principle in Maffesoli’s thought’, instead of a narrow focus on the term of ‘neo-tribe’. An overview of the application of neo-tribal theory in tourism and leisure studies enabled me to define my approach to go beyond simply offering another instance of a social activity that can be defined as neo-tribe and prompted me to engage more prominently with more theoretical aspects of the concept.

### ***3.5.3. Addressing Maffesoli’s shortcomings***

I argue that it is sensible to look at the developments outlined in this section as contributing to a level of interdisciplinary consistency in the use of neo-tribal theory in sociology and tourism and leisure studies. This is because the most recent neo-tribal writing is for the most part driven by collaborations of several prolific authors with interdisciplinary leanings - Andy Bennett, Brady Robards, Anne Hardy, and Oskaras Vorobjovas-Pinta. One such development in recent years has been the streamlining of the broad neo-tribal features. They do remain somewhat fluid across studies, but there are several main similarities. The fundamental feature underpinning the theoretical emergence of neo-tribes is a desire to coalesce (Maffesoli, 1996:75) and it has been fleshed out most clearly by Bennett (2005) who recognised the desire to coalesce and perform identity as a significant factor that drives the creation of neo-tribes. Other neo-tribal

features that are widely agreed upon have been fleshed out by tourism and leisure studies scholar Vorobjovas-Pinta (2017) who proposed the following: shared passion/sentiment; rituals and symbols; and fluidity in membership. Shared sentiment within neo-tribal theory represents an impulsive desire to seek out (similar to the above-mentioned desire to coalesce) others with shared interests, sensibilities, and passions (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:35). According to neo-tribal theory, groups use rituals and symbols to strengthen the sense of belonging (Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford, 2013; Hardy and Robards, 2015; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a, 2018b) and members must learn the rules of engagement, rituals, modes of behaviour and etiquette. Fluidity in membership is understood as the phenomenon of people temporarily and without obligation coming together from different walks of life for a shared purpose. Vorobjovas-Pinta added 'space' to the three key features of neo-tribes (shared sentiment, rituals and symbols, and fluidity in membership), not merely as another component, but as the characteristic that unites the three other characteristics and becomes a currency of sorts for the neo-tribe itself. According to him:

The possession of space makes the ephemeral neo-tribe coherent and is both the stage for the performance of shared identity and the very thing which makes this identity real (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:244).

I build on Vorobjovas-Pinta's work on space as an important aspect and a catalyst of neo-tribal formations. Explaining my decision to fully adopt Vorobjovas-Pinta's development of neo-tribal theory requires more background. In his doctoral thesis, Vorobjovas-Pinta (2017a:37) noted that not only within Maffesoli's writing but also within the writing of his early adopters, 'space appears as something eternally between the lines; it exists as an omnipresent subtext, which is rarely considered directly'. For example, while Hughson (1999:14) observes that while Maffesoli (1996) regards the neo-tribal actor as a nomad, the theorist is no less concerned with 'the spaces occupied by people during their social wandering', as neo-tribes are indeed the product of such occupations of space' (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:37), he does not explicate that much on what that means neither in Maffesoli's writing nor for his own work. Hughson's most relevant note is that:

neo-tribes will choose their 'points of gathering' where they might 'parade' their 'collective identities' based on their shared tribal traits and collective formations/ .../ Such sites of performance are essential for

neo-tribes to exist; spaces provide the ground for ideological and tribally-aligned cultural manifestation, without which sentiments and rituals cannot be expressed or manifested (Hughson 1999, p. 14).

Maffesoli himself referred to space mostly in his discussions of 'proxemics'. In his writing, proxemics refers to the spacialization of the social relations of neo-tribalism (Peterson, 1997:325), i.e. the idea that:

location becomes connection (whether territorial or symbolical), converges with an emotional glue, the spirit of religion (re-ligare, i.e. reliance), and in this process a tribe is constituted where time is crystallized in space, and the immediately lived experiences gain 'immanent transcendence', with a subsequent reconciliation of the Present as their essential value (ibid).

Maffesoli wrote that 'for neo-tribes, space guarantees sociality a necessary security. We know that limits fence one in, but also give life (1996:133); space is a social given that makes me and is itself made (ibid). This clearly signals a bidirectional process in tribal identity formation between the tribe and the space it occupies beyond its role as a physical conduit for gathering. Unfortunately, this has not been taken up in much of proceeding literature: such examples like a national park for RV'ers (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson 2013), or a cruise ship for travellers (Weaver 2011) were still only written about as backgrounds on which the tribe plays out, without further development of the spatial element of the theory.

Vorobjovas-Pinta noted that contemporary literature using neo-tribal theory had not been developing the spatial element of neo-tribal theory beyond admitting that tribes need 'anchoring spaces' that provide a momentary home or temple for a neo-tribe and he felt that this was a mistake. He argued that space 'transcends the mere framing of neo-tribal experience; it is the fulcrum of neo-tribal assembly and life, and it mediates the other characteristics of tribal identity. As such, he aimed to extend the applications of neo-tribal theory by developing its spatial characteristic. Thus, Vorobjovas-Pinta's endeavour is a well-measured liberty of interpretation of neo-tribal theory, consciously bringing the theory closer to a relevance and application in empirical social sciences. Vorobjovas-Pinta finds a way to both enhance the overlooked aspects of neo-tribal 'proxemics' and to provide a new theoretical frame for the space-identity

interplay from a tourism and leisure perspective. Hence, he provided this development and I also consider it to be a logical development.

In connection to space, a wave of interest in the digital media and social networks (Robards, 2018; Hart, 2018; Dinhopl and Gretzel, 2018; Clay 2018; Armour, 2018) has challenged Maffesoli's idea of proxemics, or physical locality, as a necessary basis for neo-tribes to coalesce. While Maffesoli had touched on the fact that social media and other internet activities facilitate and expand the scope of neo-tribes and aid their formation (Dawes, 2016:736), he did not explicitly write about the internet as a *place* to gather. The current understanding of neo-tribes includes groups of people who may meet physically and virtually (Hardy, 2021). My research focuses only on face-to-face Death Cafés, but a note on online Death Cafés can be found in Chapter 8.

Early in its application, scholars of subculture and youth studies detected a limitation of Maffesoli's original premise that neo-tribes were inherently fleeting and unstable forms of connection (Malbon, 1998; Robards and Bennett, 2011). This was not enough to explain why some of the open and indefinite social bonds appeared to become more stable and permanent than others (Hardy et al., 2005:5). Driver and Bennett (2015), for example, suggested that even though hardcore music events are temporary and occur in liminal spaces, belonging to the broader group is experienced between events as embodied qualities of those hardcore fans who attend these events. Robards and Bennett (2011), Hardy et al. (2013), and Hardy and Robards (2015) thus concluded that enduring groupings can also fulfil the definition of neo-tribe. The concept of neo-tribes has developed a sensibility for more permanent affiliations and with a certain regard for structural conditions, while still necessarily retaining the more spontaneous, participatory, and collectivist concept of group affiliation (Schiermer and Gook, 2019:190).

This is relevant because many Death Cafés I attended were not one-off events and were run monthly, every other month, or several times per year. It is important to acknowledge that to some returning attendees they can become a more permanent fixture in their lives and serve a bigger purpose than an ephemeral, convivial interaction with strangers. It can become, for example, an



ongoing outlet while dealing with bereavement. Nevertheless, Death Cafés, whether they are a part of a long-running local initiative or one-off events, are rooted in the collective experience of talking about death; they dissipate as members return to their everyday lives that are clearly delineated from the Death Café encounter and emerge again to enact a shared passion. Significantly, Maffesoli wrote that ‘today’s neo-tribes have varied lifespans and may stabilise with the help of age and time, while even tribes that are ephemeral in their actualisation can create lasting states of mind (Maffesoli, 1996:140). This is similar to how one attendee talked that they wouldn’t attend a Death Café again but would remember it fondly. What follows, is that neo-tribes provide temporary source of identification for people who choose to belong (Best, 2013:84) and that can be a one-off experience. On the other hand, neo-tribal membership for some can be a consistent feature of their lives, such as fandom (Best, 2013), or avitourism, where people come back every year and sometimes meet again (Steven, Rakopare and Newsome, 2020). Death Café has both one off attendees and regular returners and that does not detract from it being a neo-tribal formation. On the contrary, it highlights it as the particular configuration of specific people attending the particular Death Café events which create a distinct experience, a style of interaction, a shared aesthetic that is continuously recreated at different Death Café occasions, regardless of whether there are repeat attendees or not. Highlighting the coexistence of more permanent and fleeting associations that neo-tribes offer, sociologically oriented Robards and Bennett (2011) provided a compelling re-reading of neo-tribalism, in which they suggested that rather than describing the entire condition of postmodernity:

Perhaps neo-tribalism is best characterised as a process of temporal wandering in a highly fragmented late modern social terrain whereby like-minded individuals seek each other out and create more permanent, albeit less rigid, forms of association grounded in a reflexive process of self-selection based around perceived commonality in terms of taste, aesthetics, outlook, and other cultural attributes (Robards and Bennett, 2011:314).

Overall, this discussion showed that neo-tribal theory is thriving in several fields, but some authors have warned against the essence of neo-tribal theory getting lost through its selective application. I argue that the combination of Maffesoli’s original ideas of neo-tribal theory alongside the empirically grounded

developments in sociology and tourism and leisure studies provides a carefully considered and nuanced lens to explore how and why people coalesce specifically at Death Cafés. My contribution is also timely as there appears to be renewed interest in Maffesoli's ideas in sociology and broader cultural studies, evident from Schiermer, Gook, and Cuzzocrea's edited volume *Youth Collectivities: Cultures and Objects*, published in December 2021. I wish to enhance the cross-disciplinary application of Maffesoli's theory and the broader framework by introducing it to the interdisciplinary field of death studies, which I will outline now.

### **3.6. Relevance of theory of neo-tribes for contemporary death studies**

In this section, I argue that the neo-tribal framework provides a novel angle to explore how Western societies' changing relationship to death also affects the relationship of the individual to the collective. This theme is pertinent to contemporary death studies and is exemplified in this thesis by eminent death studies scholar Tony Walter's (1994) revival of death thesis and Michael Hviid Jacobsen's (2016) concept of the spectacular death.

#### **3.6.1. Tony Walter – *The Revival of Death and postmaterialist critique of the Death Awareness movement***

In his influential work *The Revival of Death* (1994), Tony Walter examined the revival of interest in developing new ways of talking about death in the Western context where neither traditional nor modern narratives fulfilled the needs of the dying and the bereaved. He related this 'revival of death' to more general social trends, especially Giddens' (1991) work on late modernity, reflexivity, and identity. Walter claimed that this revival was composed of two different strands: a late modern strand and a postmodern strand. The late modern strand is characterised by the control over patients and clients held by revivalist doctors, nurses, funeral directors, and counsellors, while the postmodern strand focuses on the uniqueness, the wishes of the individual, modern psychology mixed with romantic and nostalgic readings of death. There are scripts on how to control death coming from both strands, but it is the individual that is presented with the ultimate choice, even though this might feel like making a choice in the 'normless vacuum of post-modern society' (Siddell, 1995:573). Both strands,

coexisting in tension in the contemporary Western deathscapes, are united in their *reflexivity*, when sociological, anthropological and especially psychological understandings of how to 'do death best' (i.e. Glaser and Strauss, 1965: Kubler-Ross, 1970, 1975; Worden, 1991) are feedbacked into negotiating everyday practice and experience of death, dying and bereavement (Walter, 1994:46). Walter proposed a sociological term that can encompass these disparate themes in late-modern and postmodern strands of death - neo-modern death. Hockey (2007:444) defined neo-modern death as 'the recourse to the expert systems of modernity which have, in part, been blamed for the sequestration of death; combined with a postmodern prerogative to privilege emotionality and a more personal choice of death-related narrative and practice'.

While it has been nearly three decades since the publication of *The Revival of Death* it remains relevant (Arnarson and Hafsteinsson, 2018; Stone, 2018; Jacobsen, 2020a). In my thesis, Walter's revival of death sets the social scene in which Death Café emerges - a contemporary condition without the rigidity of traditional forms of organisation in relation to death, with people seeking a certain ambience of authenticity in death, while at the same time engaged in consumptive practices. This arguably resembles the moods of Maffesoli's proposed shift from modern society to postmodern sociality, however this surface, emotional tone similarity is not enough to argue for the usefulness of a neo-tribal framework specifically for death studies. I argue that getting closer to that is possible by looking at both Walter's and Maffesoli's formulations of a trend towards emotional, transient connections, as well as some rudiments of aesthetic aspects of participation in Walter's theory of revivalism.

One of the central tenets of revivalism is that people are encouraged to share their personal feelings about death and dying. Walter provides an example of a 'Living with Dying' workshop, run by a psychotherapist, which involves engaging in talking exclusively - what Walter terms 'a typically postmodern and temporary group' (Walter, 1994:177). This signals that Walter sensed that temporary flashes of sociality were quite prominent experiences for neo-modern individuals. Here, the neo-tribal framework would be helpful merely in terms of similarity of form, although this is still not convincing enough. One direct link is with my research is that the workshop Walter wrote about is by the Natural

Death Centre, which Underwood credited alongside Crettaz as ‘giants on the shoulders of which Death Café stands’ (MyWishes, 2014:4:37-4:53).

Walter also noted an aesthetic aspect that other neo-modern practices concerned with sharing, such as therapy and counselling, possess. He quoted ritual scholar Scheff (1977), who argued that a successful ritual and drama require a certain distancing of emotion among the audience - an aesthetic distance, in which the audience feel sad or happy but still know that it is a play - in other words, they become participant observers of their own emotion. For Walter, this seemed exactly the way therapy operated; enabling both to feel and to label the feelings, to be a participant-observer of your own feelings. Death Café is not therapy, despite some people possibly utilising it as such, yet this example is relevant as Walter described comparable to Death Café levels of self-disclosure and self-reflexivity. The neo-tribal framework is particularly apt to explore the way this is negotiated collectively.

Continuing with the theme of therapy, Walter (1994:178-179) argued that the neo-modern individual does not seek ritual for its symbolism or communal action but as a representation of solidarity (Haverinen, 2014:119). In other words, therapy provides what ritual provides, but unlike ritual needs neither community nor religious belief, and can be purchased at any time. Also, if a person wants to become a participant-observer of their own feelings, therapy is a better bet than ritual because this is the aim of therapy but only a by-product of ritual, a by-product which cannot be guaranteed (Walter, 1994:178-179). Here, emergent expressive, emotional practices intertwined with consumption have significant parallels with neo-tribal gatherings. I argue that the neo-tribal framework is especially well-suited to examine neo-modern practices as it enhances the understanding of the four aspects of revival of death that Walter outlined. First - form (temporary flashes of sociality); second - the aesthetic self-reflexive aspect of some neo-modern practices; third - gathering for gathering’s or collectivity’s sake; and fourth - emphasising the value of emotional expressivity or emotional bond.

More recently, Walter (2020) identified another lens for analysis of the contemporary revival of death - postmaterialism, or post-scarcity (Inglehart,

1981). Postmaterialism refers to the personally expressive values of people who enjoy post-industrial affluence and economic security - very different from the values of people struggling to survive (Walter, 2017:61). For people for whom physical and economic survival does not take up the central space in their lives, values shift to self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life. Specifically, Walter (2020) utilises postmaterialism in an attempt to explain the rise of the Death Awareness movement I introduced in Chapter 1. For some decades, the Death Awareness movement has focused on personal expression, personal autonomy, personal spirituality, emphasising psychological wellbeing and achieving a 'good death'. Walter (1994) has also noted that there is a tendency within revivalist engagements with death and dying to present such accounts and goals as universally relevant, but while this attitude 'may be welcomed by well-off baby boomers in the West, it misses the mark entirely for those preoccupied with their own survival' (Walter, 2020:102). My research revealed that there is a postmaterialist undercurrent in Death Café attendance in that the proponents of Death Café claim that engaging with it is beneficial to all human beings and further, that a certain emotional distance from death and dying is required to engage with Death Café most fruitfully. I will discuss this in detail in Chapter 7.

Walter's postmaterialist critique of the Death Awareness movement enhances the relevance of applying a neo-tribal lens to various death-related expressive activities. In a fragmented social terrain, these elective temporary associations, based on shared taste or sentiments, transient and often celebratory, can mean little for actually benefiting people's lives, but allow to express novel enjoyable interests. I argue that a postmaterialist angle is valuable when focusing on death awareness initiatives that emphasise human connection, such as Death Café, Death Over Dinner (Hebb, 2018), or examining the general nature of the more commercialised Death Positive movement (Zibaite, 2020). Overall, Walter's postmaterialist critique of the Death Awareness movement gives legitimacy to studying the value of the gatherings and affiliations created more from 'want', rather than 'need', emerging from emotional distance rather than the pressing proximity of death. This is the basis of Death Café.

### **3.6.2. Michael Hviid Jacobsen – *The Age of Spectacular Death***

An elaboration of the peculiar relation between proximity and distance regarding engaging with death and dying can be seen in a recent interesting proposition by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2016). He proposed a concept of ‘the age of spectacular death’ as an additional fifth phase of Aries’ (1975) well-known chronology of Western attitudes toward death. Here, I outline Jacobsen’s theory and show how the neo-tribal theory is helpful to investigate and further illuminate several aspects of Jacobsen’s spectacular death. I begin with a short summary of Aries’ historical exploration of changes in the Western attitudes towards mortality through millennia following the early medieval period until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Aries’ (1974) model has four stages: ‘tamed death’; ‘death of one’s own’; ‘death of the other’; and ‘forbidden death’. During the period of ‘tamed death’, people dwelled close to the dead, fully aware of their own impending demise, with dying and mourning being public events. According to Aries, around the eleventh/twelfth century, a shift to the period of ‘the death of one’s own’ occurred, with increasing focus towards the individual. The moment of death required maximum awareness because that was the moment when an individual’s life was judged and the fate of the soul decided. By the early eighteenth century, this was replaced with ‘the death of the other’ that now shifted to the experience of losing a loved one - ‘a new intolerance of separation’ (Aries, 1975:59). Aries stated that this was the time when mourning culture flourished and showing emotions of sadness emerged as a response to death as a greedy enemy. ‘The death of the other’ period corresponds with the romantic period in the West and the widely researched Victorian culture of death. Although it was a period of so-called celebrations of death, it was also the start of the demise of public death and public mourning practices. According to Aries, modern trends of individualism and secularity have diminished our competency to gather a community around those dying and in mourning. Dying hence was transformed into illness, and an ‘untamed death’ was made invisible or forbidden and society entered into a stage of ‘forbidden death’.

Jacobsen proposed that something new was happening at the beginning of the 21st century and called this development ‘the age of spectacular death’. The

name he gave to this phase is adopted from situationist writer and postmodern critic Guy Debord (1967). Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) began by stating that everything that had been experienced directly in the past, was now merely a representation, making us spectators and bystanders. With clear Marxist leanings, *The society of the Spectacle* was foremost a critique of capitalism and from it, Jacobsen adopted only the surface premise - 'death that has for all practical intents and purposes been transformed into a spectacle' (Jacobsen, 2016:10).

Jacobsen (2016) outlined five central dimensions of spectacular death. The first dimension is 'mediation/mediatisation of death', meaning that death today is almost exclusively witnessed through distance, mediated by the media and other agencies, e.g., death professionals. Connected to this is the second dimension - 'the commercialisation of death'. Jacobsen claims that death is increasingly commodified and commercialised in contemporary culture, primarily handled by dedicated industries, not only death-related service providers (funeral directors, urn and casket makers, etc.), but also creative endeavours of artists, filmmakers, and novelists. As the third dimension, Jacobsen inaugurates 're-ritualisation of death'. Similar to Walter (1994), Jacobsen claims that a secular individualised society craves rituals to be inscribed or re-inscribed into various contexts to make death and its celebration personally and spiritually meaningful. Jacobsen titled the fourth dimension the 'palliative care revolution' or the 'new professionalisation of death'. This refers to the fact that even though death is indeed increasingly medicalised and professionalised, the modern medical monopoly on death is increasingly challenged by the rise of the Death Awareness movement with its accompanying developments of hospice philosophy, 'death education', and palliative care practice. Within these contexts, death should be understood and handled with dignity, rather than being fought and feared. Finally, Jacobsen, akin to Walter in 1994 (and Lofland, 1978), distinguishes the 'academic specialisation of death' that has taken place, particularly within the social sciences and humanities in the last three decades. Death has become part of the curriculum, with a lot of academic attention devoted to it, which also shows signs of reflexive modernisation.

Having outlined these five dimensions that define engagement with death at the beginning of the 21st century, Jacobsen argues that the age of spectacular death inaugurates a revival, retrieval, rediscovery, and reinvention of death through a:

Process in which the old and almost forgotten practices and ideals are mixed with the new social conditions characteristic of contemporary equally individualised, globalised, mediated/mediatised and technologically advanced late-modern, post-modern or liquid-modern society (Jacobsen, 2016:15).

Generally, this idea differs from Walter's revival of death in that Walter locates a tension between rational and emotional approaches to death, while Jacobsen's tension is that between proximity and distance:

Despite the prevalence of the broad cultural discomfort surrounding death and an individual dread of it, we simultaneously seem to wallow in it by talking quite a lot about it and by being constantly exposed to it either as news, entertainment, social practice, treatment, or scientific knowledge (Jacobsen and Petersen, 2020).

I argue that neo-tribal theory is ideally suited to explore the emotionality, proximity, and distance that Walter and Jacobsen theorise. The postmaterialist grounding of the Death Awareness movement, of which Death Café can be said to be part of melds well with Jacobsen's statement that spectacular death is to be experienced vicariously, but at a safe distance for certain groups of people. Serendipitously, Jon Underwood held similar views about the spectacle of death that he expressed in 2014:

In our society we push death to the sidelines. We've got a very strange relationship with death: on one hand, we push it out of sight, real death is outsourced, it's the domain of those people who are professionals, be they in the medical profession or the funeral profession, or the religious profession. We kind of put real death... give it over to them. But on the other hand, we kind of compulsively consume a really weird kind of death, like, obviously on the news media there's a thing about 'if it bleeds, it leads'. Through music, through games, GTA5 for example, you'll see a lot of strange death in that, and through films. So we consume a sort of really alien and terrifying death, but we push death to the sidelines, so there's something strange going on there (MyWishes, 2014: 6:27-7:36).

This shows that spectacular death is not merely a theoretical construct, but also a phenomenon that (some) people recognise in their lived experience. While Underwood founded Death Café to remedy the 'very strange relationship with



death', in this thesis I use neo-tribal theory to shed light on how Death Cafés are actually part of the spectacular death narrative.

### **3.6.3. *Bringing Walter, Jacobsen, and Maffesoli together***

In the context of Jacobsen's spectacular death, it is significant that Maffesoli talks about the 'inseparability of distance and engagement in cultural and social forms of a new, post-industrial "enchantment of the world"' (Lorenc, 2018:16). This is the basis for Maffesoli's notion of aesthetics and as Lorenc (2018:17) elucidated:

Neo-tribes, created on the basis of shared sentiment, are aestheticised in the sense that their constitutive power consists in an emotional bond of belonging, and, at the same time, in the sense that the very of participation is recognised and assessed as what it is (Lorenc, 2018:17).

This combination of participation (expressed in emotional engagement) and distance (expressed through transient, fleeting engagements) creates a participatory spectacle:

We are participating magically in a collective game which reminds us that something like the 'community' has existed, does exist or will exist. It is a question of aestheticism, derision, participation and reticence all at once (Maffesoli, 1996:49).

Fundamentally, self-reflexiveness as part of an aesthetic situation means a combination of identification and distance and is relevant for the study of Death Café in the following way: people who attend Death Cafés engage in a particular social activity that they deem valuable. Talking about death becomes an aesthetic when they come to reflect on themselves as engaged in this shared activity. Even though they disperse, the promise of community beyond them remains. Not merely the community of mortals (as an oft used trope), but also a memory of a spectacle of a warm, convivial communality in which they participated.

In terms of the relation of these experiences to everyday life, Maffesoli actually argued *against* certain aspects of Debord's (1967) society of the spectacle that inspired Jacobsen (2016). It was mostly because Maffesoli attempted to find re-enchantment in everyday life and accused situationists of completely abandoning that sphere in favour of studying extraordinary situations and

spectacles. Maffesoli argued that this ‘situationist’ critique was no longer adequate in a ‘transfigured postmodern world’, where daily life was a site of enjoyment, pleasure, togetherness, and re-enchantment (Evans, 1997:223). Jacobsen’s concept of spectacular death helps remedy this problem. If we follow his claim that spectacular death appears in spaces of everyday life and now forms a part of everyday fixtures, as well as creates spaces for togetherness, in a way the spectacular death *can and does* reside in the everyday and Jacobsen has transcended Maffesoli’s critique of ‘situationist’ approach to everyday life. According to Maffesoli, the everyday is full of ‘short-lived flashes of sociality’ (Shields, 1996:xii), but some apparitions of spectacular death can be more ‘spectacular’ than others. To elaborate, I draw from Quintero Rawlings (2019), who claimed that re-ritualisation of death, exemplified by Death Cafés, memorial walks, the vernacular of angels, observation of commercialised Halloween and Day of the Dead, refers to ‘gaps in the systems’ (2019:24). She identified these as temporary and transient spaces and experiences which stand in contrast to the hospice culture, denoting a more permanent change in the age of spectacular death. I argue that the neo-tribal framework is especially relevant to address these ‘gaps in the system’, characterised by playful, transient, collective experiences of emotional proximity and distance.

To further clarify the collective aspect of spectacular death and how neo-tribal theory can enhance it, I bring in Leget’s (2020) discussion on creating a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* (practical guidance on how to face death). Leget began his discussion by recounting how differently writing about a contemporary art of dying on a holiday with his partner felt from doing the same at his sister’s deathbed:

The difference was like walking around a frozen lake and falling through the ice of the same lake. One is submerged into another relationship with the world (Leget, 2020:184).

Leget claims that there is a qualitative difference between speaking and writing about death from a third-person perspective and from the first- and second-person perspective. From there he argues that the developments in our contemporary culture, outlined by Jacobsen as spectacular death, gives us the ‘illusion that death has become more available, visible, accessible, controllable and usable’ (Leget, 2020:186-187), but on the other hand they ‘make it more

difficult to existentially engage with death and dying from a first- and second-person perspective' (ibid). For example, the specialisation of death and increasing popularity of palliative care increase the illusion of controllable death, but death as an event is marked by existential unavailability, beyond any control' (Leget, 2020:187). He claims that the 'North Atlantic culture hardly has tools to deal with these tensions and paradoxes at a personal level, unlike previous centuries in which people could fall back upon what was then called an art of dying' (Leget, 2020:185). Hence, Leget argues that the tools for meaning-making in the age of spectacular death are limited to the third-person perspective, rather than the first- and second-person perspective. Jacobsen necessarily reminds his readers that 'not all deaths are spectacular in the age of spectacular death' (2020c:202) and what I draw from Jacobsen and Leget is that the very nature of spectacular death, the way it manifests and is perpetuated, is collective, rather than individual. Getting to know death, each other, and themselves at a Death Café is a manifestation in a contemporary Western deathscape where the individual outcome is unknown, undefined in the moment, but is an act of collective meaning-making, making death available for contemplation, in other words, making it 'spectacular'. Neo-tribal theory, positioning the group, not the individual or society as its object of study thus is well-positioned to enhance Jacobsen's notion of spectacular death.

I was only able to identify one intersection of spectacular death and neo-tribal framework across existing literature - dark tourism. Dark tourism is a fairly popular research field in death studies (Stone, 2013; Korstanje and George, 2015), with a dedicated research institute established in 2012 at the University of Central Lancashire. Arguably the most prominent dark tourism scholar Philip Stone regularly draws from Jacobsen's framework and argues that dark tourism is a manifestation of spectacular death, where death is revived in the public domain and the mortality spectacle of significant others (Stone, 2018:1) is consumed as a commodity. Stone has approached dark tourism from various angles throughout his career so far, most relevant here are his discussions of dark tourism and morality. Stone (2009) called dark tourism spaces 'new socially-sanctioned vitalised dark spaces, where collective effervescence and its resultant emotional energy socially binds individuals through their consumption of dark tourism' (Stone, 2009:70) and 'whereby morality is conveyed not only by

official interpretation of the death or tragedy but also by the actual presence and emotional engagement of the individual visitor' (ibid). Stone's view here is remarkably like a combination of Maffesoli's and Jacobsen's participation and distance. Stone also argued that consumption of these spaces is not a manifestation of lack of societal morals, or a 'moral panic' (Seaton and Lennon, 2004), but 'merely a symptom of secular society attempting to negotiate and communicate morality in new contemporary spaces'. Stone (2009) also briefly noted that Maffesoli's notion on 'ethics of aesthetics' is relevant to explaining how death and disasters are portrayed and presented within dark tourism. Clearly, some linkages between Maffesoli's ideas and the way death is approached in contemporary Western societies have already been observed, but not developed further and my study is an opportunity to do so.

Overall, the spectacular nature of dark tourism is similar to Death Café in that both represent new ways of engaging with death, enabled by having intellectual distance in peace times (and now in the context of Covid-19 pandemic), postmaterialist, collective and residing in a consumptive cultural space. This example highlighted the potential of the neo-tribal framework to open up space to look at new ways of gazing, wandering, participating together in public, those ways that are simultaneously defined by emotional participation, identification and distance, and the temporary loss of self within the collective.

I also adopt several different theoretical frameworks across the empirical chapters that help to articulate and extend specific aspects of neo-tribal theory. In Chapter 4, I look at the concept of 'space'. I follow Hughson's (1999:14) assertion that 'awareness of the social and cultural geography of relevant spaces is [...] crucial to the study of neo-tribes' and Vorobjovas-Pinta's development of space as a pivotal feature of neo-tribes. I employ here Oldenburg's concept of third place and its more recent development of 'third-placeness' (Calderon, 2016). The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work (Oldenburg, 1999:41). In particular, as Death Café attendees laud the pleasant, convivial, invigorating atmosphere of Death Café, I deemed the concept of third place to be one relevant lens to explore some of the apparitions

of the collective affective energy in daily life. My decision to utilise this framework is also influenced by the fact that Jack Fong had conceptualised Death Café as a *bona fide* third place, bar the physical rootedness (Fong, 2017:222). I hold this to be an insufficient and reductive application of the third place, hence it was pivotal for me to engage with it.

Chapter 5 utilises Simmel's 'sociability' as an additional theoretical framework. Sociability essentially means sociating purely for the sake of sociation, without any external utilitarian concerns. While 'pure' sociability is an ideal type and taken in full as per Simmel's definition, is not a useful template for ethnographic inquiry (Anderson, 2015:113), I chose to engage with it as another way of leaving behind for a moment the narratives of utility and instrumentalization of Death Café that I mentioned are prevalent in most of academic writing on Death Cafes. It was a way to engage with the ideal of Death Café - undirected, unguided conversation with no agenda or leading to specific conclusions. I utilised the feature necessary to maintain sociability - good form - also to show that the enjoyment of the Death Café is not automatic, or a given, and Death Café attendees have to agree to strive to achieve it. Further, the concept of sociability was useful because it allowed to explore in a different way Maffesoli's assertion that the defining purpose of neo-tribes is 'experiencing the other' (Maffesoli 1996: 73) or 'being-together' (Maffesoli 1996: 16, 86) - it allowed to inquire how it is achieved.

Chapter 6 centres on the concept of empathy. I was drawn to explore 'empathy' because I wanted to give space to the affective and emotional aspects that are present in Death Cafes, without giving too much weight to the outwardly emotional aspect of Death Cafes because, largely, I haven't encountered it. It was a conscious decision because while Death Cafes *are* spaces for emotion around death, that emotionality, at least in the Death Cafes in the UK I attended, was often reserved and not vividly experienced in the interactions. I chose 'empathy' to attempt to explain not only the specific 'affectual nebula' of the Death Café encounter but also how it is managed between people, as it is fundamentally a relational concept. Further, the concept of empathy was an opportunity to explore Maffesoli's notion of *puissance* - communalised empathy - empirically, utilising the work of social science theorists. Especially useful were

anthropologists' Hollan and Throop's works on how creating an empathetic atmosphere requires efforts from both the empathiser and the person to be understood. In this way, the concept of empathy was also helpful to elucidate some aspects of ethics of aesthetics, another Maffesolian concept, denoting that there are no obligations in participation in neo-tribes, besides to cohere to the tribe. Overall, I utilise empathy as an additional theoretical framework to ground Maffesoli's notion of *puissance*, place it empirically, exploring the possibility of less 'heated', 'passionate' affect in neo-tribes than Maffesoli originally wrote of.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the role of Death Café attendees being strangers as an important part of the Death Café interaction. Here I utilise a concept of intimacy, specifically that of Andreas Henriksson's (2014) idea of organised situational intimacy. The intimacy at Death Café is achieved by experiencing strangers and themselves differently than the usual experience of strangers - by talking about death openly. Feelings of intimacy among strangers hence is an important shared sentiment, or a shared aesthetic of the Death Café neo-tribe that bonds them together in the experience. Importantly, this intimacy is part of how Death Café attendees experience themselves as a collective. I used the concept of intimacy between strangers to explicate how this group self-consciousness is created and experienced.

All of these additional frameworks - space, sociability, empathy, intimacy - are relevant concepts to engage theoretically with societal changes Michael Jacobsen raised are happening in the age of spectacular death. According to Jacobsen, people are seeking to engage with death in different, increasingly public spaces, in less formal, more spontaneous, 'authentic' ways with heterogenous cohorts of people. I engage with Death Café as one expression of spectacular death - a novel 'pop-up' space for collective sociable communion with 'safe' strangers that is characterized by a certain relationship between emotional proximity and distance. Investigating the inner workings of Death Café via my chosen additional theoretical concepts and frameworks provides novel and relevant interpretations about expressions of spectacular death in daily life.

### 3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical framework of my thesis. During fieldwork, I found that my research participants understood Death Café attendance as primarily a convivial, sociable, revitalising activity that allowed them to experience a sense of collectivity with strangers and reinforce their shared sentiment that it is good to talk about death. This pointed me towards engaging with Michel Maffesoli's ideas on postmodern sociality and his theory of neo-tribes, which presents a primarily optimistic view of the postmodern social life whereby people gather together to connect and express themselves. His theory stands in contrast to the kind of alienation and individualisation identified by other narrators of postmodernity (e.g. Giddens (1991), Bauman (1992)). Most significant is that Maffesoli takes seriously the enjoyment that people experience from being together.

An additional reason I applied neo-tribal theory to my study of Death Cafés was in order to emphasise the pivot from instrumentalist attitudes in existing academic publications on Death Cafés towards an emphasis on sociability. In this thesis, I give the front stage to moments of sociality in Death Café meetings. I unpack the tensions between spontaneity and purposefulness, and between the domestication of death and alienation from it, that occur as people gather for a single purpose - to talk about death.

In the last decade, scholars from various disciplines have addressed some of the inconsistencies and limitations of Maffesoli's original theory and as such have enhanced its theoretical and empirical relevance. Continuing research has shown that neo-tribal theory is a powerful tool for observing and understanding how people build collective meaning in a complex and dynamic world (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021:112-129). It is also a rejection of social atomisation in societies where - at first glance - it seems we have no time to find meaning in each other (ibid). Death Cafés provide a unique arena for grappling with how transient, ephemeral, voluntary groupings of heterogeneous participants organise themselves to achieve their collective purpose.

The neo-tribal framework provides a backdrop for taking seriously the way the Death Café transient social formation is bonded by a certain aesthetic - participants recognising themselves through a shared interest in talking about death, and also a shared acknowledgment of distance between them. In turn, unfolding the inner workings of Death Café sociality uncovers Maffesoli's overlooked notion of the aesthetic nature of the social bond, thus enhancing applications of neo-tribal theory. This is where I carve out theoretical space for my analysis of the Death Café phenomenon.

The next four Chapters present my empirical contributions to the study of Death Café. I begin this with a chapter focusing on the meanings of 'space' for Death Café.



## **Chapter 4. 'It's not about whether anybody turns up, it's about holding that space': Charting the meanings of space at a Death Café**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Ledshire Death Café organiser Tina and I met for an interview at the same town centre café she had been hosting monthly Death Cafés in for over a year. This interview was different from others for two reasons. First, Tina was one of the nine organisers I interviewed without having attended their Death Café. Second, I mainly interviewed organisers via Skype, phone, in their favourite Cafés, some at their homes, but only Tina was interviewed in her Death Café venue. This led the interview to naturally focus more on the specifics of the venue. As we sat down with our cappuccinos, I mentioned to Tina that the relatively small café was divided into several distinct spaces. There was a naturally well-lit main area, a wooden staircase leading up to a small bookstore area, and an arched entryway into a slightly more secluded area at end of the room, where a person could consume their drink and cake almost unseen from other parts of the café. She enthusiastically nodded: 'It's great, isn't it?'. Tina told me she had been involved in quite a methodical process of 'trying the venues for size' until she settled on this specific café. Tina told me she had been driven by her interest in mindfulness and hygiene theory which focused on how various aspects of space impact meetings or conversations.

Tina looked online at venues where other people had held Death Cafés and she told me she thought that many had made a mistake by choosing very large venues, such as town halls, where people's eyes were 'allowed to wander'. Crossing such venues out, she then visited five different cafés in her local area. One was 'too funky and fast-paced, full of busy young people in Ted Baker suits'; the second - 'too posh', the third - 'too stiff', the fourth - 'too noisy'. Finally, her current venue 'felt like home'. Tina especially loved the corner through the arch at the back of the café, as people were 'safe and able to remain mindful because there's not too much to focus on, but if they found it too intense, they've got the window which allows to feel like you can breathe, there's some space and some air'. Tina's concern about finding the perfect Death Café venue is only one example of how the physical surroundings are understood to affect

Death Café interactions. Organisers I talked to had varied ideas about what an ideal Death Café venue should be, but all of them emphasised that creating a particular Death Café ‘space’ is necessary to ensure the events are successful.

Ultimately, this chapter was prompted by the discrepancy I observed between the abundance of references to Death Café ‘space’ I encountered during my fieldwork and an almost complete absence of attention towards physical or metaphorical aspects of space in academic literature on Death Cafés. As outlined in Chapter 1, most of the existing publications on Death Café focus on evaluating its effects (Adler et al., 2015; Nelson, 2017; Miles and Corr, 2017) and applying it in various educational and institutional contexts (Howorth, Thompson and Paes, 2017; Nelson et al., 2018; Hammer et al., 2019). The lack of academic interest in space is surprising because the importance of ‘space’ is clearly felt when trying to get familiar with the basics of Death Café - it seems like it should immediately spike the researchers’ interest. For example, just one glimpse at Death Café advertisements on the official website reveals that almost every single event promises ‘safe’, ‘respectful’ and ‘open’ space. One hypothesis is that many of the academic articles were based on a very small number of interviews or observations, as well as not being ethnographic, and therefore Death Café space did not emerge as a significant conversation topic. My more extensive research, as well as the findings from the larger internationally focused Death Café study at the University of Glasgow (Richards et al., 2020), revealed that space is a significant concept in Death Café practice. Koksvik and Richards’s (2021), for example, found that ‘staging’ a specific Death Café atmosphere was necessary to foster human connection. This was an extremely valuable development in the dearth of academic interest in the role of space and in this chapter, I offer another angle of exploration. I aim to show that space is the main defining feature of Death Café and even more - ‘the fulcrum of its existence’ (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a:8).

In the first part of the chapter, I define the concept of space as it is used in neo-tribal theory. I mainly draw on tourism and leisure scholar Oskaras Vorobjovas-Pinta’s development of neo-tribal theory (2017, 2018a, 2018b), which suggests that space is not just a platform for neo-tribal behaviours to be enacted, but rather space itself is the reason for a particular neo-tribe to emerge

(Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:201). I then present data on Death Café events, such as most popular venues and times, with a view to discussing how the Death Café group defines the boundary between itself and its physical surroundings. This is the first of the three key features of the Death Café space I discovered during fieldwork.

I then present a concept that helps to define the remaining key features of Death Café space: third-placeness (Calderon, 2016). It is a dynamic development of Oldenburg's (1999) idea of 'third place' and refers to the quality of interaction within a space and its significance to its participants, rather than the designated purpose of the structure in which people are gathering. This line of inquiry was partially spurred by Fong's (2017) promising, yet ultimately unhelpful attempt to apply the concept of third place to Death Café gatherings. I argue that evoking third-placeness, characterised by informality, conviviality, conversing as equals (among other qualities) is central for each Death Café event, no matter the type of venue.

This helps explain the second feature I deem key for capturing the essence of Death Café space: its 'pop-up' nature. I discuss Jon Underwood's unsuccessful attempt to establish a brick-and-mortar Death Café in London to argue that making Death Café a permanent place would have created a significantly different neo-tribe, if it could be called a neo-tribe at all. The particular third-placeness evoked during the Death Café encounter is inextricable from the ephemerality of space. The third and final feature of the Death Café space I outline is that it is understood by attendees to be separate from everyday life, specifically regarding their usual social interaction with strangers. Outlining this illuminates how attendees enter and exit a spatially situated neo-tribal reality.

Ultimately, this chapter shows that Death Café is actively evoking symbols of third-place hospitality, such as informality, conviviality, among others, as a challenge to prevalent societal rules about where and with whom one can talk about death. The absence of social settings where death can be talked about with strangers is often quoted as the very reason for the existence of Death Café. Thus, creating this specific space is the main way the Death Café neo-tribe defines itself. Engaging with the concept of space empirically provides a novel

contribution to neo-tribal theory in that this dimension of neo-tribal gatherings has been claimed to be underdeveloped, overlooked and unduly relegated simply to a background in which neo-tribal realities play out (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

## 4.2. Defining ‘space’

I found that many Death Café organisers claim that their main role is ‘creating space’ for the conversations to happen. To exemplify the importance of this sentiment I recall an interview with Eleanor who had been hosting Weatherfield Death Cafés regularly since 2017. She told me that Death Café conversations were not personally interesting or satisfying for her anymore because the topics had begun to feel repetitive. Nevertheless, she claimed that ‘just being part of creating a space where people have the chance to talk together is very rewarding’. In further conversations with other organisers, I found that they understood the process of ‘creating space’ in two broad ways: first, in a physical sense of organising the time and the venue in which to hold the event; and second, metaphorically providing the opportunity for what they consider taboo conversations to unfold. This helps to define the conceptual boundaries of the notion of ‘space’ which I will use in this chapter.

Anthropologists have spilled a lot of ink in distinguishing between ‘space’ and ‘place’ (e.g., Tuan, 1977; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003; Low, 2009). Aucoin (2017) provided a characterisation of space as engaged with and experienced both as a physical and ambient dimension; as distance, location, or topography. Space is recognised as an important cultural medium, ‘an idiom through which individuals can think and that can be culturally organised to produce spatial practices that are social, aesthetic, political, religious or economic’ (Aucoin, 2017:386). ‘Place’, in turn, is a ‘framed space that is meaningful to a person or group over time’ (Thornton, 2008:10); or in other words, what generalised space becomes once it is populated with cultural meaning and affect (Aucoin, 2017:397). Describing the socio-cultural dimensions of physical sites thus would call for the term ‘place’ in anthropological tradition. My distinguishing between ‘space’ and ‘place’, however, is guided by the specific concepts I build on in this chapter, namely Oldenburg’s (1999) concept of ‘third place’. Thus, to avoid

muddling of definitions, the term ‘place’ will only refer to this specific analytical concept and its development of ‘third-placeness’ which I will introduce in due course.

My definition of ‘space’ thus is far broader and mainly builds on tourism and leisure researcher Vorobjovas-Pinta’s work (2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020), which resonated with my empirical findings on the role of space in Death Café. It was especially relevant to explain my finding that many practices, such as the ritual of having coffee and cake, boundary creation between Death Café and everyday life, among others I discuss in this chapter, can be understood through a common thread of ‘space’. Amalgamating Maffesoli’s original concept and published work on neo-tribes, Vorobjovas-Pinta (2017) proposed a model for identifying the universal characteristics of neo-tribalism, claiming that there are four overarching characteristics: shared sentiment; rituals and symbols; fluidity in membership; and space. Vorobjovas-Pinta (2017:37) also noted that while the first three characteristics have been the main themes of many articles, the characteristic of space within neo-tribal theory has been comparatively under-researched and underdeveloped.

The ‘space’ he refers to incorporates both the physical and social aspects of the location, which together define the boundaries of neo-tribal collectivity.

According to Vorobjovas-Pinta:

Spaces are the sites of performance where collective identities are manifested but are themselves formed by and formative of these identities: spatial delineations align with identity boundaries, and vice versa (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:201-202).

This understanding of space emphasises how the physical spaces where people gather are linked to the very nature of the group. In his research on a gay resort, Vorobjovas-Pinta found that the resort space was not a platform, or background, for the three neo-tribal characteristics to play out, but was actually ‘a seedbed, and a catalyst, for the emergence of new rituals, traditions, and shared behaviours’ (2017:201). He argues that the spatial characteristic of the group encounter ‘transcends the mere framing of neo-tribal experience; it is the fulcrum of neo-tribal assembly and life, and it mediates the other characteristics of tribal identity’ (2017:244). In the case of the gay resort, where visitors are

released from having to negotiate their homosexuality in a heteronormative environment, the fleeting state of neo-tribal membership and its clear temporal and physical boundaries are themselves enabling the existence of the neo-tribe. Vorobjovas-Pinta established that ‘without space as this shared currency, the other three elements of neo-tribes can have no collective form, and that the tribal identity will dissipate’ (ibid).

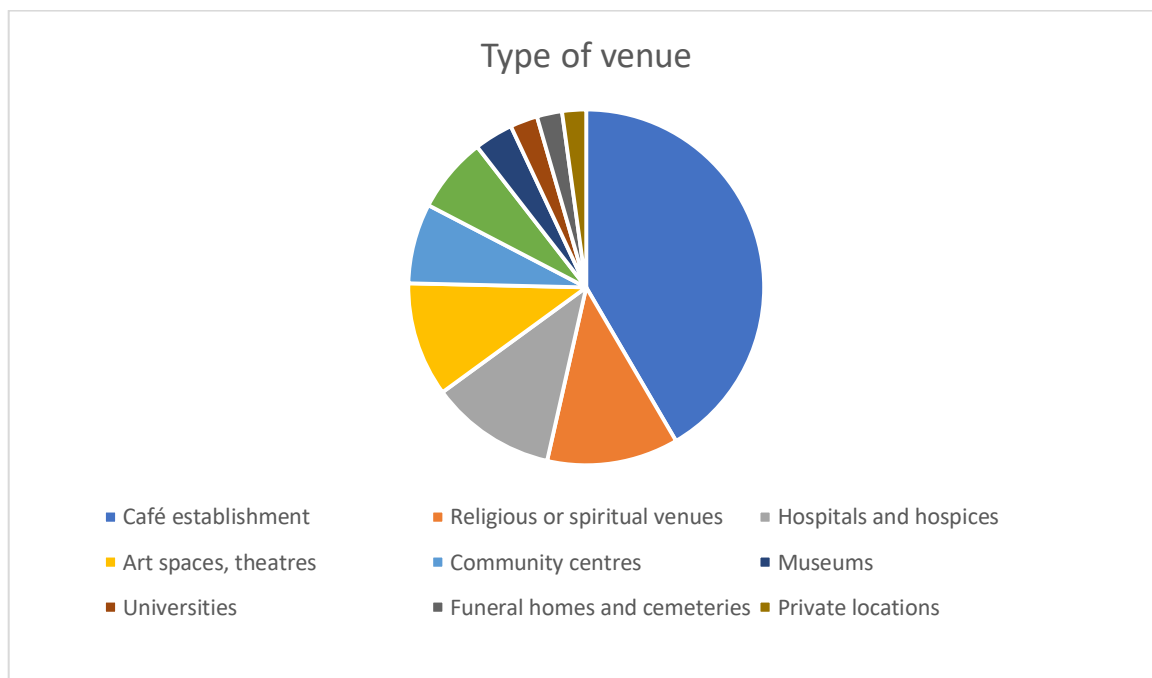
This is especially relevant in the context of my research. Death Café meetings take place as a challenge to the perceived lack of talk about death in other, especially casual and informal settings. The physical space of Death Cafés is thus created by the act of gathering in response to this. In the meetings, participants often discuss their shared sentiment that it is good to talk about death and lament that death is a ‘taboo’ conversation topic in many other contexts. Put simply I argue that the very act of gathering together defines Death Café as a social phenomenon and, as per Vorobjovas-Pinta’s suggestion, mediates the other characteristics of group identity. Further, I argue that the spatial (and temporal) boundaries of the Death Café event align with the collective identity of the Death Café neo-tribe.

In the following sections, I will show these processes of spatial delineation at work. First, I will focus on how the physical aspects of Death Café, such as the type of venue, the time of day, etc., affect how the Death Café group defines itself within that physical space. Then I will move on to more metaphorical aspects of Death Café, specifically looking at it through Oldenburg’s (1999) third place lens, which I will introduce. Throughout this discussion, I will show that the Death Café grouping also possesses the three underlying neo-tribal features (symbols and rituals, shared sentiment, and fluidity in membership) and they are all enabled by the connective thread of space.

### **4.3. Examining how Death Café groups establish their space**

In Chapter 1, I established that the number of organised Death Café events I gathered from the official Death Café website ([deathcafe.com](http://deathcafe.com)) are not representative as not all events are registered there. The website nevertheless provides a general indication of the most popular venues and times. I recorded

all Death Café events in the UK that were registered on the website from September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (the first Death Café in Hackney, London) until March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, when UK-wide coronavirus lockdown was implemented, marking the end of the possibility of face-to-face Death Cafés for an extended period.

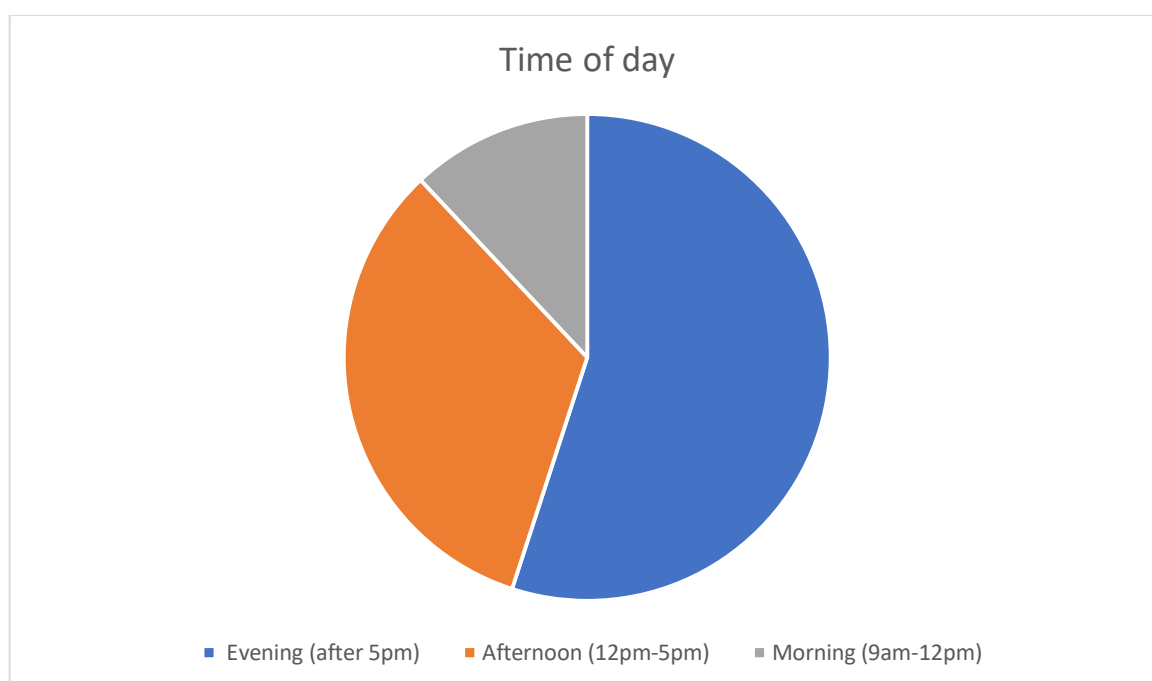


**Figure 2. Chart representing popularity of types of Death Café venues**

Figure 2 represents the types of venues where Death Cafés have been reported to take place in across the UK. It is important to note that my research was concerned with Death Cafés where people physically gathered in one venue/space, as opposed to online Death Cafés. Online Death Cafés were some of the least popular options in the UK before the onset of coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and their presence would only marginally alter this chart.

Around 40 percent of Death Cafés in the UK registered on the official website were reported to be held in café establishments. This was followed in popularity by religious or spiritual venues, such as churches, Quaker Meeting Houses, Buddhist centres, as well as spiritual centres such as ‘Goddess house’, or ‘Natural healing centre’ (11,5% of events). A similar proportion of Death Cafés were reported to be held in hospitals and hospices (around 11% of events). Next popular were art spaces, such as theatres, exhibition spaces, collaborative art spaces, etc. (around 10% of events), community hubs and centres and village

halls (around 7%), libraries (6,6%), similar proportions (around 2%) of events were held in museums, universities, private locations, funeral homes and cemeteries. Evenings after 5 pm were the most popular times for Death Cafés in the UK, with around 55% of Death Cafés taking place then. Around a third of Death Cafés took place during conventional lunch/afternoon time and just about 12% in the morning.



**Figure 3. Chart representing the distribution of times of day for Death Café events**

When I refer to a Death Café taking place in a ‘cemetery’, ‘hospice’, or a ‘museum’, in most instances they still take place in internal dedicated café shop areas of these establishments. Out of those that did not have café shop areas, i.e. Tannochbrae church hall, Chigley hospice prayer room, the refreshments were brought in by organisers. While I conducted research in the most common setting for Death Café, I cannot claim confidently that my account is representative of Death Café practices in the UK. In a way, the very premise of my study is based on ‘getting back to the basics of Death Café’ so to speak. I am drawing attention to the importance of respecting the original Death Café ethos of non-directed conversation, unguided conversation with no agenda, not for instrumental purposes. Fundamentally, I can say that I have first and foremost *experienced* a Death Café as I described throughout the thesis: pleasant, warm. no explicit agenda, not for profit, voluntarily organised, and these Death Cafés



are the main concern of my thesis. However, it must be noted that a number of Death Cafes might not appear in reality as such and are possibly fraught with tension, serve public engagement, education, service promotion purposes or are held in place of bereavement support groups. Further in-depth research on the variety of types of Death Cafes in the UK and internationally would be welcomed.

The venues for Death Cafés are varied and Death Café participants hold varied perceptions about demarcating the boundary between the group activity and its material surroundings. I will explore how Death Café groups understand their activity based on the time of day and the venue where the events are taking place. What's the difference between a daytime Death Café happening in a busy establishment that simultaneously serves other patrons, and an evening Death Café held in a venue opened exclusively for them? Does the presence of Death Café impact the rest of the surroundings and is the group concerned about that? Does the group claim the space confidently or do they lower their voice and huddle together? I argue that this spatial boundary work is central for the group's definition of itself both in singular events, and as engaging in Death Café practice more generally.

Journalist Mosleh (2019) began their article by emphasising the contrast between the serious topic and casual setting, which while diverging, do not affect each other significantly:

As an upbeat Rihanna song plays in the background, the group sits at an Edmonton café and discusses the origin of the death rattle, a gurgling sound people make when death is near because they're unable to clear the back of their throat. The space is bright and welcoming, despite the dark discussion (Mosleh, 2019).

This stands in contrast with an instance Tina told me about. During one of her daytime Death Cafés, the group had been talking and lightly joking about the process of embalming. A gentleman at a neighbouring table kept 'dramatically huffing and puffing' at every instance of laughter, eventually got up, exclaimed loudly: 'I'm not sitting here!' and stormed off. Tina said that this caused the group to feel self-conscious about affecting the café's business.

On another occasion, when I visited one of Wokenwell Death Cafés that took place in a local library, we were sat at a large table in an open and brightly lit space. Half the group ended up having their backs to the back of the library, with only bookshelves behind them, while the other half was back-to-back with people using stationary computers. An elderly man playing solitaire slowly turned around after he overheard Rhys, a young man with a thunderous voice say: 'I lost my parents when I was 4'. He continued playing and kept turning around, with Rhys' eyes darting back and forth from the computer user to the group as he was sharing his bereavement experience. Noticing other establishment patrons reacting to their talk thus might affect the Death Café attendees' comfort levels if they had already been feeling apprehensive about talking about death. The proximity of other patrons during a daytime event could be said to be in line with Death Café's goal to destigmatise conversations about death to enable people to talk about it in casual settings. However, there is a level of self-consciousness in the Death Café group simply because they acknowledge that not everyone might want to talk and hear about death going about their daily lives. By being 'considerate' of other patrons, the Death Café attendees share a sentiment that they are gathered there for the same reason, but that this reason is different to that of other patrons'. This shared sentiment, I argue, binds the group.

Even when there are no other patrons, disruption by staff can be an issue. For example, Brigadoon Death Café took place in a hotel bar in the morning. Waitresses came to the tables to take orders as people were taking off coats and beginning to settle in. Drinks and food began to be delivered to the 14 people present only after the conversations had started in earnest. The following snapshot from one of the conversations among four women, Abigail, Barbara, Claire, and Dianne details the agitation caused by such disturbance.

Abigail had been talking about how funerals provide comfort to people as they can begin to process their loss by talking to others. Barbara agreed that it was really helpful to hear stories about the deceased. Abigail began reflecting on her experience: 'it's very different with somebody unexpected... or younger. See, my mother died relatively young 30 years ago...'

Abigail was interrupted by a waitress approaching the table with two cups of coffee loudly exclaiming: 'Did you just have two coffees here?'. Claire looked around the tables and said: 'No, it was three coffees and a tea'.

The waitress set the two cups down and left, allowing Abigail to continue: '...and a lot of things happened in her funeral that I didn't want there, but... you know'. The waitress marched to the table again, interrupting Abigail by shouting: 'Another coffee and a flapjack!'.

Barbara claimed the treats and the four women shuffled around stirring their beverages passing sugar between them. Abigail began telling the others how organising her mother's funeral brought disagreements with her brother. Claire contended that such situations were indeed complicated and that her father, for as long as she remembered, had always wanted to be cremated. Before she was able to reveal what ended up happening, the waitress loudly exclaimed again: 'Excuse me, ladies, can I just take your payment now?'.

Barbara frustratedly whispered to the group: 'Oh my god, no you can't'. At that point, the women also realised that they needed to come over to the bar to pay. After three out of four women returned, Abigail attempted to continue the conversation: 'So you were saying you thought about your father's wish ...'. Barbara responded: 'It wasn't me, it was Claire, she's still paying for her coffee... I love this juxtaposition, don't you, of, like, your mother's funeral, and tea coffee and cake'. Claire eventually came back, and the conversation was able to continue.

The waitress asking for payment is nothing out of the ordinary and being slightly annoyed about a disrupted conversation is not unique to Death Café attendees, but expressing dissatisfaction with interruptions when participating in Death Café nevertheless is one of the ways the group collectively creates its boundaries and claims its territory. They came specifically to talk about death and while the conversation is taking place in a familiar everyday setting, what Barbara called an enjoyable juxtaposition of serious and light, interruptions such as these are not welcomed. In the same vein, organiser Marina lauded her chosen Death Café venue (a quaint café with a separate room upstairs) for

having waiters who were consistently ‘almost invisible’ during the events. She considered it to be an expression of support for Death Café, an ‘understanding of the special value of our meeting’. This is consistent with how Vorobjovas-Pinta understands the elevated role of space in its relationship to neo-tribes, in the sense that feeling of collective ownership of the space by the tribe is constitutive of tribal identity itself. This can be further explicated by exploring the reasons for hosting Death Cafés in exclusive use venues.

Riseholme, Weatherfield, Borchester, Akenfield, and East Bromwich Death Cafés are all well-established and take place in café venues that have been opened after hours specifically for the Death Cafés. Borchester Death Café organiser Serena, for example, felt strongly about this exclusiveness:

I think it needs to be a space exclusively for Death Café because you just don’t want other people overhearing those conversations and perhaps it’s not fair if other people are starting to listen to stuff that they might not choose to be involved in.

A more separate, even dedicated place where conversations can be contained among those who explicitly choose to participate in a conversation about death is preferred by many organisers. Holding a Death Café in an exclusive use venue protects Death Café attendees from possibly being judged and allows free-flowing, less censored, and careful conversation. The Death Café neo-tribe is continuously negotiating its position against the presence *and* absence of others, whether that be venue patrons or staff. These negotiations of boundaries between Death Café and its surroundings show further that a certain level of awareness about the sensitivity of their shared endeavour is required from the group even if talking about death in everyday settings is sought to be ‘normalised’. This awareness is shared between them as they gather in spaces that are either dedicated to their endeavour or blended with the everyday rhythms of the venue. The security and resistance that space provides for the neo-tribe, in Death Café’s case are enacted bidirectionally: it protects the unsuspecting patrons on neighbouring tables from possibly getting upset, but also allows Death Café attendees to solidify their shared interest and bond them as a group. By attempting to keep itself and others ‘safe’ from each other, Death Café neo-tribe is asserting its ownership over the space for conversations about death.

This part of the discussion focused on the physical aspects of the Death Café space. In the next section, I discuss how Death Café also uses certain rituals and symbols connected to other aspects of space, in order to confirm further the group's view of itself (Maffesoli, 1996).

#### **4.3.1. Symbolic Death Café atmosphere and third place**

The official guidelines on the Death Café website suggest that 'a good venue is important as a pleasant environment helps people relax and talk about death' (Underwood, 2013a). 'Getting the atmosphere right' has been articulated by several organisers as an important task. I began the chapter by introducing Tina who was incessantly focused on finding the best physical venue that she felt would facilitate people opening up to talk about death. However, a significant number of organisers focus less on how the surroundings enable talking about death *specifically* and are more concerned with simply providing a generally familiar and pleasant setting. Violet talked about her venue in Darrowby:

It's not too big, it's cosy because the seating is quite relaxed. You don't want to be in upright chairs or anything, I think that's important. The lighting doesn't need to be stark bright white; the ambience has to be sort of more relaxed and subdued. I think any subject you were covering, even if it wasn't a Death Café...if you were meeting for, I don't know, an agricultural meeting, it would still be nice to have a decent ambience.

Here Violet stated that ambience is more important for the overall pleasant atmosphere, not to serve the purpose of making people open up to talk about death. Hughson's (1999:14) assertion that 'awareness of the social and cultural geography of relevant spaces is [...] crucial to the study of neo-tribes' here is relevant when we investigate the origins of the aforementioned notion of 'pleasant atmosphere'.

I argue that one helpful concept for this is Oldenburg's third place (1999, also Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982), especially the recent developments of the concept, which I will outline briefly here. Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place* (1999) is a socio-historical commentary on the decline of American social life, narrating societal changes responsible for it and examining how third places

- 'the core settings of informal public life' (Oldenburg, 1999:16) away from settings of home and work (first and second places, respectively) - have survived this. Oldenburg claims that these 'haven[s] of rest and recuperation' (Oldenburg, 2013:7) are key sites for neighbourhood and community building and maintenance (Sandiford, 2019:1094). The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work (Oldenburg, 1999:41) and some examples from the urban landscape include: cafés; hairdressers; pubs; and libraries. Oldenburg's third places have the following characteristics:

- 1) They are on neutral ground: all are welcome, can enter and leave the space whenever they want;
- 2) They are a leveller; attended by people of different socio-economic strata;
- 3) Conversation is the main activity;
- 4) They are accessible; there are no physical, policy, or monetary barriers to the entrance;
- 5) They have a low profile, Oldenburg says 'even seedy';
- 6) There are 'regulars' who find the atmosphere comfortable enough to 'root' them there;
- 7) The mood is playful, laughter is often heard, and wit is valued;
- 8) They are a home away from home, or a place with psychological comfort that occupants might expect at home (Jeffres et al., 2009:335).

The concept of third places has been fruitfully advanced by other academics examining the role of third place interactions for the personal and community benefits of such places as libraries (Harris, 2007), museums (Tate, 2012), sports stadiums (Jacke, 2009), restaurants (Rosenbaum, 2006), and homes (Purnell, 2015). With the proliferation of the internet, many academics saw the opportunity to extend the notion of third place to virtual meeting spaces (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Rao, 2008; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). It also has been expanded to include events, such as festivals (Hawkins and Ryan, 2013), and academic conferences (Purnell and Cunningham-Breede, 2018).

Despite the endurance of the concept of third place in academic studies, Sandiford (2019) argued that the analytical potential of the concept had been missed by a large proportion of studies, which according to him, have succumbed to 'a mechanistic exercise of confirming whether somewhere qualifies as a third place' (Sandiford, 2019:1094). Some examples of this are

studies confirming that coffeeshops (Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012), school libraries (Kuno, 2011), and Twitter (Markoc, 2019) meet the eight criteria of Oldenburg's third place. Sandiford suggests that instead of debating whether something *is* a third place, researchers should focus on the implications of 'third placedness' for enterprises, their customers, and the communities they serve (Sandiford, 2019:1104).

One example, illustrating if not the pitfalls, then simply missing the benefit gained from engaging critically with the concept of third place in a similar context to my research can be found in Burrows's recent doctoral thesis (2020) on Memory Cafés (informal gathering for people with memory problems and their carers to share their experiences). Burrows mentioned only in passing that Memory Cafés acted as a 'third places, which are places that are not home, or work, and provide a space in which connections are made' (Burrows, 2020:231). However, how the context of third place fostered the development of supportive relationships in action was left untouched and I argue it was a missed opportunity to address the role of 'third placedness' for the interaction in a casual environment on an intimate and sensitive topic.

For example, even if a Death Café is not taking place in the classical venue of a café, I argue that physical and symbolic elements of this archetypical third place are sought to be replicated in the group's behaviour. As Rachel Weiss, the founder of Menopause Café (Weiss, 2017), who also had hosted Death Cafés explained, the attractiveness of a café environment is that it:

Is a normal place to go and meet, it is a very different feel than going to a church hall or a doctor's surgery, so people feel comfortable. And that helps to normalise the topic, whether the topic is death or not, it's an environment that we're familiar with, we know what to do.

Rachel Weiss highlighted the insider knowledge that comes with attending an event that takes place in a café environment. Tina also had reflected on the significance of a café establishment to the Death Café 'vibe':

I do wonder whether there's not much disagreements because of the space that we occupy, because it's a very public coffee shop. It's a very warm environment. We are enjoying our coffee. We're enjoying our cake

or whatever anyone's having and people are in the right space. They're not competing who knows the most about death.

In the above quote, emphasising non-competitiveness points to seeking an atmosphere that can be defined as classically 'third place'. One is not 'talked at' as attendee Molly from Akenfield put it, comparing Death Café conversations to a death doula course she had attended. Fundamentally, I argue that Death Café can be understood well through the symbolism of a third place and strives to evoke third place-like qualities. Death Café attendees expect informality, conviviality, talking as equals, among other third-place qualities because the pleasantness of the Death Café atmosphere is built on the culturally symbolic café interaction. Laurier and Philo (2006a, 2006b), in their extensive ethnography of café culture in Edinburgh, define cafés as places in the city in which urban dwellers have come to expect conviviality between the unacquainted. In Death Cafés this is elevated to intimate conviviality between the barely acquainted via creating a 'mutually assured safe hospitality' (Sandiford, 2019:1096). Sandiford uses this term to explain the attractiveness of third places to members of contemporary society, interacting within increasingly complex spaces and contexts. Third places provide physical and psychological safety and lower the social anxiety about strangers' unpredictable behaviour.

To explore further how the third place qualities manifest in the context of the pop-up nature of Death Cafés, I adopt a dynamic development of the concept of third place, as proposed by human-computer interaction researcher Roberto Calderon (2016). Calderon introduced the concept of third-placeness, which is a departure from Oldenburg's original concept in that it represents a 'state' of human socialisation, instead of a physical location. Third-placeness can emerge wherever and whenever people socialise, and has a spontaneous, sporadic, and nomadic nature. Third-placeness was elegantly summarised by Ferreira, Anacleto and Bueno (2017:211) as 'the sense of being in a third place without architectural constraints'. Third place, hence, is a physical embodiment of third-placeness, while third-placeness is the 'event' of achieving the third place's



characteristics at a certain place and time, constructed and sustained through experiences in and interactions with the place<sup>8</sup>.

Jack Fong (2017) has also used the concept of third place to understand Death Café. Here I will introduce his approach and explain how my application of the concept differs from Fong's. First, despite only briefly engaging with Oldenburg, Fong ultimately claims that Death Cafés are '*bona fide* third places' (2017:222). Fong's reason for asserting that Death Café is a third place is because 'the key attributes of third places, save the physical rootedness, are all present' (ibid). I argue that here Fong's analysis is reduced to an unfulfilling mechanistic exercise that Sandiford (2019) described. Second, Fong's understanding of Death Café spatiality is an amalgamation of Habermas's (1964) public sphere and Oldenburg's third place and he goes as far as using these concepts interchangeably throughout the chapter dedicated to the topic. I argue that this narrative offers an exceedingly macro view of Death Café, which is consistent with Fong's largely theoretical narrative about Death Café as an existential social movement, based on data from a small sample of 5 Death Cafés. Some overlap can indeed be found between Habermas and Oldenburg, specifically in that Oldenburg argues that third places contribute to a democratic society by countering the excesses of ideology, and that the differing points of view expressed there encourage thinking (Oldenburg, 2013:19). However, it is my view that Fong introduced Oldenburg's third place to his analysis of Death Café primarily to offset the weight of Habermas' inherently political and social change-oriented ideas, sensing that Death Café conversations in real life would rarely fit with a definition of 'public opinion' (Habermas, 1964). According to Fong himself, the third place is introduced to 'remind readers that Death Café communicative dynamics can frequently be lighthearted' (2017:214) and he considers it to be the most appropriate concept for explaining the atmosphere, the 'vibe' of Death Cafés.

In contrast to Fong, who grounds Death Café as a *bona fide* third place to explain its success and interactions within it, I argue that Death Café proponents evoke the third-placeness in physical space as a perceived challenge to physical

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<sup>8</sup> I find the difference between Sandiford's 'third-placedness' and Calderon's 'third-placeness' to only be grammatical and will use the latter for consistency.

social settings in which conversations about death are permitted. In other words, Death Café is not limited to, or entirely dependent on the pre-established qualities of any architectural setting and pre-determined forms of social interaction associated with that physical setting. Many of the features, traditionally attributed to third places, such as conviviality, easefulness and informality are valued and replicated across the social franchise and in diverse venues. Being able to relax and converse freely on a sensitive, intimate subject with like-minded people, and as equals, is one of the cornerstones of Death Café. Through actively attempting to evoke third-placeness via cultural symbols and behaviours attributed to the archetypical third place (café establishment) when conversing about the subject of death, the Death Café group defines and enacts its purpose, and as such, '(re)creates itself' (Walby and Spencer, 2018).

#### ***4.3.2. The ritual of coffee and cake***

One of the most recognisable rituals of Death Café is having coffee and cake. The attitudes to refreshments in Death Café events I encountered were heterogeneous. Many interviewees expressed a sentiment similar to organiser Serena's, who said she had witnessed only one function of food in Death Cafés - that of an ice breaker. Organiser Emma thought that food was a good distraction and provided comfort in an unusual social interaction. She once served a bowl of fruit and found that 'dipping in for a bramble from a shared bowl or peeling a satsuma helped to avoid eye contact if feeling nervous'. Olivia was one of several organisers I talked to who found the requirement to provide treats somewhat of an inconvenience. She usually hosted Death Cafés on Monday nights under the assumption that this weeknight would be free for most people. However, she found that:

It is a time when you don't eat cake. You don't have tea and cake in the evening, you have that in the afternoon normally, because of diet, sugar, and caffeine. It's not ideal.

When I asked organiser Eleanor whether she thought a Death Café, as an activity, is for everyone, she expressed a similar sentiment: 'I know people don't want to eat cake at seven o'clock at night! We always ask for savouries and they [the café] never bring them. Definitely not for everyone!'. Here Eleanor used the inconvenient timings for indulgence as a humorous reason as to why people

would not want to engage with Death Café. These examples show that the coffee and cake ritual establishes Death Café as a separate special occasion that does not follow people's daily consumption routines.

Vorobjovas-Pinta noted that gay resort community-created rituals and symbols do not have any value outside the resort and are institutionalised by the confined space of the resort (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a:7). Having a slice of cake and a cup of coffee of course does have value outside Death Café and can be understood simply as a treat, on a social occasion or alone. However, I argue that this conventional meaning is transformed at a Death Café. Rachel Weiss's Menopause Café (Weiss, 2017) model is based directly on a Death Café, so she encourages enjoying cake in both events. However, she finds serving cake at a Menopause Café slightly contradictory because maintaining a healthy diet is supposed to be one of the most important things when going through menopause. She considered serving fruits and nuts, but thought that then the event would lose the feeling of comfort:

Cake is a treat, isn't it? And we want people coming to a Death Café or a Menopause Café to feel like a treat rather than... because they're both very heavy and serious, potentially depressing topics, so we should try to make the environment as comfortable and familiar as possible.

While Rachel Weiss employs the conventional notion of a treat, it is introduced into the Death Café and Menopause Café contexts as a symbol to actively counteract the seriousness of topics of the conversation. This role of cake is also articulated in Death Café guidelines (Underwood, 2012). When we combine this view with the reticence expressed by some organisers about whether attendees really want to consume cake and coffee, it reframes the role of these refreshments as part of a ritual helping to evoke the third-placeness of the space via the act of commensality, and also a visible sign of Death Café membership. I myself felt obliged to always purchase a drink and cake to be 'fully' participating in Death Cafés (if they were not offered for free, in which case I also felt compelled to eat even if I wasn't hungry). The Death Café ritual of coffee and cake thus creates a certain aesthetic practice of consumption, which does not emerge organically, but rather is used deliberately to evoke third-placeness as part of the Death Café mission to bring death conversations into everyday spaces.

## 4.4. Examining the ephemeral nature of Death Café

The pop-up, nomadic nature of events was central to the philosophy of Death Café's prototype - *Café Mortel* (Crettaz, 2010). No *Café Mortel* was ever held in the same venue twice (ibid). Even if many Death Cafés in the UK have a consistent 'home' throughout their lifespan, the ephemeral nature of Death Café events is one of the franchise's defining features. Some organisers of well-established local Death Cafés told me that regularly 'opening up' Death Café space as a time-bound destination for conversations was their central role. As facilitator Doris from Weatherfield put: 'It's not about whether anybody turns up, it's about holding that space for people if they do want to be there'. In this section, I will explore how the ephemerality of Death Café events and groupings is inextricable from the particular appeal of the Death Café for most of its proponents. I will use Jon Underwood's unsuccessful attempt to create the permanent brick-and-mortar Death Café in London as a frame for this discussion. Finally, I will connect the ephemerality of Death Café space to the neo-tribal feature of fluidity in membership.

### 4.4.1. Brick-and-mortar Death Café London

Most of Jon Underwood's posts in 2014 and 2015 on the Death Café website are about trying to get the project of a permanent Death Café in London off the ground (Death Café, 2017). In 2015, Underwood created a crowdfunding campaign (Crowdfunder, 2015) to sell shares of Death Café London, defined legally as a Community Benefit Society. This not-for-profit project was anticipated to host not only traditional Death Cafés, but also to be used as a venue for film screenings, classes on will writing, support group meetings, and drawing sessions (Osgood, 2015).

In 2014, Underwood travelled to Switzerland to meet Bernard Crettaz after the very last *Café Mortel* event (Underwood, 2014b). Underwood took the opportunity to discuss his plans for Death Café London and the following fascinating exchange transcribed from a video interview (Nkemi, 2014b:26:50-29:35) highlights the issues that Death Café London could have presented to the essence of the franchise:

**Underwood:** ‘... I share your objective to give death back to the people, and as part of this, I am working to establish a real Death Café in London. This will be a space for Death Cafés but also, it will be an invitation for people to apply their creativity to death. What do you think of the idea?’

**Crettaz:** ‘Where there’s creativity?’

**Underwood:** ‘Yes, where people can apply their creativity, they can relate to death in their own way, whether it’s through poetry, through films, painting’.

**Crettaz:** ‘I respect your idea, Jon. But I would just like to draw your attention. There is a great gift in what you do. I also had this idea of finding a fixed place and then I abandoned it. Why? Because I want us to be nomads like life. What is extraordinary in our work is to go from one café to another and to speak to the owner of the café: ‘Can I come and speak about death here?’. That’s already a huge job. And to also say to the owner of the café: ‘I also want to speak about death’. You negotiate and you need to accept the people. And there’s also all the customers who come every day, to draw these people in. For me, this nomadic life by changing cafés was a fundamental rule. I am scared but I respect your idea that you create a specific space, that you actually recreate a specialised space while we actually want to give death back to the city and people. But I just want to draw your attention to the dangers of creating a ghetto of death. But you are doing it. I’ll respect it, but I am scared of creating a new space that becomes a new specialist or a ghetto of death’.

While Crettaz was not involved with the development of the British Death Café model and Jon Underwood did not diligently follow Crettaz’s model either, this interaction between them is enlightening. Underwood claimed that by establishing a brick-and-mortar Death Café he would be sharing Crettaz’s objective to ‘give death back to the people’. In this particular instance, Underwood spoke of providing an opportunity to legally own the dedicated space and Crettaz warned him that this would be an exclusionary move. Crettaz mentioned that it was important to be visible to regular café customers, otherwise what he called a ‘ghetto of death’ would form.

Reagan (2018) in her doctoral thesis spoke with Louise Winter, an early Death Café proponent and co-founder and director of the funeral business Poetic Endings, who had a similar take to Crettaz:

I spoke with Jon about a brick-and-mortar Death Café concept and I ended up pulling away from it because I felt that it was putting death in a

space that wasn't part of society, it wasn't part of a normal wider conversation, it was shoving it in a room somewhere and putting loads of creepy skulls everywhere, which also just adds to this concept that there should be a destination for death—not that it should be part of life every day (Reagan, 2018:299).

In my research, Death Café attendees seemed to especially value the opportunity to talk about death in an unstructured and unprescribed manner, which also offered an opportunity to escape the cliché ideas about who is interested in talking about death, mainly that of goth or nihilist youths. A similar attitude can be seen in some media articles, such as in the following introductory sentence (Adams, 2019): 'The idea of a "Death Café" might conjure up images of black leggings with lime green skulls on them, or somewhere an alternative traveller would visit in Amsterdam'. And even in an article where one of the co-authors, Lizzy Miles is a spearhead of the Death Café initiative in the United States, it was noted that:

The concept of tea and delicious cake was meant to impart that these events are warm and inviting, and not got gatherings of teenagers with black t-shirts and black eyeliner (Miles and Corr, 2017:152).

While seemingly attempting to move beyond these cliché understandings of the type of people who would want to engage with Death Café, Lizzy Miles had also expressed a desire for a different expression of Death Café membership. She posted a comment under Underwood's (2014c) blog post announcing plans for Death Café London saying that she was:

Excited about the centralised merchandise availability. I hope the various Death Café logos become collectors' items ala Hard Rock. I can think of at least 20 logos from 20 other cities that I would want to have in a t-shirt or coaster collection! (Underwood, 2014c).

A significant number of commenters under Underwood's posts on the topic of Death Café London were concerned that the material and financial aspect of a 'real' Death Café was in conflict with the pop-up, or what Crettaz earlier called 'nomadic', nature of Death Cafés. One commenter, identifying himself simply as 'Bill', urged Underwood to abandon the project:

Whether London needs another coffee, tea and cakes café is a matter of debate, no matter how it is themed. Death Cafés thrive now because they

are largely exempt from the uncompromising forces of the marketplace. That won't be the case with a physical Death Café. You'll be selling products, not ideas. (Underwood, 2015)

Creating a permanent Death Café, choosing a style of decoration and an agenda of events could very well be seen as alienating many people and adding another layer of exclusivity. Arguably, after becoming a part of the urban landscape, a sidewalk Death Café London would develop some barriers to group membership that do not exist now. One example comes from Lv and Qian (2018), who studied a coffeehouse neo-tribe in Guangzhou, China, and observed that there existed barriers to gaining membership of a coffeehouse neo-tribe. Only those who were part of the economically well-off urban middle class, identified with certain lifestyles, and possessed specific cultural knowledge could secure access to the collective identity of the coffeehouse. While several of these barriers exist in Death Café and are addressed throughout the thesis, especially in Chapter 7, turning Death Café into a permanent fixture would make these and other barriers, such as possibly adopting a particular 'darker' or 'alternative' décor style, more visible.

In addition, translating part of the initiative into a permanent and literal third place would have resulted in complex negotiations of membership exclusivity, complicated financial, legal entanglements that are unavoidable as a facet of existing in the urban landscape. In contrast, having 'just' a Death Café meeting allows for this ephemeral neo-tribe to focus fully on this reason for coalescence and to express their shared sentiment, to enjoy the creation of third-placeness without involving other parts of their daily lives. Coming back to original concept of third place, Oldenburg and Brissett (1982:270) wrote that third places are entirely unremarkable and are not particularly interesting or notable either to the outsiders or to their inhabitants; they are simply there providing opportunities for experiences and relationships that are otherwise unavailable. Death Café here departs from this notion. It does not just 'provide an opportunity' for strangers to talk about death - Death Cafe actively creates the sense of third-placeness when talking about death that is to be enjoyed there as a somewhat special occasion; this is the reason *why* this specific relationship with strangers emerges. Overall, I argue that to retain the same sense of

camaraderie, authenticity, belonging, Death Café necessarily needs to remain ephemeral.

#### **4.4.2. Fluidity in membership**

One of the traditional neo-tribal features is fluidity in membership. This means that people from different walks of life, coming together for a shared purpose (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Lewis, 2021) can easily move in and out of the group, as their connection is ‘loose, inherently unstable and held together essentially through emotion and passion’ (Otnes and Maclaran, 2007:52). Underwood acknowledged that Death Cafés most often have one-time attendees and Death Café London would need to establish a regular clientele to be financially viable:

It’s like people come to connect with death and then move on to get on with their lives. Perhaps this indicates that even people who are open to connecting with death only would want to do so occasionally.

But the way people will interact with a real Death Café could be much more diverse. Attending a Death Café event is a relatively big commitment. Would people want to connect with a death awareness project more regularly if they could do so very lightly e.g., by just popping in for a drink? (Underwood, 2015).

Underwood’s concern about the nature of how people engage with Death Café – by going to an event, possibly only once or twice – and how Death Café London, a brick-and-mortar space relying on returning clientele would fit with the rhythm of urban life, highlights that the Death Café space is primarily based on a very concentrated coalescence. I sketched out boundaries of that coalescence by first showing how the Death Café group defines its presence in relation to its surroundings, then by emphasising the importance of ephemeral nature of events for the emergence of third-placeness. I define this further in the next section, where I look at how relationships created at a Death Café denote ‘the arrival and departure, or connection and disconnection, from the neo-tribal realities’ (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017:188).

#### **4.4.3 Separation from everyday life**

The last defining feature of Death Café space is its separation from everyday life in relation to social interactions. Vorobjovas-Pinta (2018b:71) remarked that much of the literature using neo-tribal theory focuses on people’s lived



experiences whilst in a temporary neo-tribal state (Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Hardy et al., 2013; Hughson, 1999; Kriwoken and Hardy, 2017), leaving the extent to which such time-bound experiences are embedded in member's daily lives unexplored. Using the case of an enclosed gay resort, Vorobjovas-Pinta sought to understand what constituted the legible boundaries of a neo-tribe; that is, when and where did a person enter or exit a spatially situated neo-tribal reality. Furthermore, he attempted to highlight a dichotomy between the world of the 'unreal' – the resort and its experiences and social connections – and visitors' 'real' day-to-day lives and lifestyles (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018b:72). It is important to say that this separation is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, but rather becomes an incentive to anticipate returning to and re-enacting a set of neo-tribal experiences once again (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018b:81). Separation from everyday life and the ephemerality of Death Café space offers more opportunities for retaining interest and novelty. Many regular Death Café attendees, such as Edie who goes to Riseholme Death Café, told me they return because the events are different each time:

All the groups create their own agenda, depending on what each individual is concerned with. Sometimes these focus on practical issues to do with death, some explore more philosophical questions and sometimes it's just an opportunity for people to express their grief in a supportive environment.

The following extract from one of the Borchester Death Café conversations shows that there exists a real-unreal binary of sorts in Death Café in the way attendees juxtapose the conversations they have in Death Cafés with their day-to-day life. Helena, a middle-aged woman with a white Maltese pup on her lap, made a passing comment that Death Cafés are not taking place 'in real life'. This comment was picked up by Ezekiel, a 69-year-old man who had stayed silent for the first half of the conversation but became exceptionally inquisitive towards the end of the evening: 'You said something very interesting there, Helena. You said that real life is very different from what we're doing here'.

Helena seemed to be caught off guard for a second, with her hand frozen on a coffee cup she had been reaching for, but she reclined back and began speaking as she laid her palm on her snoring pet:

Well, I suppose 'real life' is how you live your life, as in your day-to-day existence, whereas you choose to come here. I don't know anybody here, but I come and I can share experiences that mean something to me. I won't see you guys tomorrow or go for coffee or whatever, I won't see you probably ever again. Or I'll see you the next time I come here because that's the only time I interact with you.

Ezekiel pushed further: 'I actually think what we're doing here is more real. We're here to avoid the talk about music and food, we're talking about deeper things.'

Helena elaborated: 'Maybe 'real life' isn't the right way to say it. My *daily* life is different to how I experience this.'

Jennifer, Ezekiel's wife also offered insight that deepened the discussion: 'Because it's your outer life and your inner life... We are talking also about our inner lives aren't we?'

Helena replied: 'If I go out for a coffee tomorrow, I couldn't say "you know what I'm really feeling today?". People are just looking at you like you're crazy, but here you can say how you feel...'

Facilitator Doris agreed: 'If you talk about death outside this... People are saying: "Oh you're being negative".'

A flurry of synonyms was thrown out by several other people in enthusiastic agreement: 'Gloomy!', 'Morose!', 'Morbid!'. Helena concluded this thread of conversation:

I think we are not being at all gloomy and it always makes me feel inspired and I always feel like I've had a really good discussion. And I've learned so much more than I would from just rubbish conversations.

Helena distinguished Death Café from the daily rhythms of 'real' life first by framing it as an elective experience. Second, she addressed the fact that she was sharing her intimate feelings about death with people she had no knowledge of and probably wouldn't have any contact with otherwise; or even won't see in

the future. Finally, the group collectively acknowledged that in other contexts, bringing up the topic of death would not be well accepted.

Vorobjovas-Pinta (2018b) wrote that the gay resort space allows freedom to take on new, shared identities, where the present agency takes allows a ‘momentary escape from our personal histories’ (Vorobjovas-Pinta 2018b:78). In Death Café, this works slightly differently. The sequestered and ephemeral Death Café space allows attendees to bring their personal histories and escape momentarily both the complexities of their personal relationships and frivolities of conventions of everyday interactions and routines. At the same time, the participants also take on a shared identity that is connected to Death Café space - they collectively evoke the sentiment of ‘we need to talk about death more’ during the actual Death Café conversations. The Death Café neo-tribe is lamenting the lack of spaces and opportunities to discuss death in the way they are doing it, as they are doing it. This is the focus of Chapter 5.

That death needs to be talked about more was the main shared sentiment among Death Café attendees and organisers, reflecting the neo-tribal feature of the common desire to seek out others with shared interests, sensibilities, and passions (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018b:6). Fundamentally, gathering in a temporary space where one feels welcome to express their thoughts on a rarely spoken about subject, without any responsibility to other participants outside the boundaries of the event, is the catalyst for the Death Café neo-tribe to gather. Many Death Café organisers and attendees view Death Café as a destination to have conversations that don’t happen elsewhere. As organiser Emma said: ‘Your peers your family or work colleagues, whoever, don’t want to talk about it. You have to go somewhere’. Organiser Laura echoed this sentiment with her own experience:

Some people, even within my own family, for example, you dare not mention the topic, they just want to change the subject immediately they are so uncomfortable. I think those people who need it, they’re given an outlet for conversations that people can’t easily have in their circles.

The fact that many Death Café attendees feel like they would be ignored, ostracised, judged, or sneered at if they were to bring up their concerns about

death, dying and bereavement, or even mere interest in the subject in their 'real' life, bears interesting parallels with what Vorobjovas-Pinta (2018b) says about the authentic identity of gay resort patrons. He claims that when the patrons assert that the resort space allows them to be their true selves, they imagine leaving the resort as returning to their real lives, and deductively, their false selves. In this dialectic of real and imaginary spaces, the resort is an unreal construction that provides a sense of comfort and safety, while the real world is fraught with complexities of negotiating homosexual identity. Vorobjovas-Pinta uses an interesting turn of phrase to evoke the sense that the resort is a distant but nonetheless sustaining image of authenticity: 'a palliative memory' (2018b:8). A similar sentiment was articulated by Eleanor when I asked her about what she thought the impact of Death Cafés might be on people's lives:

I think the biggest impact is to be satisfied that they were able to be free for two hours to talk about something that is tricky outside, to have that easefulness, to have that permission, freedom to just come and be themselves for two hours. I don't think you can expect any more than that. And in fact, it might make some people feel a hell of a lot more uncomfortable about the fact they can't do that at home.

Once experienced, then, the easefulness of conversation at a Death Café could be considered a 'palliative memory'. A reminder of the possibility to feel honest when talking about death with strangers, which does not happen in daily life. After one of the Lochdubh Death Cafés, I asked the participants if they would ever go to another Death Café. A young woman said, 'If I ever saw another one, I would remember this one and think: "Aw, that was nice"'. Following Vorobjovas-Pinta I argue that the Death Café space, as a catalyst for enjoyable and valued experiences and also as a 'palliative memory' (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018b:8) of those experiences 'arguably comes to carry greater affective worth to guests than the interpersonal bonds it catalyses' (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018b:79). Interestingly, while I did not collect longitudinal data to confirm, this could also show that Death Café attendance has lasting effects on their thinking outside the affective event.

## 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the various meanings Death Café organisers and attendees hold about the value of Death Café space. The variety of ways 'space' is understood in Death Cafés - as a safe haven to explore a shared interest in

death, an escape from everyday routines, a way to destigmatise death conversations by bringing them within an earshot of other café patrons, a destination to learn about others - is united by the perception that 'space' actually *enables* Death Café conversations.

To make sense of this, I applied a neo-tribal perspective, also providing empirical support to Vorobjovas-Pinta's argument that space is more than just a characteristic of a neo-tribe; it is the fulcrum, currency of sorts, and linking value for the formation of neo-tribes (Vorobjova-Pinta, 2017:244). I found that there are three defining features of Death Café space. First, I addressed the physical aspect of it by showing how the Death Café group's concern about the 'safety' of the group and those around it is part of its definition of itself. Death Cafés take place in spaces that are either dedicated to the Death Cafe or take place in the presence of other venue patrons. Even though the main goal is to 'normalise' conversations about death, the significance participants place on the space they occupy in the presence, and especially absence of others is a bonding agent to the group.

Second, I argued that the ephemeral, or 'pop-up' nature of Death Café space is inextricable from the appeal of the Death Café for most of its proponents. And third, I showed how Death Café space is different from everyday life in relation to social interactions and how this illuminates how people enter and exit a spatially situated neo-tribal reality. Throughout the chapter, I also evidenced that Death Café groups also possess the three underlying features of a neo-tribe (symbols and rituals, shared sentiment, and fluidity in membership) and how they are all enabled by the connective thread of space.

In addition, this chapter sought to advance the analytical merit of Oldenburg's (1999) concept of third place. As a more fitting explanation of the desirable quality of Death Café interaction, I introduced the more dynamic notion of 'third-placeness' (Calderon, 2016). I argued that the Death Café group collectively evokes tangible and intangible symbols of third-place as a challenge to societal ideas about where and with who should conversations about death happen. The insights from this chapter on the implications of third-placeness could be similarly applied to the proliferating 'café' format initiatives that seek

to destigmatise sensitive conversational topics by providing a relaxed, friendly, unstructured atmosphere, e.g., Memory Café (Miesen, and Jones, 2004) or Menopause Café (Weiss, 2017).

Another goal of this chapter was to provide the reader with information about Death Café venues and their usual atmosphere so that unfolding interactions in the ensuing chapters could be visualised more vividly. Building on the importance of informality and conviviality as outlined in this chapter, I now turn to discuss how collective enjoyment of Death Café is achieved via particular behaviours and conversational strategies.

In context of Jacobsen's spectacular death, Death Café can be seen as a feature of one of features of this theoretical construct: 're-ritualisation of death'.

Jacobsen writes that:

the recent civic and commercial ingenuity when it comes to drawing attention to death through different forms of memorialization and ritualization and increasing awareness is quite breath-taking: 'death cafés', 'memorial walks', 'death awareness weeks', 'dining with death' events, supplying 'angel kits' for the bereaved, and so on (Jacobsen, 2019:29).

All of these new initiatives are taking place in public, so fundamentally, an inquiry into how the space is used and transformed is relevant and important. As another theoretical frame to look at Death Cafes I mentioned Walter's postmaterialist critique of Death Awareness movement and related activities. A café encounter is not an undoubtable symbol postmaterialist values, but I argue that the cultural significance of it as a middle-class pastime need not be forgotten in the context of analysis of Death Café and I will touch upon it later in the thesis.

## **Chapter 5. 'It's almost as good as going to a really good concert': exploring Death Café conversations as an enjoyable experience**

### **5.1. Introduction**

During our interview a few months after we met in Riseholme Death Café, Owen, an octogenarian photojournalist, recalled how his GP got up and hugged him after learning that his wife had died. To him, this gesture was 'beyond words, because words can only do so much'. Having recently learned how fond he was of Death Café conversations I was curious about the function and value of talking. I asked Owen: 'If words can only do so much then what can Death Cafés actually do?' Owen smiled and shared:

Because words are the way in, you see. I am going to a Death Café. I am talking about death. And then I find that other people are enjoying the conversation, getting something out of what I'm saying. People are warm and it's a very nice way to spend the evening. It's almost as good as going to a really good concert!

I was struck by how clearly Owen articulated what Death Café conversations meant to him. He enjoyed the ability to talk freely about death, but that came only second to the feeling of enjoying the activity together with other participants. This interaction with Owen was only one of many where people reported similar feelings of enjoyment of talking about death with others. This appreciation of the conviviality involved in the interaction provided an impetus to look at Death Café as an enjoyable communal experience.

This chapter is driven by ethnographic material from Death Café conversations that deepen an understanding of what kind of behaviours and interactions are valued at a Death Café, how they obstruct or contribute to the achievement of collective enjoyment, and how a Death Café group navigates any conflicts and disagreements. In this chapter, I argue that adopting Simmel's theory of the social form of sociability, in which concern with 'good form' triumphs over the immediate utility of interaction, combined with Maffesoli's notion of neo-tribal aesthetics can broaden academic understanding of why and how participants gain enjoyment from Death Café conversations. Furthermore, I will argue that

this theoretical lens allows me to hone in on the value and impact of Death Café as a form of social interaction.

After introducing the key analytical concept of sociability, I move to frame attempts to get along and to enjoy the conversation together as striving for 'good form' within the Death Café. Through ethnographic examples, I show that 'good form' is a collaborative achievement. Furthermore, I outline the co-existing multiple subjective, labile understandings of what 'good form' at a Death Café is, as held by organisers, facilitators, and attendees. These examples centre on ideals of facilitation, as well as group and individual behaviour. I then present the clearest instance of a conflict I have experienced at a Death Café, the source of which can be said to be the lack of effort to maintain sociability. Specifically, I will discuss how subjective understandings of appropriate perspectives from which Death Café attendees 'should' talk (personal, professional) affect the emergence of sociability. One of the conditions that Simmel deemed necessary for sociability to emerge - for the reality to be sufficiently sublimated and for personalities to engage with each other in abstracted forms, that way granting each other commonality (Anderson, 2015:114, citing Hage 2002:203) - is also important for the collective enjoyment of Death Café.

Following on from this conflict, I introduce a more successful approach to navigating any disagreements - talking about talking about death. As a discursive tool that attendees often evoke, reminding those present that even though there are surface disagreements everyone is there to talk about death (to 'break the taboo') serves as a common ground and allows attendees to relate anew. More so, I argue that there are instances when talking about talking about death transcends its role as common ground in conflict resolution and becomes a collectively enjoyable activity for the group.

To further the relevance of this argument, I move on to outline the synergies between Simmel's sociability and Maffesolian neo-tribal aesthetics, defined as a 'way of feeling in common' (Maffesoli, 1996:74) and 'recognising each other and ourselves' (Maffesoli, 1996:77). The common faculty of feeling and experiencing that binds neo-tribes together (i.e. the 'tribal aesthetic') is neither a natural nor



an individual creation, but rather a product of discursive mechanisms (Green, 2018:174). I argue that talking about talking about death, as a key discursive practice in *striving* for sociability, is where people ‘recognise each other’ most acutely as collectively participating in Death Café. Thereby, talking about talking about death becomes the key constituent of the neo-tribal aesthetics of the Death Café interaction.

I conclude the chapter by arguing that Death Café is not necessarily reconfiguring the death taboo because it encourages talking about death, but it is reconfiguring talking about death as a valuable pastime. This is important to the overall thesis because it shows that Death Café is a valued form of social interaction, grounding it in the enjoyment of the social, beyond the attempts to discover Death Café’s instrumental utility.

Engaging with the concept of sociability, or specifically, striving for sociability in a Death Café elucidates the vague aspects of Maffesoli’s aesthetics - feeling in common (Maffesoli, 1996:74). As such, this adds both to theoretical development of neo-tribal aesthetics and elucidates some of the activities within Death Café empirically.

## **5.2. Sociability: a key analytical concept**

In his original work on social forms, Simmel first characterised sociability as ‘association for its own sake’ (Simmel, 1949:254). It has also been defined, among other variations, as a ‘sociable gathering that serves no exterior purposes but is its own end’ (Pyyhtinen, 2018:96). The sociable gathering, in other words, is driven by an impulse to be with others for the sake of experiencing sociability itself. The only concern for this type of gathering is to succeed in evoking a sociable moment, which is further defined as a mutual guarantee of experiencing values pertinent to sociability, e.g., joy, relief, vivacity (Simmel, 1949:257). Simmel elaborates upon sociability as a democratic play-form of sociation which can occur only if the more serious purposes of the individual are kept out so that it becomes an interaction not of complete, but of symbolic and equal personalities (ibid); this is also how commonality to each other is granted (Hage, 2002:203). While engaging in sociability, people are not to focus on

content from external situations, such as making money, producing products, or training others; instead, they are to commit themselves solely to the experience of the association (Henricks, 2003:23). Social engagement itself becomes the focus of interaction: what is normally form, becomes content (Simmel, 1950a:40-41)

Simmel (1949:250) illustrates an emergence of the principles of sociability with a historical example of medieval knightly fraternities gradually losing their religious and practical ends but continuing as sociable gatherings with chivalrous interests and conducts at their core. 'Pure' sociability is an ideal type and taken in full as per Simmel's definition, is not a useful template for ethnographic inquiry (Anderson, 2015:113). Anthropologist Sally Anderson argued that 'sociability' appears to be an 'undertheorised, intuitive concept with Anglophone undertones of social morality, cocktail-party convention, and leisure, pleasure or posturing, depending upon one's point of view' (Anderson, 2015:13). She also found the voluntarism and joy of sociable situations to be overstated. Nevertheless, Simmel's sociability has experienced renewed anthropological and sociological interest in recent years (Amit, 2015; Phull et al., 2015; Gowricharn, 2017; Kaplan, 2018; Horgan et al., 2020; Murray and Willis, 2020) and in this chapter, I mainly draw from Anderson's explanation of the value of studying sociability for anthropologists and sociologists (2015) and her own ethnographic work (2021) on Danish pedagogical values in school classes.

First and foremost, Anderson (2015; 2021) made a fundamental distinction between sociality and sociability, which I also adopt. She argued that using *sociality* was best to be 'reserved for discussing intersubjectivity and social interaction as fundamental conditions of human beings in *all* social and societal domains' (Anderson, 2021:20). Following on, she argued that *sociability* should be used for discussing certain highly valued or value-laden forms of sociality. Anderson claimed that the goal of her paper on children behaviour in school classes (2021) was not to say that Danish classrooms have instances of pure sociability but to inquire as to how the ideals of sociable classroom behaviour, espoused on children by adults, come (or fail to) to be valued by children themselves as they enact them every day. Similarly, I also do not claim that

achieving sociability defines Death Café. What I attempt to do is to show that efforts to be sociable *matter* to those involved in a Death Café, but it is a fragile and uncertain process.

This framework is especially relevant for studying Death Café because it has often been described in academic literature as safe and informal (Adler, 2015) interaction, providing a ‘gentle and kind context’ (Miles and Corr, 2017:62), ‘open, unstructured, spontaneous, genuine and interdisciplinary dialogue’ (Hammer et al., 2019), or that the conversation ‘allows [attendees] to share knowledge and understand the world around them’ (Howorth, Thomson and Paes, 2018:8:A15-A16). While I obviously concur that the overall mood of Death Cafés is convivial, positive, and informal, there is simply not enough academic attention paid towards how these moods and atmospheres are achieved. Many of these definitions of Death Café exhibit an assumption that people *know* how to act at a Death Café and that all they need is an ‘opportunity’ (Baldwin, 2017:5) to talk ‘freely and honestly’ (Allen and Martin, 2019:A24).

I argue that people strive to achieve ‘good form’ at a Death Café with what they deem to be appropriate behaviours and attitudes. Good form is a ‘mutual self-definition, interaction of the elements, through which a unity is made’ (Simmel, 1949:255). Individuals hold varied understandings of what is an appropriate Death Café encounter and enact them in the meeting. These different ideas can clash, resulting in tensions, spoken or unspoken, co-exist in tolerance, or be a pleasant endeavour where the understandings of good form align. My main argument is that whatever shape they individually think ‘good form’ takes, upholding it matters to all participants to an extent, even if it is just for selfish reasons to enjoy the interaction themselves. Because different people hold different understandings, in a way good form is a ‘live’ concept that develops during each unique Death Café meeting where people ‘feel out’ each other’s understandings of good form and see what level of success can be achieved in that instance. From there, I clarify good form at a Death Café as a result of collective understandings of the appropriate means to strive for a maximally enjoyable and valued encounter. It follows that the understandings about ‘good form’ at a Death Café can be multiple and the success of the sociable moment depends on the synergy of these understandings among the particular sets of

people gathered. In the following pages, I will be looking at how Death Café organisers and attendees frame the ideals of a Death Café interaction. I will also explore how they enact those ideals, how they understand good form, and why it matters to them.

### **5.3. Ideals of facilitation; ideals of group behaviour**

Death Café is based on the premise that there is no pre-set agenda and the conversation is undirected and participant-led. Different Death Café facilitators hold varied and sometimes conflicting stances towards the degree of control allowable within the conversation and how it should be allowed to unfold serendipitously. By discussing these different approaches I will explore, following Anderson (2021:22):

The subjective notions of good form, how appropriateness may or may not matter, and which criteria people use in monitoring and assessing individual and collective performances as appropriateness of action, tone, manner, domain specificity, relational proximity and distance, engagement and commitment.

The majority of Death Café facilitators whom I interviewed had hosted several Death Cafés. Compared to the attendees, facilitators were much more invested in enacting these ideals or merely having a clear idea of the good form of Death Café, especially pertaining to the appropriate attitudes and behaviours of attendees. Usually, it is the Death Café organiser that takes up the role of facilitating the conversation. In the case of larger Death Cafés, some organisers choose to have co-facilitators or trust the group to self-facilitate. I will provide three examples to support my analytic intention: an instance where due to a lack of facilitators, a regular attendee was tasked with facilitating; an instance where the organiser Simon chose not to be present in conversations; and another instance where organiser Frida spoke about her development as a facilitator. I chose these from a range of examples because they are indicative of the variety of facilitator attitudes and ideals about who (and to what extent) should control of the dynamics of the conversation.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand what the Death Café facilitator role entails. The Death Café guide (Underwood, 2013a) states that the main role

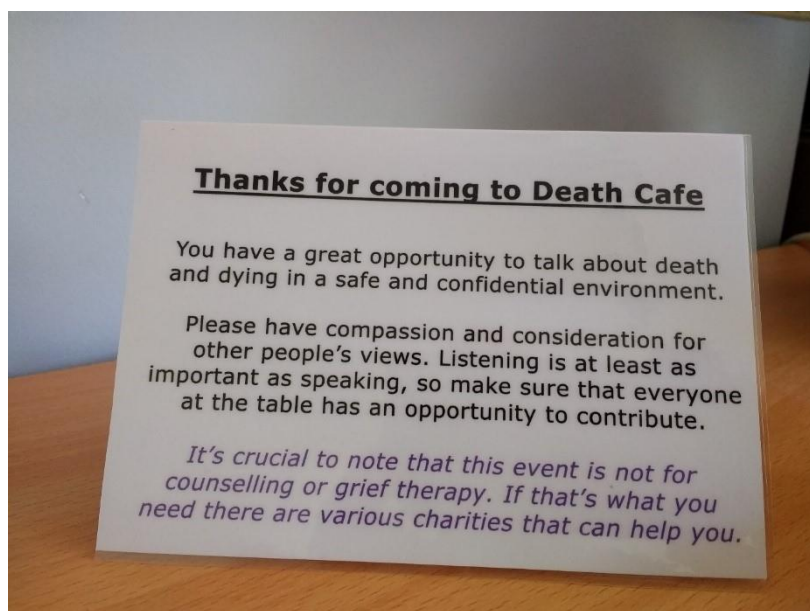
of the facilitator is 'making people feel safe to talk about death'. In order to achieve that, the facilitator has several responsibilities, such as:

Ensuring, during the discussion, that guidelines are respected, especially regarding tolerance for others' views; Bringing people into the discussion if you think they want to say something; Moving the discussion on if things get stuck; Managing any difficult situations (ibid).

Death Café does not ask that facilitators have a formal qualification in, or specific level of experience with, death and dying. However, all Death Café facilitators should 'be able to listen to and discuss all aspects of death and dying with equanimity, have good group facilitation skills and be able to handle any issues or problematic situations at or arising from the Death Café' (ibid).

Alongside the skills listed above, the main qualities desired of facilitators are 'enthusiasm for talking about death and dying, empathy, clear boundaries, flexibility and a friendly manner' (ibid). Overall, from these guidelines, it appears that the facilitator is tasked with monitoring the content of the conversations in terms of being vigilant when conflicting views on various topics arise. Also, they seem to be deemed responsible for remedying major disruptions in the flow of conversations and 'managing any difficult situations' which potentially gives them a significant amount of responsibility for attendee interactions and reactions.

The first organiser whose specific approach to facilitation I discuss is Simon. I talked to Simon before his first-ever Death Café event. He was planning not to participate in the group conversation and later I found out that he indeed spent the entire conversation sitting away from the group. Instead, Simon's presence as both organiser and facilitator took the form of a table card he created.



**Figure 4: Table card created by Death Café facilitator Simon (reproduced with author's permission)**

Simon told me in the interview that he hoped the card would be an impartial, impersonal tool to allow attendees to manage any unruly speakers - they could point at it, lift it, or read it out loud if any problems arose, reminding others of the rules in place. The card's opening statement - 'You have a great opportunity to talk about death' - and Simon's lack of physical presence in the conversations point to the fact that he perceives that the Death Café conversations should be self-facilitating. He told me that providing space, getting people in the room, and then giving a three-minute introduction laid the necessary foundation, and then it was down to the tables to 'bring to the event what they want to bring' and manage any disagreements among themselves. He further told me:

If somebody on the table is dominating, then actually maybe [the card] would give other people more confidence to say 'oh don't forget we've been told that we need to be more accepting' or that, you know, 'perhaps it would be nice to open it up to somebody else', so there's more of a group responsibility.

I regrettably did not ask in the interview whether his choice was because of his reluctance to be responsible for remedying any disagreements or his genuine thinking that this provides the most benefit for attendees. Nevertheless, Simon transferred the responsibility of self-management to the group in the guise of his understanding of good form at a Death Café. This sentiment was echoed by

several other organisers/facilitators, who believed that attendees should be responsible for their own reactions and that by participating in a Death Café a person should be able to be social. As Edith articulated: 'You have to trust that the people that come along can take care of themselves while taking part'. This especially pertains to people who are emotionally vulnerable and this will be discussed in Chapter 6. In the context of the argument I am presenting here, the view Simon, Edith and many others take is important because it speaks to sociability's morphological connotations of 'being capable of', 'able to' (Anderson, 2021:22) and in which contexts these abilities are valued. I explore this further in the next example.

The Camberwick Green Death Café I attended was the final event after an almost eight-year tradition. It was very well attended with almost 30 people present and the table I was sitting at ended up without a dedicated facilitator. Organiser Olivia assigned the role to Jasper, an elderly man who had been going to Death Cafés for 4-5 years and estimated he had attended 20-30 meetings. The other five people at our table, besides me and Jasper, were first-time attendees. Even though before his assignment Jasper had been boasting about his extensive Death Café experience, he was visibly flustered by the turn of events that left him in charge. Jasper took off his wristwatch and placed it on the table. Then, he allocated every person at the table 10 minutes to talk uninterrupted. If anyone was to stop with any time left on the clock, Jasper would encourage them to go on. This Death Café ended up being a life-story sharing event. Jasper diligently monitored questions from around the table. 'Be careful!' - He would exclaim if someone wanted to offer any advice at all. Due to this lack of agency to freely communicate with other participants, this was personally the least enjoyable Death Café and I was worried that other attendees around the table would be discouraged from attending other Death Cafés in the future. A young woman from my table indeed approached me after and asked if all Death Cafés were this regimented, but to my surprise, a young Irish man said that he would love to bring this type of event to his workplace. This shows just how varied understandings of what constitutes a good Death Café are, and that it is unclear to whom it matters that good form is maintained (Anderson, 2021:22). The young man seemed to be perfectly satisfied, while my

own feeling was that this was not a satisfactory Death Café because it defied my expectations of it being unguided.

The next morning, I interviewed Olivia and she said she had made a mistake allocating the facilitator role to Jasper. She told me she thought that it would keep him from dominating the conversation because he usually talks incessantly. Instead, he dominated the conversation in a different way. Providing attendees with equal opportunities to talk was important to Olivia and for her, as a facilitator, that involved monitoring and reining in more dominant personalities. By contrast, Betty from Weatherfield said that having dominant and intolerant personalities, whom she and her co-facilitators called ‘the shouters’, was inevitable:

People who raise a lot of noise are tolerated, because it’s society, and it’s a democratic society. People who want to dominate will seek out places where they can do that - they know that they will be tolerated because that is the ethos.

Here, Betty suggested that there are people who make use of a broad understanding that ‘good form’ at a Death Café means it is a tolerant, safe space, and thus seek it out to fulfil their conversational needs without attempting to contribute to that ‘good form’ themselves. A similar sentiment was expressed by Serena, a self-proclaimed ‘nice and polite’ person. So much so in fact, that at one of her early Borchester Death Cafés she allowed a person to bring in a ‘massive gong and perform a sound bath’ to the group for 10 minutes, during which she said she was ‘dying inside’. Her attitude was that in general, tolerating first-time attendees dominating the conversation is to be expected, because they don’t yet know how to act in a Death Café. However, she also had regular attendees who continued to dominate the conversation:

These are regulars, so you’d think they would know how to police themselves and know that everybody is hungry, everybody wants a bite of the cake and you got to make sure that there’s enough for everybody to go round. So I just remain shocked, I just can’t believe that there are these people that just don’t know when to shut up and let other people have a say.

Organiser Morag suggested that occasional exploitation of the Death Café good form is not always conscious:



This is the nature of being with human beings - some of them are less skilled at emotional intelligence. At listening, at saying 'this is my opinion', instead of saying 'this is true'.

This shows that the ability to be sociable is not automatic and needs work, not everyone is naturally gifted with these social cues, echoing Henricks's observation that sociability serves as a kind of training ground in social awareness (Henricks, 2003:23).

The last example is about Frida, who organises and singlehandedly facilitates Portwenn Death Cafés that are attended by a solid core group of regulars. When I interviewed her after a Death Café that had a total of four people present - Frida, me, one regular, and an unexpected newcomer looking for specific information - we discussed the evolution of her style of facilitation and feelings of responsibility towards attendees. Frida told me:

I think in the beginning I carried a whole box of books, handouts, box of stuff, and a blackboard, and now it is just what I got in my head. It's not as efficient now in one way, as it would have been at the beginning because [*referring to the new person who came asking questions*] I would have gone 'there's this book here and if you look in the foreword of this book you will find details on that'. Now I'm just going 'no, they can find it out themselves', I don't have to do it for everybody. I no longer need to live up to their expectations of what I might have. There's an ease around it now.

Over the years, Frida had emancipated herself from feeling pressure to conform to a certain image of a Death Café facilitator. This concerns less her style of facilitation but more her perceived responsibility as a facilitator. Her role evolved from being a source of information, to simply being there to welcome newcomers. More importantly, this is about establishing the way Frida wants to engage with her own Death Cafés - as a person with her own experiences, thoughts, and resources she might have accumulated and might want to share. Other facilitators also have concerns about the distance between the role of the facilitator and the person they are behind it. For example, Emma said that from the very beginning of hosting Death Cafés as part of her job at a charity, she was wary of disclosing personal information about herself in the same way that attendees did. She told me that in one event, a natural opportunity' arose for

her to talk about the experience of cleaning out her mother's closet after her death. Emma told me it 'really stimulated the conversation' even though she felt slightly uncomfortable about sharing personal experiences.

These three examples show that Death Café facilitators are concerned about how best to facilitate. 'Getting it right' (Anderson, 2021:22) matters to facilitators not only as a matter of upholding the requirements from the Death Café guide but is also a reflection of their personal attitudes and understandings of the role and what their responsibility is towards and in relation to the attendees. Facilitators have multiple understandings about the appropriate behaviour of Death Café attendees, and how the conversation should look. Is it sociable enough? Is it too shallow, too deep, too offensive, too quiet, too loud? What topics are 'right' for Death Café conversation? For example, Frida thought that philosophical musings about the afterlife were 'mind-wank', and people were wasting time on these topics instead of focusing on practical issues at the end-of-life. On the contrary, organiser Victoria told me she always enjoyed it when her Death Café group began contemplating the fate of the human soul after death. Many facilitators are not concerned with personally enjoying the conversation topics and see their role primarily as 'holding space', as discussed in Chapter 4, something akin to a 'community service' like Serena articulated. Many also say that they don't direct the conversation too much or at all and see their role primarily as 'safeguarding': supervising the uncharted waters of what is for many people the first time talking about death out loud, and looking out for instances of discomfort or offense.

The cornerstone of achieving sociability - 'good form' - in Death Café has multiple meanings for attendees and facilitators. This section was concerned with Death Café facilitator views. However, many of the Death Café interactions unfold without any facilitator involvement. The lack of facilitator involvement in the conflict I detail in the next section is secondary to the point I will make there, but it is worth noting that many of these ideals of how a Death Café should run are labile and fragile.

## 5.4. Conflict

Conflicts are not a common occurrence at Death Cafés. For example, Victoria, who had been running her Death Café for three and a half years at the time of our interview and had also visited several other Death Cafés, said that she always found it:

Amazing that there aren't more problems really, people are so respectful, and they really do seem to get the rules and the rules are very simple, you know, confidentiality, respecting other people's spiritual beliefs and just listening to people. And people seem to abide by them generally and that's quite remarkable really, because it could be a very contentious space especially when beliefs are coming up. I'm always surprised that there's never any problems.

Out of the 14 Death Café conversations I recorded, only a few had instances of tension or disagreement that resembled a conflict. This seems to confirm the image of Death Café as an exceptionally untroubled and pleasant social interaction, with only a vague inkling that conflicts might happen when religious and spiritual beliefs come up, as Victoria mentioned. Here I will present the clearest instance of conflict I encountered during my fieldwork. This example shows that one origin of conflict at a Death Café can indeed be connected to the lack of effort to maintain sociability. Specifically, this concerns fulfilling the requirement that the 'actual life and selves of attendees appear in properly reduced forms and [ ...] personalities engage with each other in abstracted forms, that way granting each other commonality (Anderson, 2015:114, citing Hage, 2002:203). In this section, I will also show how subjective understandings of good form also extend to understandings of appropriate perspectives from which Death Café attendees 'should' talk. This section will show how important willingness and openness to engage with others is for the success of Death Café as a sociable encounter.

Akenfield Death Café takes place in a small café that opens exclusively for the group in the evenings. There is only one row of small round glass tables with two wicker chairs for each table. The organiser and facilitator, Millie, usually begins the Death Café as one big group conversation and then sees if it splits naturally. Millie prefers her Death Cafés to be religion and politics-free so that people won't get into arguments. She wants to avoid any negativity that could turn into

people 'thinking it is impossible to have a conversation about death and enjoy yourself'.

There were several clashes at this particular Akenfield Death Café event. The conversation began with a discussion about how important and enlightening the (then) new Louis Theroux documentary (Fellows, 2018) about end-of-life choices was. In the documentary, Theroux interviewed several people that chose to end their lives at home, having purchased legally dubious 'euthanasia kits'. Referring to the fact that decisions like this are a legal grey area, the group agreed that whatever happens when the time comes to notify authorities about a death at home can have a significant impact on the bereaved families. Sixty-year-old Fay then told the group about how uncomfortable she felt when, after her father died at home from cancer, police showed up and turned the poignant Sunday morning into a 'Mr. Bean sketch' by questioning her and searching the body. Thirty-nine-year-old Phoebe, sat at the other end of the room, interjected with a polite but non-negotiable:

Can I say something about it? Because I'm a police officer, I can explain a little bit about what the process is if it helps.

She then concisely did just that, but Fay kept insisting that the police had to get involved only because the GP was not available on Sunday to certify the death. Phoebe relented slightly, saying that the procedures could have been different before she joined the force. After Fay's impassioned: 'It was only six months ago!', Phoebe simply said: 'We don't certify death'. There was a general increase in the volume of the conversation as the whole group became involved in it and I could not make out the details. Fifty-six-year-old Cecilia interjected loudly:

If people want to die at home and they don't want to have the police coming round it's going to mean that people are going to say 'well, I'm not going to die at home'.

Phoebe then very calmly explained:

The thing is... it needs to build the relationship with us because there's nothing wrong with us coming to your house.

Fay's experience was that police procedures were, as she said, 'grotesque' and that they affected her negatively, while Phoebe took it upon herself to clear up the legal processes for the group, speaking as a representative of her profession. There was tension as these two perspectives seemed to compete for the status of truth. As Simmel wrote, 'while sociable interaction centres upon persons, it can occur only if the more serious purposes of the individual are kept out, so that it is an interaction not of complete, but of symbolic and equal personalities' (Simmel, 1949:254). This raises an important point about how sociability could be achieved at Death Cafés. This is not to say that discussing serious subjects, such as legal matters after death, is inherently a threat to sociability. Rather, this concerns the extent to which discussing such issues have stakes in people's lives beyond the sociable situation; what Simmel calls 'external content'. This external content is anything that is not immediately concerned with the success of the present moment, such as professional motives, strivings for profit, or attempting to convince someone about something. Henriksson (2014) argues that the inclusion of individual strivings in a sociable situation becomes a worry for everyone involved. Fay's entrenched negative attitudes towards institutional power became evident even more during our interview, where she spoke mostly about her husband's and friends' bad experiences with the NHS. At the same time, it could be said that Phoebe's individual striving was to clarify the situation from a professional point of view to avoid what she thought was unfounded criticism of police procedures.

An interesting example of how external content can affect a Death Café can be seen in Hammer et al.'s (2019) suggestion to have hospital-based Death Cafés for healthcare professionals only, separate from what they term 'open-community' (2019:1) Death Cafés. They argued that talking about their professional frustrations potentially in the presence of patients, or future patients would be detrimental to the image of healthcare professionals in the community. In sociability, the reality is in a condensed and sublimated form and every person is engaging with each other's abstracted forms. As Hammer and colleagues (2019) tangentially touched on, it could not be achieved where there exists a concern that what is said could affect the external situation and where participants are not acting as if equal. In this case, the healthcare professionals need to maintain a certain distance, status, and authority.

In several instances in my fieldwork, I came across people feeling apprehensive about sharing their stories at a Death Café if there were deathcare professionals or volunteers present. As we were going around introducing ourselves in Tannochbrae Death Café, one person said that they didn't feel comfortable talking about themselves because there were several people present who 'had done courses', referring to death doula and bereavement support training. This person explained to me later that they felt those people spoke not from an individual perspective, but as representatives of a profession. It is interesting to note that the person made this judgement after everyone's introductory sentences, thus with little actual context where anyone could have spoken as a 'representative'. This suggests that introductory statements are extremely important at a Death Café as one is presenting to the group a very small fragment of their personality and it can affect the mood of the whole group. The Akenfield Death Café did not have an introductory circle, thus Phoebe's introduction to the group was that she was a police officer who could explain the process Fay was criticising to the group.

Going back to the Akenfield Death Café conversation, after a very sympathetic prolonged 'noooo' from the whole group, affirming that indeed, there was nothing wrong with the police coming to your house, Cecilia continued:

But if you have planned your... good death and what you want to happen, although you're doing your job [*gesturing towards Phoebe*] and you're not doing any harm, I might not want that, so therefore I'm going to have to think 'well, I have to make sure that I don't die at home'.

Fay then invoked instances of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) at home and said the police treat the mothers of deceased infants 'like it's a crime scene', to which Phoebe responded by providing a real-life example about when a family *had* harmed one of their five seemingly well looked after children. Soon after this, the conversation was elegantly moved in a different direction by a young man asking to know more about dying from cancer. At that point, the tension had subsided, and people continued sharing their own experiences of how people they knew died. Eventually, another middle-aged woman, Beth, told the group a story of 'a friend of a friend' who had consulted an energy healer

before a routine surgery. The healer had allegedly warned the woman that she had multiple tumours and suggested her doctors should be careful. Then Beth revealed that this was exactly how this friend of a friend had died - 'they accidentally burst the tumour'. The reaction to this story was reserved, with some muttering 'I don't know about that' under their breath. Cecilia, however, enthusiastically picked up on that:

There's a mystery to life as well as there is fact! There's a guy who had stage three colon cancer and he completely cured himself through diet and lifestyle change, so I think it is important to be open and not shut the door to alternatives.

After refraining from participating in the conversation for a while, Phoebe was not able to hold herself back:

I'm sorry to throw my opinions around, but I've had cancer twice and I almost find it offensive - not anyone here - but when people say, 'have you tried eating this?', 'have you tried that?'. And you're like, 'I haven't got cancer because I've not eaten the right type of potatoes, I've got it because I've got a cell mutation that is attacking my body.

Cecilia responded:

I think everybody's individual and if it's a cell mutation or if it's something... I think we all just need to look at our individual... some people cure of it in one way. And it seems that people know what's best for everyone else, so many opinions.

When the discussion shifted from sharing personal experiences of death to detached accounts of 'a friend of a friend' and an unidentified 'guy' being miraculously healed from cancer, it also shifted from being centred on the lived experiences of people in the room, which had warranted a certain level of tolerance and patience, to opinions and hearsays that then became available to quickly contest. Phoebe prefaced her protest by saying 'I'm sorry to throw my opinions around', but her opinion was informed by her own experience of cancer, just as Fay's was informed by her unpleasant first-hand experience with the police. Phoebe assumed various roles in this Death Café conversation - as a representative of the police force with her professional knowledge, and as a cancer survivor, responding to claims that she found tiresome in her daily life.

Cecilia responded with an already familiar emphasis on everyone's unique situation. The conversation continued in agreement that every single individual has the right to choose how to treat their own body.

This is where the understanding of Death Café as 'just a chat' becomes problematic. For many attendees, it is a new, unusual type of social engagement and as such, there is no blueprint of how best to act. In Akenfield Death Café, stating that one's views only pertain to them seemed to momentarily cool the disagreements, but they would continuously resurface. Ultimately, agreeing to disagree, what I argue could be seen as a 'prototypical referent of good form' (Anderson, 2015:116) did not appear to work in this Death Café event. Being reminded about the uniqueness of everyone's situation in life at first glance would seem to allow a co-existence of heterogenous views and an ability to move on from conflict. However, because participants' right to their own understanding was constantly reaffirmed, the individuals remained firmly planted in their own beliefs, their own situations and did not act as if associated (Anderson, 2015:15) anymore, which marked the end of sociability. In Simellian terms, sociability dissipated because the conversation began addressing their multi-layered identities as victims of bureaucracy, civil servants, vulnerable bodies, and medical subjects.

It might seem from a first glance that adopting a personal perspective is the way forward for maintaining good form at a Death Café. As Tina said, stopping people from talking about someone else's experience was the main intervention that she had to make in her Death Cafés:

Someone will start talking and say 'yeah my neighbour's friend, she never told somebody that she wanted to be creative, but I knew she did. And then they buried her. And they really shouldn't have done that'. And then you kind of shift that and say 'yeah that must be really difficult. Have *you* left a clear message?'

However, talking from a personal perspective is not a blueprint for guaranteeing a sociable encounter. For example, Marina found that when sharing her deeply spiritual experiences of people dying, she would constantly reiterate that it was only 'her truth' and she was not trying to convince anybody, but some people would nevertheless react very strongly, in what she called an 'angry and



provocative' way. Thus, again we see another form of knowledge being considered inappropriate. These examples show that Death Café is an indeterminate space where what is widely understood as 'just a conversation' is subject to what essentially is an improvisation, 'a process of testing and sending out feelers to see what might catch hold, be picked up, or be played with' (Yared and Davis, 2014). This improvisation is not without friction, as the group constantly negotiates their personal and collective understandings about what a Death Café interaction should look like, what are the appropriate perspectives from which to speak, and which parts of one's personality to bring to the table.

I will now discuss a more successful strategy for managing disagreements and divergent points of view, highlighting that achieving 'good form' in a Death Café depends not on agreeing on topics, nor 'agreeing to disagree', but on collectively recognising that all participants are engaging in a Death Café conversation.

## **5.5. Talking about talking about Death**

One of the first observations I made during fieldwork that was confirmed time and time again was that people at a Death Café will probably talk about the value of being at a Death Café. It was especially prevalent during the end of meeting reflections, where attendees often highlighted how much they appreciated the opportunity to talk about death without judgement and in a casual environment. Attendees talked about talking about death throughout the event as well. Many times, they were not exchanging specific advice or sharing information but mused about the fact that there is no death talk 'in our society' and how helpful it is to talk about death.

Talking about talking about death, as something people do at Death Cafés has been noted in two master's dissertations: Karrel's (2018) on Death Cafés in Canada and Heald's (2020) on Death Cafés in South Africa. In both dissertations, however, as a conversation theme, talking about talking about death had a negative connotation and was framed as a strategy of avoidance that was inconsistent with the goal of Death Café to talk about death. As Karrel (2018:49) wrote:

If the problem is that we do not talk about death [...] then it seems strange that the discussions that happen at Death Cafés often still dance around the actual issue of dying. Instead of addressing death itself, attendees talk about the need to talk about death.

Karrel made a compelling observation here. In the very next sentence, however, she claimed that ‘the actual experience of dying and the nature of any possible afterlife are fundamentally unknown and unknowable’ (2018:49) and that this was why people resorted to approaching death itself ‘tangentially’ (ibid), focusing on practical issues and situations like having a will and talking with their family about end-of-life and funeral issues (ibid). This argumentation is confusing - Karrel first claimed that talking about death itself - the ultimate unknown - was fundamentally not possible, but then criticised the fact that people did not talk about that. Moreover, understanding ‘practical, imaginable’ issues merely as second best when it comes to discussions about death undermines the importance these conversations might have on people’s end-of-life trajectories.

One of the South African Death Café hosts whom Heald (2020) interviewed, ‘dismissively’ (p.61) defined talking about talking about death as concerning metaphysical enquiries, talking about things beyond death; he also said that this had the potential to result in arguments (ibid). Heald wrote that this host:

Had insisted that talking about talking about death was not breaking a taboo, nor did it fit into his goal of creating a community of intimate exchange. As he said, ‘it’s fine to disagree... [but] it’s completely unreasonable to know the unknowable and argue about belief’ (Heald, 2020:61).

While not central to either Karrel’s or Heald’s dissertation arguments, these observations show an assumption that there are limits to the utility of talking about certain aspects of death - especially the unknowable afterlife - and more importantly, that some conversations hold more value than others, with multiple understandings of ‘talking about talking about death’ being relegated to ‘second best’. Contrary to this, I will show that talking about talking about death is not an unsatisfactory inferior topic for conversation, nor does it happen due to inability to talk directly about death, but instead is an important tool that a

Death Café group employs to strive towards a good form of interaction, maintaining conviviality and commonality.

I will provide examples of the main uses of talking about talking about death at a Death Café. First, it allows to situate Death Café conversations against the ways death and grief are dealt with in the outside world, in Death Café attendees' daily lives. In the following passage from Brigadoon Death Café, rendering the otherwise concealed grief visible at a Death Café is considered as an impetus to gather:

You're looking around you and we've all got this secret wound. This massive thing that we've all got in common, and it's totally unspoken. What's amazing about sitting with strangers and talking about death is that we're allowed to talk about this huge thing. It's like when you're driving on your way to a funeral and it's a lovely sunny day, and you still see people walking along the road, having a laugh and you're kind of like: 'WHAAAAAT? you guys, come on!'. It's like: 'Stop all the clocks, everything should stop right now, everyone should know that this is a huge thing!', but nobody does.

This short extract is not talking about death directly or addressing a precise issue or specific experience; it addresses the value of talking about death and how participation in Death Café binds attendees - they are all intentionally carving out time in their schedules to engage in the conversation, often without expecting specific outcomes.

Second, talking about talking about death, as a self-referential conversation, helps position the Death Café in relation to other settings and other forms of engagement with death, and again, builds solidarity among attendees. At the end of Borchester Death Café, the three conversation groups came together in one circle to reflect on the night's experience. Regular attendee, forty-eight-year-old, Mina said that she was impressed as always with the honesty and the depth with which people were able to talk about things that they couldn't normally talk about. Seventy-six-year-old Beatrice then challenged Mina gently from the other side of the room by asking if she didn't think that Death Cafés were self-selective and the sort of people who would come here were likely to be the people that had an honest nature and already wanted to talk about death. Mina agreed and Beatrice continued by saying that she had been

attending a weekly bereavement group and their reaction to the idea of Death Café was always cold and judgemental. Thus, it seemed that Beatrice sought out Death Café not merely because the topic was death, after all they talked about similar things in the bereavement group, but as an interaction that was specific in its form - open-ended and honest. I am not claiming that this type of self-referential conversation does not appear elsewhere, but I am arguing that it is a frequent occurrence at a Death Café, where reflecting on their reasons for attending is instrumental in allowing the attendees to build trust and feel enjoyment, which contributes to solidifying it as a form of sociable social interaction.

Thirdly, taking a more dynamic and significant role in the conversation, talking about (the value of) talking about death offers a common ground for solving conflicts and maintaining good form of sociability when attendees have differing views. To illustrate this, I recall the Borchester Death Café conversation I participated in. It circled mainly on a meditative, joint exploration of beliefs about the human soul in Eastern and Western philosophies. I had noticed Ezekiel, who I have already introduced in Chapter 4, had been silent for the first half of the conversation, shuffling in his seat and picking at the leftover crumbs on his dessert plate. The first time he spoke was after Sally shared with the group that she kept seeing signs of her deceased father's presence - what she called 'synchronicities'. Ezekiel politely but firmly called it 'coincidences'. Some people agreed, others were not convinced, but the topic was not changed. After a few minutes he brought to the group what he deemed a 'mischievous' question - does death itself matter? He prefaced the question by saying that death and the grief it causes to those who survive was a major concern and that was partly why talking and planning beforehand was so necessary. But he said that he didn't personally think that missing out on the next sunrise matters. Helena, who had just finished passionately discussing the continuity of the soul, interjected: 'But you might not though, you might be somewhere else where you'll see a better one!'. Ezekiel responded with laughter: 'I might, but I might not!'.

In this instance, Ezekiel, seemingly bored of the conversation topics, gently turned down Helena's suggestions of an afterlife and attempted to shift the

focus by raising a broader question about whether talking about death was ultimately helping those facing death or those facing bereavement. After a short silence, Helena agreed that it was quite important to consider who do deaths matter to, how it affects different individuals, and what we can do about it. Then, she asked Ezekiel if he really believed that death was the end and after his affirmative answer, proceeded to talk at length that she simply could not feel the same. Ezekiel's attempt to change the topic by introducing a question about the value of talking about and planning for death was unsuccessful this time because Helena kept bringing up her own questioning of the finality of death. However, in many other Death Cafés, it has shown to be quite a successful strategy of evoking more generalised responses, instead of focusing on the specific details of beliefs or themes, uniting a disagreeing group again in acknowledgment that they are engaging in this activity together and they all see value in it. In any case, this was a calmer encounter than in Akenfield, because, even if for a short while, it brought the group together to consider the activity they were engaged in as a collective, instead of remaining in their own firm positions and debating content external to Death Café.

The following excerpt from Riseholme Death Café illustrates the recurrent awareness of collectively engaging in Death Café conversation. It provides a window into the rhythms of the conversation, the moments of appreciation of the opportunity to talk. Riseholme group talked about the value of talking about death twice during the two-hour meeting- for the first five minutes and the last fifteen minutes. We started the conversation by taking turns explaining what brought us to this Death Café. When it came to Albert's turn, the retired academic took a moment and a breath before he started speaking:

I don't quite know what got me here when it first started, but once I've been coming here, everything makes so much sense.

This prompted Edie, a retired practising Buddhist to dig deeper: 'And when you say it "makes sense" - what makes sense?'. Albert continued:

Well, it might be a coincidence, but when I first started coming, people in my life started dying. I lost four friends last year, so it was useful to have a space to make sense.

Forty-six year old Alice jumped in enthusiastically:

I was just going to say I think we feel that normally in everyday life we can't just talk about it as a 'talk about it' type of subject. And I think that what's quite important here - it is not a bereavement counselling type of thing, but just the opportunity to be able to talk generally about it. Whereas unfortunately as a society we just feel very guarded about talking about it on a general day-to-day kind of level.

Edie agreed:

I think that's the thing for me, I just want to normalise it, to be able to talk about death without the sort of [*she gasped dramatically and heightened the tone of her voice*] CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS! It's going to happen, so I want to be able to accept it.

Albert then asked Edie whether she found that talking about death had improved her life and she said that hearing other people's views on their own death and afterlife helped her develop her own Buddhist views. Already in the first five minutes, the group had begun to discuss the utility of talking about death and how talking has been shaping their views. While this came about by Albert referencing his close encounters with death and reflecting on how Death Café helped make sense of that, the talk quickly turned to a general inability to talk about death in other settings. As a sidenote, while I do not have specific data to prove it, the collective engagement in meaning-making about the role of death and dying I just presented in this example, could also potentially be considered a form of lasting impact of Death Café.

In the last fifteen minutes of the conversation, it circled back to evaluating the Death Café activity, with Edie actually bringing up the same point about Death Café being an opportunity to hear what other people think. Albert then agreed that he never has conversations of this nature and Alice contributed by saying that Death Cafés give the opportunity to sit down and explore these questions openly and have many varied conversations that would not happen otherwise. She lamented that the topic of death could not be brought up elsewhere. This was essentially the same exchange as at the start of the evening. Owen then raised a hypothetical situation of what would happen if someone threw out a nonchalant 'oh, what do you think about death?' to a person sitting next to him on the train. The group roared with laughter and Alice imagined that one would get a surprised and probably even disgusted response, such as 'well that's a bit

morbid, isn't it?!'. The whole group succumbed to laughter again at her enactment.

Owen turned the conversation back to the Death Café by saying: 'We are making a forum here' and then pointing to organiser Edith, who had joined our table for a while: 'You, Edith, are making this forum'. Edith laughed saying that it was not just her, that Death Café was an international movement. John interjected commenting that the emergence of Death Café seemed very timely 'considering that the world's in trouble in all kinds of bad trouble'. Then John attempted to explain that because of the informational highway we have more information at our fingertips and hence more anxiety because we are more aware of all the problems in the world. He then wondered whether Death Café was 'a symptom of that anxiety... or a tonic to it'.

This amount of time spent marvelling and pondering about the need for Death Café and the value of talking at a Death Café is not unusual. While such neat circularity does not manifest in every Death Café conversation, in all the Death Café conversations I observed, it was extremely rare for participants not to talk at all about the value of Death Café and of talking about death. While Death Café attendees have preferred topics of conversation, contrary to Karrel (2018) and Heald's (2020) notes on talking about talking about death, it is not an inferior topic of conversation - it is an active exercise in maintaining good form. By having the power to cool disagreements, giving space to a plurality of views, while nevertheless agreeing that they are all collectively engaged in an activity they deem important and enjoyable, talking about talking about death is an important tool for maintaining sociability at the Death Café.

In this section, I have introduced three uses of talking about talking about death in a Death Café. I have established that it is used to highlight the difference between how death, grief, and bereavement are addressed in people's daily lives versus in Death Café. It is also used to differentiate Death Café from other death-related initiatives, such as bereavement groups. I have also shown how talking about talking about death is an important tool for maintaining sociability and cooling disagreements by reminding attendees that they are all here for essentially the same reason - to talk about death. In the next section, I will

continue to argue that talking about talking about death is an enjoyable part of the conversation in its own right. Furthermore, I argue that talking about talking about death transcends its role as a common ground and a tool for conflict resolution. As a collaborative and enjoyable effort, talking about talking about death is the key constituent of the ‘aesthetics’ of the Death Café interaction, which I will turn to introduce now.

### **5.5.1. Aesthetic bond**

While I made extensive use of many features of Simmel’s social form of sociability in this chapter, when I come to talk about aesthetics, I have chosen not to draw fully from his work, even though it is very much grounded in the theory of aesthetics (Davis, 1975; Frisby, 1991; de la Fuente, 2008). de la Fuente’s (2008:354) observation that ‘the “social forms of art” seem to be as important to Simmel as the “art of social forms”’<sup>9</sup> shows that Simmel’s understanding of aesthetics primarily concerned the sensation of beauty and stylisation of social life, and one of the main trajectories in his theory of aesthetics was to show a potential synthesis between art and sociability as ‘autonomous forms’. Autonomy here means not depending on external content. With regards to sociability, as already discussed in this chapter, it is considered autonomous because a communal ‘being together’ supersedes the specific reason for getting together in the first place (Simmel, 1950a, in de la Fuente, 2008:348); in regard to art, artists transform practical needs and the materiality of objects (for example painting a wall for practical purposes) into forms that are purely for the purpose of art and are evaluated from a viewpoint of art.

This signals that embracing Simmel’s complex theoretical approach for Death Café would only be possible by way of farfetched analogies. Of course, this is not impossible, as human geographer Danny McNally (2015) managed to successfully integrate Simmel’s idea about aesthetics in his work on the type of encounters created by participatory art projects. However, in my research, it is the simple argument ‘Death Café is not art’ that urges me to distance my analysis from the full extent of Simmel’s sociology of aesthetics. Nevertheless, de la Fuente’s (2008) helpful distinction between three distinct frames in what

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<sup>9</sup> Quotation marks in the original.



he calls the 'sociology-aesthetics nexus' (de la Fuente, 2008:344) in Simmel's thought, allows me to retain Simmel's approach to aesthetics that is most relevant to my argument. These frames are:

firstly, situations where Simmel locates aesthetic principles of ordering within the social form; secondly, instances where Simmel locates principles of social ordering within art and aesthetic forms, and, thirdly, circumstances where Simmel sees the mutual dependence of aesthetic and social factors transcending mere analogy (de la Fuente, 2008:345).

In this chapter, I made use of the first frame, locating aspects of sociability in the Death Café encounter. And while this paragraph showed my hesitance to fully apply Simmel's use of aesthetics to Death Café, de la Fuente (2007) has provided another way to move forward with my claim that introducing the concept of aesthetics enhances an understanding of Death Café - his valuable synthesis of Simmel and Maffesoli's ideas.

As outlined in Chapter 3, Simmel was one of the inspirations for Maffesoli as he came to formulate his neo-tribal theory of post-modern sociality, where the aesthetic - 'the taste, the admiration, which is held in common and which cements the collectivity' (Maffesoli, 1991:16) - is a distinctive form of social bonding. As with Simmel's social form of sociability, where 'the attraction of doing things together becomes the principle of individual compliance' (de la Fuente, 2007:106), Maffesoli claims that experiencing something together is 'a vector of aggregation' (Maffesoli, 1996:76). This pleasure can be short-lived and again, congruent with Simmel's sociability where 'the collectivity only lasts as long as each participant is receiving their share of aesthetic enjoyment' (de la Fuente, 2007:106). de la Fuente then makes a further crucial link between Simmel and Maffesoli, saying that despite its fragility, the aesthetic bond is the form of integration that is most distinctly social (de la Fuente, 2007:102, cf. Maffesoli, 1991:8). This unites Simmel's sociability, the pure form of sociation, which as it ceases to serve external purposes, acquires the character of aesthetic autonomy (ibid), with Maffesoli's origin of aesthetics as a social bond as 'social existence ... returned to itself, people bonding together for no other reason than to 'bathe in the affectual ambience' (de la Fuente, 2007:02, cf. Maffesoli, 1991:11).

The reason people come to Death Cafés is to talk about death, not to engage in something purely social, but the conversations in which talking about talking about death dominates the encounter, go beyond the purpose of instrumental utility and engenders significant feelings of commonality between attendees, which they enjoy talking about. While people involved in Death Café claim that it is open for everyone, they are still very much basking in the knowledge that those present are engaging in something special and valuable, are breaking a taboo, or establishing a new space or forum for having conversations about death. Maffesoli also thought of aesthetics as ‘a means of recognising ourselves’ (Maffesoli, 1996:77). Group members recognise each other through shared aesthetics, and it goes beyond what Maffesoli at first outlined in a more visual sense: ‘the hodgepodge of clothing, multi-hued hairstyles, and other punk manifestations’ (ibid) which he states ‘act as a glue’, while ‘theatricality founds and reconfirms the community’ (ibid). As mentioned above, Maffesoli’s neo-tribal aesthetics is a way of *feeling* in common.

One of the pillars on which the value of Death Café’s good form stands is the indeterminate space to collectively explore thoughts, experiences, lessons learned from talking or not talking, but all achieved through the act of talking. It is created collaboratively, patiently, in a setting where reality is sufficiently sublimated, and the group members engage with the unwritten rules, and ‘getting it right’ matters to those involved. When people are invested in upholding good form, the Death Café conversation becomes most enjoyable for the maximum number of people involved. Attempts at good form are usually fragmented in Death Café as individual understandings of good form differ, as shown throughout the chapter. In this view, the common faculty of feeling and experiencing that binds neo-tribes (the ‘aesthetic’) is neither a natural nor an individual creation, but ordered by discursive mechanisms (Green, 2018:174). Talking about talking about death, which is the key discursive mechanism for striving for sociability, is also where people ‘recognise each other’ most acutely as being a part of Death Café.

In both Simmel’s and Maffesoli’s definitions of the aesthetic bond, there are moments of ‘supra-individuality’, where subjective tastes are combined with and subsumed in the collective sentiment. Simmel defined that as ‘a feeling of

satisfaction in the very fact that one is associated with others, and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others' (Simmel, 1971:128). de la Fuente noted that there is no external mechanism governing such relationships, and indeed in Death Café, good form matters not for any specific external purpose, but because people *make it* matter by having and upholding ideas on how a Death Café interaction should be. People at the Death Café comply voluntarily with this aesthetic situation, they agree on what good form is and collaborate, and the reward is that they encounter something bigger than the self (de la Fuente, 2007:107), a moment of supra-individuality, which cements the group. They are engaging in death talk as they haven't had the opportunity to before; they are reconfiguring death talk for themselves.

Locating the bonding aspect of Death Café neo-tribal aesthetics is especially relevant in the context of discussions about possible effects and implications of Death Café. Some examples are combating burnout (Hammer et al., 2019; Bateman et al., 2020, Oliveira et al., 2021) and as a possible gateway to bringing conversations about death and dying into family context (Baldwin, 2017). There were a few instances in my research where Death Café conversations were defined as 'good rehearsals' for bringing the conversation into home life to have with the family, more by attendees than organisers:

Sometimes it's best to talk about it with strangers because you can rehearse the conversation you probably need to have with your family. I think the first time to broach it with the family it is quite difficult, so if you had the conversation with someone else, you have an idea of a response.

In the follow-up interviews, however, some organisers expressed a concern that Death Café conversations might not actually encourage bringing up this topic with family members, simply because this need to talk is satisfied at a Death Café. Walter (2017:25) also suggested it could be that attendance at a death-awareness group might do the opposite to raising awareness in everyday life, confirming the participants' desire to talk and alienating them further from their family. Such statements are concerned with the instrumental value of Death Café, neglecting the benefits that enjoyment and collective exploration can provide, which is where the framework of neo-tribal aesthetics and the value of sociability is useful.

Writing about sociability on a singles' cruise, sociologist Andreas Henriksson (2019:48) makes an important point that it is best not to define singledom and its sociable activities as a 'phase of social needs that are satisfied in coupledness'. Singles, enjoying the sociability on the singles' cruise, risk losing that satisfaction if they enter a romantic relationship. In this context, singledom is reconfigured as satisfying state in itself, not as a transitional phase between partners. Indeed, Henriksson claims that if singledom gives access to a number of activities that offer sociability and community, this may lead to its redefinition; it may be understood not as a lack of, but as access to, relationships.

This observation can be applied to Death Café as well. If the inability to talk about death in everyday life leads people to attend Death Cafés and produces sociable moments, pleasant feelings of belonging, and connectedness during this conversational activity, it might itself be reconfiguring the idea of talking about death. Rather than attending Death Cafés to address burning questions, specific topics, seeking information, many attendees talked about enjoying the easefulness with which the topic was broached, that was not present in other settings. Death Café is undoubtedly used for practical purposes by some attendees, like the newcomer at Frida's Death Café who wanted specific information; and other purposes discussed throughout the thesis. While for some people Death Café attendance might have a specific lasting impact, such as receiving the information that has been sought, it is also important to acknowledge that for many attendees it is impactful precisely because Death Cafes themselves are a new social space, a particular social aesthetic, granting attendees the opportunity to clarify their own views about mortality, to practice talking about death, and to experience an unusual social interaction.

In this thesis I do not go into details about how Death Café can be a meaning-making tool. I observed people getting answers to their practical questions and clarifying where some of their fears come from when others shared examples from their past, but my focus in this thesis is broadly on the importance of the sociable aspect of Death Cafe, and more so - the attempts to stay sociable.

Death Café attendees often dip in and out of the conscious awareness that they are all gathered to talk about death and describing what they are doing as they are doing it, collaboratively learning how to talk about death in a way they haven't done before. In a way, striving for sociability and experiencing together the aesthetic bond of talking about talking about death is reconfiguring death talk not directly as a fight against the 'death taboo', but as an enjoyable and valuable pastime - the basis for the Death Café neo-tribe and, arguably, Death Café's most valuable, yet overlooked feature.

### ***5.5.2. Connection to spectacular death and postmaterialism***

In this chapter I attempted to ground the nebulous neo-tribal concept of aesthetics as a shared sentiment that bonds people together in empirical material. However, while in this chapter (and in the thesis more generally) I focus mostly on the immaterial aspects of human connection and enjoyment of Death Café, it is important to acknowledge the cultural consumption of the symbol of a café encounter, which also provides an opportunity to discuss the other concepts I am working with in this thesis - spectacular death and postmaterialism in reference to Death Awareness and Death Positive attitudes and practices. Postmaterialism can indeed be connected to some aspects of neo-tribal theory by highlighting the significant aspect of consumption and straightforward consumerism that is prevalent in many neo-tribes. Looking into contexts in which neo-tribes are taking place, such as based on visual aesthetic styles, e.g. a particular style of clothing (Aung and Sha, 2016), or a material consumption of a holiday package, a status symbol, etc. one cannot deny that some of them are a privilege of those who are not immediately concerned with their survival. Same with a leisurely cup of coffee in an often quaint environment in the case of Death Café.

Regarding my suggested neo-tribal nature of Death Cafes, in the context of spectacular death here relevant is the second dimension of this theoretical construct - the commercialisation of death, where Jacobsen highlighted the increasingly mercantile nature of funerary practice, as well as the use of death as entertainment in popular culture. Philip Stone, building on Jacobsen's thought, in his account of dark tourism as a commercialised and entertaining spectacle, wrote that 'dark tourism in an age of spectacular death ensures that

mediatised/mediated death lingers uneasily between the liberation of market and commercial forces, yet is subject to cultural heritage selection and control' (Stone, 2018:205). This is a significant thought because it also brings to attention how the way of behaving in Death Café is mediated by expectations of behaving in public, and more specifically, having a cup of coffee at a cafe, which is a cultural aesthetic symbol. All in all, while in this chapter I attempted to show the Death Café aesthetics of talking about talking about death are achieved via human interaction, hence not immediately connected to consumption and commercialisation, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that those threads of cultural meanings still exist in the decision to attend a Death Café and that many of the contemporary Death Awareness/Death Positive practices are indeed entangled in similar consumerist contexts with a postmaterialist undercurrent.

## 5.6. Conclusion

Ending this chapter, I must comment on the fact that Riseholme and Weatherfield Death Café conversations featured prominently in these pages. I interviewed nearly everyone who participated in these conversations and a consensus was that these were somehow richer, more lively, inquisitive, and erudite Death Café conversations than the participants had experienced in previous Death Cafés. Riseholme and Weatherfield shared a very significant trait - individuals in both Death Cafés were contacted by organisers before the events, asking if they would participate in my research. Both organisers told me that to join me they chose people who were confident and who always contribute to the conversation engagingly and respectfully. In the context of the analysis in this chapter, this only emphasised the importance of intentionality and willingness to participate in the conversation for maintaining sociability which can result in an especially fulfilling collective exploration.

Borchester and Akenfield Death Cafés did not have pre-selected groups of participants. Borchester conversation was quite successful in bringing the conversation back onto common ground, while Akenfield conversation dissolved into unpleasant territory. This leads me to conclude that while a sociable moment cannot be truly predicted in advance, collective understandings and efforts to engage and uphold good form exist and play an important part in

creating the Death Café atmosphere. This is especially significant because talking about death at a Death Café is a new type of social engagement for many and as such, there is no blueprint of how best to act. Death Café conversation, sometimes strongly enjoyed, in other instances is full of frictions and inconsistencies. This is understood among participants as reflecting the dynamics of any other social situation, thus unavoidable and somewhat tolerated. It follows that it is not sociability itself but striving for it that is a part of the Death Café neo-tribal aesthetic. It hinges on labile and multiple understandings of what 'good form' is in a Death Café conversation, ideals, and motivations held by facilitators and attendees. I argue that discursive practices at a Death Café, especially those concerned with maintaining sociability, are an example of a neo-tribal bond, which is an aesthetic bond, in the way in which collective sense is experienced and expressed (Maffesoli, 1996:85). This aesthetic bond is not necessarily that affective or emotional, but it pushes most people to understand themselves as part of Death Café.

Enjoyment of a Death Café interaction emerges from successfully achieving a particular social aesthetic that participants feel like they have stakes in maintaining both for their own enjoyment, and that of others. Then, attendees can enjoy the opportunity to collectively explore what their relationship (or lack of) with death means to them, how talking (or not talking) about death has affected them and how Death Café is doing something new to the way they talk about death, which goes beyond the immediate utility of the conventional understandings of what talking about death should do, such as lead to end-of-life conversations with the family. Introducing Simmel's social form of sociability and Maffesoli's neo-tribal aesthetics helped frame Death Café encounter as a collaborative effort which, when people agree on what 'good form' is, results in the configuration of death talk as a valued and enjoyable pastime.

In the next chapter, I continue to address the ethical aspect of this particular neo-tribal aesthetic - Maffesolian 'aesthetic ethic' - delving deeper into questions of not only how people talk to each other but also how they are able to *relate* to one another.

## Chapter 6. Empathy or Tolerance? Understanding each other in a Death Café

### 6.1. Introduction

The magic is that it's so simple! You're just bringing people together and starting a conversation about something that you usually don't talk about. And within minutes, complete strangers share their deepest thoughts about very personal subjects. And it's such a deeply human subject, the single one that connects us, and whatever we say about it, there's always someone else who will relate to what we are saying.

Sadie of Kings Oak Death Café is but one organiser who has attempted to put into words the 'magic' of the Death Café. The ability of strangers to open up about the sensitive topic of death even before the first sip of coffee has gained an almost canonical status in accounts about Death Café, authored by both organisers and enthusiastic attendees. The attendees told me they leave Death Cafés feeling 'invigorated', 'inspired' and 'energised', but are Death Cafés any different from any other topic-based conversation group in terms of how people interact and relate to each other? Or is it because the subject is death that makes it special? This chapter looks at how Death Café participants strive to understand each other and be understood during the one or two hours of the informal, convivial Death Café conversation. I will unpack the limits, constraints, and affordances of this ephemeral interaction.

There are three parts to this chapter. In the first part, I introduce what I deem to be the most suitable explanation for the sense of 'magic' and of 'being energised' in a Death Café. I draw on Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribal *puissance*, or 'the will to live', to make sense of these expressions. The understanding of *puissance* I propose in this chapter differs from its most prevalent use in neo-tribal literature as highly emotionally charged, intensely passionate (Doidge, 2017), hedonistic (Riley et al., 2010), even erotic (Clay, 2018). Death Café conversations are attractive to many attendees for their sense of casualness. In the case of Death Café, I argue that *puissance* emerges during interaction through experiencing the easefulness of discussing a sensitive subject matter with strangers. I argue that understanding and empathising among Death Café attendees is also not a continuous state of being, but rather manifests itself



in short bursts of relating. To explain how these appear and develop, I introduce the approach of ‘moments of relating’ (Hoppe et al., 2019).

In the second part of the chapter, I focus on interactions between attendees. I use anthropologist Douglas Hollan’s work on the imaginative and illusory aspects of empathy to explore how attendees, as individuals, are able to relate to each other as strangers with completely different circumstances. Again, *puissance* emerges through realisations that one *can* talk about death to other people, and they *can* understand each other without knowing each other personally because they are capable of empathising with strangers and it will work best if those strangers work to be understood as well.

In the third part of the chapter, I highlight situations where emotional support beyond the casual conversation is desired, including signposting to professional psychological aid. This contrasts with the already mentioned one of the most attractive features of Death Café - the ability to address a ‘taboo’ topic in a casual conversational form, not in an overtly emotional way, or in an institutional, therapeutic context. However, when such situations arise, attendees and facilitators, individually and collectively tolerating a shift from the Death Café as a conversational event to Death Café as a support group, allow the Death Café encounter to unfold as an especially sensitive encounter. This ‘rallying together’, as organiser Lucy defined some of the work the group performs, is also a constitutive element of the emerging *puissance*, grounded more in the ‘ethical’ aspect of empathy (Kirmayer, 2008).

Using the anthropological concept of empathy, specifically Hollan’s (2008) call to study how empathic understanding emerges by moving beyond a first-person view of empathy and turning analytical attention from the empathiser to the person to be understood, I provided a theoretical and empirical development of Maffesoli’s (1987, 1995, 1996) somewhat vague and underused notion of *puissance* - the energy of the collective.

## 6.2. In search of Death Café magic

Here I introduce Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribal *puissance* and how it helps to understand the collective ambience of Death Café. I also detail why empathy is a good concept to use to analyse how people come to understand each other at the Death Café and how *puissance* can be integrated with the insights on empathy from anthropological literature.

### 6.2.1. *Puissance*

Belinda, who hosts pop-up Death Cafés on her narrowboat in various bodies of water articulated her understanding of Death Café magic:

Oh, the relief on people's faces when they leave Death Cafés! I had a lovely woman come not so long ago and she said: 'I've come because I'm absolutely terrified of dying'. And so, we all launched in and had various conversations, as you do, about goodness knows what. And at the end of the Death Café she just said: 'I am so grateful to have come because I feel like that fear bubble has burst'.

The feeling of relief, as Belinda and I discussed later, emerges also because people are 'allowed to talk about death in plain words', not in institutionalised, or sensationalist language as they are used to hearing death talked about. Or, as Victoria articulated, 'as soon as you make something forbidden, you give it energy and it can become a very heavy thing'. Hence, according to Victoria, Death Café facilitates a release of this energy or at least reduces the metaphorical heaviness by showing that talking about death is not forbidden. This transformation is a collective endeavour, both created and supported by the ambience or collective mood of the event.

Spencer and Walby (2013) use Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory to analyse how 'efficacious' emotions facilitate group dynamics among scientists working in a laboratory. While Spencer and Walby did not give a specific definition, I take 'efficacious' emotions in this context to mean those shared and individually experienced emotions that play a role in bonding the group together. This is in accordance with neo-tribal theory, in which the emotional experience of the neo-tribe is what gives it effervescence, again, serving to bond the group together. In other words: 'the circulation of affects and passions constitutes an

efficient cement for social structuring' (Maffesoli, 1993:69). For Spencer and Walby (2013) the experience and interplay of varied emotional experiences in the laboratory, such as grief, boredom, frustration, pride, joy, and excitement played a pivotal role in keeping scientists connected. The emotional tone of the Death Café meetings, as articulated by organisers, attendees and experienced by me as well, was commonly that of a casual convivial interaction, to which participants brought an attitude of openness, honesty, equality among participants, with some excitement and trepidation sensed in the background. As noted by Eggins and Slade (1997), neither 'casualness' nor 'equality' for example, are natural, a priori conditions of conversation; rather, both are culturally and historically specific ideals that speakers accomplish (or avert) by means of particular conversational strategies. Thus, 'efficacious' emotions in a Death Café are those that produce the calm and pleasant ambience desired (and advertised) to be experienced communally. This being-togetherness is based upon an 'empathetic sociality' (Maffesoli, 1995:11). Maffesoli thought this sociality was the basis for *puissance* - or 'the will to live' (1995:31) - that can energise individuals and in doing so act to bind more strongly these neo-tribal formations. Maffesoli (1996:13) suggested that the empathetic sociality of these groups is expressed as ambiances, feelings, and emotions and that the collective emotions of a group become concrete in places such as local pubs or in any 'network of convivial cells' (Maffesoli, 1996:42).

*Puissance* is not an essentialised characteristic. In other words, it is not meant to refer to something that is fixed within each human individual. It is a term that denotes particular social energy reliant on the intersubjectivity between people, thus is linked to convivial situations. Rather than being an intrinsic human feature, *puissance* is relational and appears it is explicitly dependent on the presence of the other (McNally, 2015). McNally (2015:132) writes that the emergence of *puissance* occurs due to it generating a 'sphere of freedom' (de la Fuente, 2008:351) in which participants co-create a 'communalised empathy' (Maffesoli, 1987:71) and who consequently find a sense of comfort in others. In other words, the 'sphere of freedom' manifests as 'feelings of liberation and relief' from the forces of reality (Simmel, 1950a:57, in de la Fuente, 2008:351). In Chapter 5 I argued that talking about talking about death is a significant feature of Death Café conversations and helps engender feelings of commonality

between attendees and acts as a temporary bond between them, what I called an aesthetic bond, following Maffesoli. In this chapter, I expand this by addressing the emotional aspect of this aesthetic bond, as neo-tribes have been classically defined as ‘loosely connected, inherently unstable, and *held together essentially through emotion and passion*’ (Otnes and Maclaran, 2007:52, emphasis mine). Because excessive emotionality is neither particularly frequent, nor gladly welcomed Death Cafés, and ‘passion’ most frequently manifests itself as extremely vivid, animated conversations, the *puissance* has to emerge from somewhere else than highly affective and emotional engagement. For this reason, I will look into other possible origins of *puissance*. A good starting point considering to what extent it could be influenced by talking about a ‘taboo’ topic. Koksvik and Richards (2021) found that the narratives of ‘taboo’ and secrecy surrounding death functioned as an imperative for Death Café organisers internationally. In their study, the notion of taboo ‘frames Death Café participation as transgressive and bold, enhancing the group’s identity amongst attendees’ (Koksvik and Richards, 2021:10). I provide a short discussion concerning other emotional nuances of engaging in ‘taboo’ conversations besides ‘transgressiveness’ and ‘boldness’.

I discussed with Menopause Café founder Rachel Weiss the similarities and differences between Death Cafés and Menopause Cafés, which are directly influenced by the former. One of the most enlightening points of the discussion was when Rachel noted how women that had a relatively unproblematic experience of menopause hesitated to come to Menopause Cafés:

I have friends who said: ‘But I sailed through my menopause, I didn’t even notice it, there is no need to go to a Menopause Café for me’. But I say: ‘Well the need might not be for you to gain support, but maybe you have something to give’. And they haven’t seen it that way, that they have hope and optimism to give. Because they haven’t suffered. It’s like the archetype of a hero - you have to have suffered and overcome obstacles, and *then* you have the wisdom to encourage people who have the same obstacles to face, whereas actually it’s very encouraging to hear someone who said ‘yeah, it was fine, maybe yours will be fine too’.

Death and menopause are both topics that affect people’s lives profoundly yet have been notoriously hard to address publicly. In Menopause Cafés and Death Cafés there exists a desire to normalise both as topics of conversation in a casual

environment. Rachel prefers having a positive atmosphere 'because depression is one of the symptoms of menopause' and thus a meeting of women who are there to talk about their struggles is prone to becoming somewhat negative; what she called 'a mope fest'. Rachel thought that the emotional tone of Menopause Café benefits from people with varied experiences and found that Death Cafés often have a very similar, positive atmosphere. Indeed, I argue that the diversity of reasons people have for attending Death Cafés somewhat regulates the overall collective mood. Those who have had bad experiences with death and bereavement coexist in the meeting with those who are merely curious about death and have to find an emotional tone on which to conduct this informal conversation about death - the very reason why they have all gathered there.

On the other side of the spectrum, positive experiences of death can sometimes be viewed negatively in a Death Café. For example, Albert told me he was 'rubbed the wrong way' and 'unsettled' by one thread of our Riseholme Death Café conversation, where Edie and Owen shared their experiences of being present at 'good' and 'blissful' hospital deaths of their friends. Albert, who also had been present at a hospital death of his friend, said he couldn't relate to the optimism and 'upbeatness' of these accounts, which he found 'borderline offensive' and made him remember how painful the experience had been for him. Thus, even though attendees shared similar experiences, it did not lead to relating as the emotional tone of talking about these experiences did not match. All in all, the Death Café *puissance* is produced not simply because the topic is death, but through the easefulness with which one can talk to others about death. This easefulness, as seen when compared to Menopause Café, is aided by a relatively neutral level of emotionality, not too negative and not excessively positive. Several attendees have highlighted that the ability to discuss sensitive topics without much emotion attached to them is one of the main appeals of Death Café.

At the same time, Death Cafés *are* places for emotion. While direct displays of emotion are considered to be uncomfortable (discussed later in the chapter), acknowledging the strength of emotions surrounding death is important, collectively and personally. Some attendees actively consider how to sustain 'good form' of a Death Café meeting while also meeting their emotional needs.

For example, Maggie from Brigadoon Death Café talked to me about how she was not sure whether she would be able to bring up at a forthcoming Death Café what had been occupying her mind for the last few months - her son's recent serious accident. Maggie said she even felt emotional telling me about it on the phone, so was unsure whether that kind of emotionality would be accepted in the Death Café. Death Café attendees are in a constant process of negotiation about what they can reveal to the group and how that will be accepted by the group.

I found that in Death Café there exists a delicate balance between keeping the emotionality of conversations neutral when talking about death while respecting the gravity of the subject matter. *Puissance* emerges through moments of easefulness of the conversation among participants regarding the sensitive subject matter. It is not based on shared experience, but on shared sentiment. This shared sentiment - death is important to all our lives - generates an ethics of being together (Maffesoli, 1987:71) that acknowledges the magnitude of these experiences and a possible variety of human responses to them. In the next paragraph, I will introduce some of the anthropological literature on empathy that, in combination with Maffesoli's *puissance*, will help to ground an understanding of the Death Café 'magic'.

### **6.2.2. Empathy: a dynamic and elusive concept**

Out of a spectrum of emotions, I selected the concept of empathy to examine Death Café dynamics. Formal definitions of empathy usually describe it as a way of assessing what another person is thinking, feeling, or doing from a quasi-first-person point of view, and that it includes both an emotional and cognitive aspect (Hollan, 2012a:70). It is generally agreed that empathy is a complex phenomenon, including emotional, intellectual, and ethical aspects (Kirmayer, 2008; Hollan and Throop, 2008). Hollan and Throop (2008:385) had noted that in contrast to the growth of interest in the concept of empathy in the fields of psychology, medicine, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis, there was a relative lack of explicit interest in or systematic exploration of empathy in anthropology. Hollan and Throop (2008:386) also noted that the importance of empathy for social life is often presumed, but it is not clear how for anthropological purposes it differs from more often addressed notions of sympathy (Kelly, 2012),

intersubjectivity (e.g. Csordas, 1990; Jackson, 1998; Duranti, 1993; Ochs and Solomon, 2005), and intentionality (e.g. Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; Duranti, 2001, 2006). Thus, some clarification on how and why I use the concept is necessary.

I mostly draw from Hollan and Throop's separate and collaborative developments on the value of empathy for anthropology (Hollan and Throop, 2008, 2011; Hollan, 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2017; Throop, 2008, 2010, 2011). First, Hollan and Throop (2008:392) write that what makes empathy distinctive from other ways of affective sharing or merger with others, such as sympathy or compassion, is that it implies understanding *why* someone is thinking or feeling the way they do, not just that they do. I found this to be pertinent to Death Cafés as elective events, where even though attendees' emotional tones and reactions might differ, all attendees are aware that the topic of death is of great significance for people's lives and can evoke various reactions. Further, Hollan and Throop (2008:389) suggested that empathy was a concept to be studied in 'the context of the ways in which people gain knowledge of others and reveal, allow, or conceal knowledge of themselves' (Hollan and Throop, 2008:389). This is pertinent to Death Café conversations where people choose what to disclose to strangers, in a setting that encourages somewhat intimate, personal exchanges.

I was also drawn to use the concept of empathy here because it is quite significant to neo-tribal theory as well (Maffesoli, 1988; Dawes, 2016), albeit loosely defined as 'communalised empathy' (Maffesoli, 1987:71) inherent in *puissance*. Most importantly, I found that engaging with underdeveloped notion of *puissance* would provide a novel response to Hollan's (2008) impassionate call for anthropologists to study not only people's attempts to empathise with others (the perspective of the empathiser), but also how people imagine or allow themselves to be known and understood (perspective of the person to be understood). According to Hollan (2008:485), the empathic work of understanding is always embedded in an intersubjective encounter and depends on efforts from those who attempt to empathise and those who seek to be understood. I argue that neo-tribal theory, in the Death Café interaction context, helps further frame empathy as a collective, sometimes arduous

achievement, emerging in the space between people. In the context of this Death Café study, ‘empathising’ refers to expressions of and reactions to various emotions when talking about the emotionally significant subject of death. Here, ‘empathy’ thus is a process of understanding where these emotions come from (if they do come up in the meeting) and managing one’s responses based on that, which contributes to the overall mood of Death Café as safe and welcoming and to the group feelings of satisfaction and togetherness. Empathy here has a similar role in bonding the group together like Spencer and Walby’s (2013) ‘efficacious’ emotions in the laboratory.

It is important to be aware that this is a consideration of Death Café in the British context. Hollan and Throop (2008) noted that empathy is notoriously hard to define because of cross-cultural variations of the concept. Further, from an ethnographic perspective, empathy is never ‘neutral’, but rather is always found embedded in a moral context, which affects both the likelihood of its occurrence and its means of expression (Hollan, 2012a:72). Throop and Zahavi (2019:290) pointed out that these ‘expressive, moral, and experiential dimensions of empathy are inevitably culturally shaped’. There is limited data to build from to infer commonalities and differences of Death Café dynamics around the world (Fong, 2017; Karrel, 2018; Richards et al., 2020; Blanch, 2021) and I do not aim to provide an account that can be immediately applied to other contexts. This study, however, will prove valuable to future studies on Death Cafés, especially to those of comparative nature.

Despite being potentially emotionally powerful and morally significant (Throop, 2011; Feinberg, 2011) there are fundamental limits to the extent of understanding another person that emotional, cognitive, or combined dimensions of empathy can offer. Additionally, the understanding of others’ feelings and actions that empathy provides is not meant to be seen as an especially profound or deep kind of understanding (Zahavi and Rochat, 2015). Taking this view allows me to locate empathy in transient, episodic Death Café engagements among strangers, even though traditionally, empathy is seen to develop over time (Throop, 2010). Even though Death Café attendees are usually strangers, their knowledge of each other develops during the conversation and I argue that it is most useful to characterise empathy not by a finite point in time



of mutual affective experience, but rather as a dynamic process that involves cognitive and emotional discoveries about others' experiences (Main et al., 2017). Continuing to unpack this fleeting, yet dynamic connection, I draw on Hoppe (2018), who in her study of empathy sought by family members of people with early-onset dementia, found that whether a person feels understood is not only a matter of providing the right reaction, but also providing the right reaction *at the right time*. The stakes are raised at Death Cafés regarding this: there is simply no other time for participants, who are likely to never meet again, to understand each other and feel understood; it has to happen quick, yet somehow achieve a sense of depth that the Death Café is so often praised for.

It was mentioned a few times during my interviews that talking deeply in Death Café does not necessitate engaging in serious debates, or moral evaluations - 'it is beyond good and bad', organiser Frida claimed, because Death Café 'offers no solution'. Organiser Betty even thought that the majority of people who go to Death Cafés do so not because they have ideas about death that they want to share (with the exclusion of some bereaved people who Betty thinks simply need to talk about their grief), but because they *don't* have definite ideas and just want to share their uncertainty. Then, these moments of understanding each other become even more powerful as they are mutually explorative. Significantly, many such moments have been described to me as examples of 'magical' and 'energising' moments at a Death Café and I have experienced the pleasure of such moments as well.

Hoppe et al. (2019) see the analytical utility of such temporary, fragmented 'moments' of relating for unpacking how understanding each other is achieved. As doctoral students on projects about dementia, Hoppe et al. (2019) organised 'dialogue evenings' to report their findings back to practitioners and people affected by or interested in dementia. They discovered that over two years, the 'reporting back' format became a collaborative process of mutual learning between the academics and attendees, whose backgrounds included people with dementia, family members, care managers, social workers, spiritual counsellors, music therapists, physiotherapists, journalists, and policymakers. Their discussions were undirected and a method of Socratic dialogue, encouraging analysis of a situation from different perspectives was used by organisers to help attendees gain a deeper understanding of others' stories, experiences, and

perspectives (Hoppe et al., 2019:14). The authors argue that the dialogue evenings produced non-hierarchical moments in which participants encountered each other as people and not in terms of their roles, which allowed them to relate to each other and dementia in new ways (Hoppe et al., 2019:15).

In Hoppe's dialogue evenings, as well as in Death Cafés, as discussed in Chapter 5, participants negotiate what to bring to the conversation drawing from their multiple, intertwined subject positions, such as being a family member of a person with dementia and also a care worker (Hoppe et al., 2019:15). In St. Mary Mead Death Café, for example, a middle-aged woman Debra participated enthusiastically in a humorous conversation about cleaning one's attic before death in order to spare the relatives from dealing with the clutter. When it came time for the group to share their final thoughts of the evening, Debra said that the reason she came to this Death Café was to 'practice listening' for her bereavement counselling training, but that the conversation ended up being unexpectedly helpful for her personally, as a daughter of a father who died without leaving a will. She thanked the group for this and said that this experience is being together and speaking freely about death ignited her enthusiasm to finish her bereavement counselling training even further. This relates to Hoppe et al.'s main point that learning together, relating, and understanding each other does not happen continuously but in 'moments', which are 'vulnerable, momentary achievements' (Hoppe et al., 2019). Further, Hoppe et al.'s participants talked about the 'energy' of the evenings that they took away with them and the 'magic' of shared moments. Such flashes of relating, like Debra's unexpectedly struck personal chord that left her touched and inspired, carry particular energy that contributes to the collective enjoyment of Death Café and lays the ground for making sense of the work of empathic understanding (or communalised empathy - *puissance* in Maffesolian terms).

Additionally, thinking in 'moments' acknowledges the limitations of the format of the dialogue evening (Hoppe et al., 2019:11), in terms of how affective or lasting this shared energy can be. This is also useful when thinking about the 'magic' of Death Café conversations. How far does it extend and how can the researcher know for sure? On a methodological note regarding this, Hollan (2008:481) asked: 'as anthropologists, how often do we have the kind of follow-

up data that would allow us to confirm the accuracy of our own alleged empathic observations or those of others?'. I believe I was quite fortunate in this instance as I was able to conduct follow-up interviews and inquire about certain moments and certain conversational decisions made, which enriched my understanding of how people allow themselves to be understood. An example of such moments, where learning *of* each other happens, has been recounted to me after the fact by John from Riseholme Death Café.

John identified two different ways of talking about death: intellectual and authentic. He said that it is easy to intellectualise and reference classical books or moving poems about death or talk about your practical knowledge, but he doesn't get much out of a Death Café that way. After all, he does that in his professional life where he creatively engages with the topic of end of life. Instead, John said he always attempts to be as honest and open as he can, and if he believes 'someone is opening up and making themselves kind of vulnerable', that to him constitutes an authentic conversation. He continued:

While it can be difficult to open up to a bunch of strangers, whenever I do anything that's difficult, I find it quite exhilarating at the end of it. And despite the difficulties, it ends up being great because you have a nice bit of cake and a nice bit of conversation.

John told me that at the beginning of each Death Café he usually 'feels around' whether other attendees are more interested in an intellectual and distanced conversation or are ready to be vulnerable. He then tries to match the emotional tone. John recalled hearing a person being very upset at the back of the room in a Death Café he and I participated in and contrasted it with our conversation being 'deflective', with an abundance of literary, film, and art references. John was equally receptive to emotionality, vulnerability, and playful or inquisitive intellectualisation, malleable in his responses to the situation because he saw Death Café more as an occasion for 'getting out of the house' and socialising. In contrast, Daisy admitted that she barely speaks in Akenfield Death Cafés and goes there because she finds it comforting to hear that other people have the same fears and worries.

This co-existence of different orientations towards other attendees, the moments of feeling out who is also present at your table and how they want the

conversation to flow creates Death Café as an inherently responsive environment; and empathy requires a receptive audience (Kirmayer, 2008). The importance of openness towards relating to other people's experiences was visible in East Bromwich Death Café when the conversation turned to accompanying dying people in their last months of life. Leida, one of the facilitators, noted that she found it very interesting that people who were dying wanted to talk about death but this was often rejected by their relatives under the guise of being protective over the dying. Then, Leida likened this interaction to a toothache:

I can't feel your toothache, but I can empathise because I may have had some toothache in the past. But how can I say that you won't know you've got a toothache? I find it really interesting that we think that somebody doesn't experience anything living in their body and if we don't talk about it, they won't notice that they're dying ...

While this is not an example of empathic understanding in action it is quite a poetic remark on the limits of our knowledge of the inner states of other people. It also highlighted that the empathiser makes decisions whether or not to accept pleas for engagement from the person who wants to be empathised with. I will now turn to provide more examples of Death Café attendees engage in attempts to understand each other and be understood.

### **6.3. Imaginative aspects of empathy**

Hollan (2008:483) suggests that imaginative and illusory aspects of empathy help us understand why most of us can feel understood even though we know it is impossible to directly know or access another person's experience. For Hollan (2008), offering gestures that allow another person to feel understood, even if there is no accurate or 'full' understanding from the empathiser is the crux of the process of empathising. The person to be understood, however, also needs to be receptive to attempts to understand them. In this section I show how the imaginative aspects of empathy are especially significant in Death Café conversations with people that have different circumstances, experiences, viewpoints. I will provide some examples of how participants perceive themselves in relation to others and how that affects how empathic understanding emerges. For example, some of the empathising during the

conversation is based on shared experience, such as bereavement, but some examples I provide involve people in significantly different situations that don't immediately allow for a level of experiential understanding, such as a large age discrepancy, or having a terminal illness. Thus, the following discussion will highlight the imaginative aspects of empathy at work and allow us to peer into the space between people that is sometimes left unbridged.

### **6.3.1. Age differences**

Attendee ages varied widely in Death Cafés I attended. In my participant sample, around 4 percent of attendees were in the age range of 20-29; 8 percent - 30-39; 19 percent - 40-49; 27 percent - 50-59; 22 percent - 60-69 and around 20 percent were aged 70+. While most attendees were over 50, Death Cafés held in larger UK cities had a much higher proportion of people under 30. This differs from Fong's definition of the Death Café demographic as 'non-terminally ill Baby Boomers' (Fong, 2017:6), based on the 5 Death Cafés he had attended in Southern California. The sense of equality in the Death Café is built upon the notion that everyone must deal with the same predicament: that of mortality. However, even though death can happen at any time, youth and advanced age are in actuality perceived differently in Death Cafés. Here I present how these subjective perceptions come into play among individuals of different chronological ages and how that affects the ability to achieve empathic understanding.

Ida, a twenty-one-year-old journalism student, came to East Bromwich Death Café for inspiration to write an essay about 'something unheard' for one of her courses. She posed a question to the group after about 20-odd minutes of not participating: 'Do you think it is harder for people, as they get older, to speak about death, because you're, like, closer to death?'. Facilitators Victoria and Leida replied in the same breath that it all depends on the person. Ida then gave some background, explaining that her mum was about to turn fifty-eight and had not written a will despite being continuously egged on by her. Ida wished for these things to be sorted now because she felt that it would be too uncomfortable to bring the topic up when her mother was seventy and, in Ida's words, 'much closer to death'. Victoria enthusiastically exclaimed: 'You should

write your will! Set an example!'. Ida let out a nervous laugh: 'No, I'm too young'.

'You're never too young to write a will' - Victoria reiterated in the same joyous manner. Another attendee joined in:

I can second that, everybody should write their bloody will because my dad died without a will and I'm wrangling with the solicitor.

Ida did not follow this conversational thread further. I talked to her later about being the youngest person in the Death Café:

As a young person, I feel that older people look at you and they're... not like there's a bit of jealousy, but they look at you and just think: 'Oh you're young - do you even understand? Why are you here? You're so far away from death!'. It's annoying. Do you know what I mean? I'd like to think it wasn't the case [*in the Death Café*] and everyone was just very accepting and didn't mind if you were young or old or anything, but I'm not sure.

Ida expressed some faith, but also reservations that her age did not matter in the conversation. At the Death Café table, people of different chronological ages coexist, and the advice of writing a will was applied to everyone present. Ida, however, seemed taken aback that the advice was applied to her as if her mother and other Death Café attendees were in a different category to Ida due to being in later stages of life. Her ability to relate to other people was limited by that perceived distance from death, while the facilitators included her under the category 'mortal', thus not exempt from writing a will, even though she was quite a bit younger.

On a similar note, Morag, who was middle-aged, expressed a strong imaginative view in her reasoning for organising Brigadoon Death Cafés:

I feel if I hear stories of people who are on the journey ahead of me, especially the ones who had to deal with their parents dying, which I haven't yet, it might make it a bit easier for me. I have this naive belief, you know, that they're the front guard, while they're still there I won't die, which is ludicrous, but yeah.

Imagining a life trajectory where death and bereavement take a somewhat predictable, chronological, and generational pattern, Morag was interested in

seeking wisdom from older, thus presumably more experienced people. Morag and Ida's views could be said to create a certain hierarchy among Death Café attendees, based on a perceived direct correlation between advanced chronological age and accumulated knowledge about mortality, an increasingly intimate relation with death. However, this view was indirectly challenged by Arthur, an elderly man who came to Morag's Death Café because the 'advert in church notices made him smile'. Arthur said that he was curious to participate because his old age was not as useful for understanding death as he thought it would be:

I thought I might have understood a wee bit more by now than I do, I don't know what, but I thought whatever mysteries there might have been some sort of glimpse or insight into that, but I'm not so sure.

A slightly younger Charles echoed Arthur: 'The wisdom of getting older and all that eh? Where is it?' Then a wave of laughter roared through the group.

These assumptions go both ways. Older people can also look at younger people and see them as they themselves were. Take for example sixty-year-old Fay who was embroiled in the conflict in Akenfield Death Café discussed in Chapter 5. Fay referred to Phoebe, with whom she clashed there, and her opinions as 'dogmatic' and noted that 'people wake up at different time', mentioning that Phoebe, being only in her thirties, was 'simply too young to understand' what Fay was trying to communicate. Even though Phoebe had gone through cancer twice and experienced several traumatic bereavements, Fay saw that their positionality was directly affected by the difference in age:

I hate being judgemental and that's because I think people are going through what they're going through and that's how it is, isn't it? And I was very, very naive when I was younger, compared to now, when you suddenly begin questioning everything. That's what life does really.

During the East Bromwich Death Café conversation Victoria mentioned she was always surprised when young people attended her Death Café. The rest of the group did not get a chance to respond before Victoria continued her train of thought saying that actually, young people can also experience significant bereavements. Finally, Victoria concluded that Death Cafés were almost more valuable to younger people because they were 'often not able to talk about that kind of stuff, it's almost seen as strange that they would want to talk about it,

unlike older people'. In this statement, Victoria's confusion about why a young person would even think about death was replaced with a realisation that it actually might be harder for them to talk about it. Through this thought process, Victoria came to acknowledge that human experiences of death and bereavement are varied, which for her legitimised young people's attendance of Death Café. This is similar to what Carlisle (2015) discovered about Thai ghost stories. As there are no well-established shared definitions about the types of Thai ghosts, Thais make sense and evaluate the credibility of each other's ghost stories by only agreeing on the terms that define 'human perspectives' (Carlisle, 2015:62) - the ways people can (and think is possible to) experience ghosts. This way, heterogenous and unique individual experiences can be accommodated in a shared social framework based on the commonality of being human. Age in relation to perceived distance from death is an imaginative aspect of empathy and can both obstruct and afford understanding each other, depending on people's efforts to understand and feel understood. Attendees have assumptions about what people at different life stages might feel towards death and bereavement but acknowledge the uniqueness of individual human experiences. These perspectives are constantly renegotiated in conversations. Realisations of varied human experiences create a dynamic process of relating to others upon the significance of death.

### **6.3.2. Background knowledge**

Another imaginative aspect of empathy rests on the usual situation that Death Café attendees have no background knowledge of each other and can empathise only with the words the other person speaks and the stories they choose to disclose. Weatherfield Death Café organiser Betty, who had worked as a nurse, recounted a situation when one of her patients, who was terminally ill, turned up at the Death Café. She suggested that the patient sit in a different group from her, but he was adamant that he wanted to join Betty's table. Throughout the night Betty remained acutely aware of how severely unwell the man was. The fact that she did not know anything about other people's backgrounds and that other people didn't know anything about her patient disturbed her greatly. Betty told me she found the situation quite difficult as she wanted to make sure the patient was unharmed by possibly humorous or insensitive remarks made by those unsuspecting of his condition. She ended up filtering every aspect of the



interaction through the prism of her patient's condition and how he could possibly be affected by that. This inner knowledge about the man's situation made the Death Café interaction precarious in Betty's eyes. Her feelings did not come up in the Death Café conversation, neither did the man's condition, but she was hyper-aware of what was said that night. The patient expressed that he would want to come again, in that case, Betty said she was going to suggest firmly that it would be more beneficial for him to be in a different group from her.

This is a powerful example of the levelling qualities of a Death Café - not knowing about other attendees' backgrounds means that there are no topics that are from the outset out of bounds. The interaction unfolds on a blank canvas and some implications of this are discussed in Chapter 7. In a Death Café, people present whichever fragments of their personality they wish, which gives momentary freedom, for example, from the label of 'terminally ill'. The man did not choose to be understood as 'terminally ill', but Betty's experience of the evening was severely affected by prior knowledge of him. This is an unusual case for the Death Café, but precisely because of that, it highlights that taking a first-person perspective is not necessarily a straightforward path into a successful Death Café encounter. Due to time limitations and lack of knowledge of others' personal backgrounds, understanding each other in a Death Café emerges through mutually experiencing the conversation and relying on imaginative aspects of empathy to fill in the gaps in people's perspectives.

### **6.3.3. Shared experience**

Hearing someone else's similar stories, for some, can bring hope and encouragement, as one of Brigadoon Death Café attendees said:

You don't think life after loss will ever be normal again, and then you speak to somebody, and they talk about it in a more casual manner so maybe they've dealt with it two years ago and you can only ask how can you go from recent death mode to casually talking about it?

This understanding, based on 'shared experience', echoes how anthropologist Rosaldo (1989) described how he was only able to viscerally understand the anger of the Ilongot head-hunters when he experienced grief after suddenly losing his wife. However, we must ask what counts as a shared experience.

Having had a headache does not equal understanding of chronic headaches and Hoppe (2018) notes that the question of which experiences are *not* shared is just as important as asking about the experiences that are because sharing an experience does not necessarily need to connection and understanding. Fainzang (2077:11) argued that empathy is primarily an intellectual construction despite involving a significant emotional aspect; one can empathise with people whose situation one has not personally experienced. It was a frequent occurrence, however, that if Death Café attendees discovered a similar bereavement experience, the conversation would focus on that for a while, as if that common thread triumphed over other things people found to have in common. Sadie from King's Oak Death Café recounted an example of this when two mothers who had experienced child loss sat at the same table. The conversation focused on them for most of the Death Café, as Sadie said it was *felt* around the table that these two women needed to talk. Sadie expressed that she knew this exchange did not satisfy the majority of the attendees, but they accommodated it and she was grateful for it.

Wokenwell Death Café organiser Orla admitted that because Wokenwell events were organised by a bereavement charity, they probably attracted more people that needed additional signposting for grief services and resources than usual for a Death Café. The conversation in this Wokenwell Death Café event focused on an elderly couple, Rita and Seamus, who came 'looking for someone who had the same experience of losing a child'. This Death Café was the first one for a young man in his thirties, Rhys, who had experienced several bereavements from a young age. He said he had 'chewed through his grief and wanted to lend an ear', to help people. It was a supportive and quite emotionally intensive meeting, where Rhys at times almost scolded Rita. For example, after Rita told the group she was 'barren to her friends while going through grief', Rhys asked whether any of the friends had actually said that. 'That's how I understand it', replied Rita, and Rhys firmly told her to get over herself as she was reading too much into the situation. They had maintained a back and forth throughout the entirety of the meeting. Other attendees' situations, such as forty-something Megan's, whose GP wanted to evaluate her mental health when she said she had been attending Death Cafés, or university student Dora's, who was studying the

natural burial movement, were not picked up by the group, nor did they contribute to the conversation besides providing an early introduction.

Even though Rita and Seamus came looking for someone with an identical shared experience of losing a child because they thought that would result in a deeper understanding, the support they received was provided by people who understood them in different ways. First, by Rhys, who shared the sense of immenseness of bereavement and was willing to share advice how he dealt with grief; by Orla, who took up a bereavement support signposting role, offering them various avenues to access counselling; and finally, by the rest of the group that remained away from the conversational arena, willing to put their curiosity and other needs aside for the sake of something more 'urgent'. Shared experience thus is also an imaginative aspect of empathy because even without relating to others directly, Death Café attendees are able to intellectually, if not emotionally, understand the heaviness of other people's experiences and to re-evaluate their individuals positions against the needs of others. It seems like Rita and Seamus were made to feel understood as they hugged Rhys and Orla after the event and stayed to chat for a while. I'd like to turn now to discuss further these instances when Death Café interaction transcends beyond its primary understanding as a casual conversation and where listening and being present becomes a largely non-negotiable embodied disposition. It is a demanded presence, but it can also be rewarding.

## **6.4. Beyond conviviality**

Some of the existing literature on Death Cafés references the therapeutic value of talking in Death Cafés in the context of using the model instrumentally. Clark-McGhee et al. (2017) hosted a number of Death Cafés in an NHS context and reported being 'struck by the strength of feeling these conversations aroused, which prompted some to reflect further on their own experiences of death' (Clark-McGhee et.al., 2017:154). They also noted that 'those taking part may experience the conversations that occur as therapeutic' (ibid). Hammer et al. (2019), Bateman et al. (2020), and Oliveira et al. (2021) all have proposed that if Death Cafés were implemented in hospitals, they should be studied for their effect on healthcare worker burnout. Karrel (2018) argued that because a lot of

Death Café attendees want to talk about a bereavement they experience, Death Café functions as a support group. The media has also played up the support group angle, specifically Appleton's (2019) and Pandell's (2018) journalistic pieces on Death Cafés, which begin as AA meetings do: 'My name is ... and I'm here because...'. With an article title such as *Mortals Anonymous* (Pandell, 2018), the clear allusion to the therapeutic nature of the meeting is unmistakable.

While on the one hand, it is reductive to interpret Death Café as merely a support group, on the other hand, saying that Death Café is not a support group just because it is not *meant to be*, misses the reality that it sometimes does act as such. I argue it is important to not overlook these interactions and how they affect understanding each other in Death Café and I will turn to address them now.

#### **6.4.1. When a Death Café is not enough**

While many organisers actively denounce any expectation of a therapeutic outcome, there were several explicit mentions of the therapeutic value of Death Café in interviews with attendees and organisers. For example, an elderly regular attendee had told organiser Olivia that Death Café for her was like family, and she found it very therapeutic to have this community for two hours once a month. In this person's life, the ephemeral Death Café interaction had gained a more permanent grounding. Fifty-one-year-old Polly told me she began attending Tilling Death Café following her father's death and the end of a romantic relationship. She told me she found a 'very supportive group who took good care of her vulnerable self at the time'. Organiser Nicola had asked the whole group right before the meeting to be sensitive to Polly's predicament and that she had advised Polly not to come as it is not a bereavement group. The group rallied around Polly, offering advice from their own experiences of bereavement, any time she reached out to speak. At the end of the meeting, Nicola indirectly thanked everyone for their effort by stating to the whole group (now with Polly included) that we all have a gift to give to others: not our professional knowledge or personal experience, but simply ourselves.

Having to listen patiently when someone presents a more urgent need or giving emotional support is not necessarily what the attendees expect or want to do at the Death Café. One of the Weatherfield Death Café organisers, Eleanor, had not told her brother she was involved with the Death Café, as their extended family had quite a lot of early and tragic deaths, all from her brother's side. She told me she would never talk about Death Café to those who have had traumatic experiences of bereavement because they were 'holding that terrible raw distress in them' and she believed a Death Café would possibly only open up wounds. Eleanor thought that for people who were particularly affected, the true healing would come from seeking psychotherapy, not surface level Death Café conversations.

Eleanor emphasised the mental space needed to talk about death and suggested that maybe Death Cafés were more useful to people who would benefit from 'a little push', for example, to finally write a will. However, people who would benefit from more structured and explicitly therapeutic encounters *do* attend Death Cafés and protecting the attendees from adverse emotional reactions is a significant concern for many Death Café organisers. Organisers from counselling or psychotherapy backgrounds told me they applied their professional skills in Death Cafés, and they also appeared to be the most comfortable with managing attendee expectations and reactions. Organisers from more diverse backgrounds, not immediately associated with psychological support, or simply, professional listening, tended to be more anxious about where their responsibility ends. Tina, who is now a celebrant, but with a background in nursing and education, said:

We always state that it is not a support group. I think it's really important to remember the responsibility to keep people safe in the discussions. As a host, you don't often know about the people visiting so it is important to listen and look really attentively.

Edith, a funeral celebrant and a practising Buddhist, told me that she cherished her Death Café meetings that were always oversubscribed and had several returning attendees, but admitted that it was only after two years of organising them that she gradually realised that she could only take on so much responsibility for other people. She said she needed to stop putting pressure on herself, but also emphasised that it could be somewhat of a personality trait, common to people in vocational professions, such as teachers, celebrants,

doctors, and nurses. Edith began liaising with a retired grief counsellor who was willing to offer one free counselling session with any Death Café participants Edith identified who might benefit from a little bit of extra support. That made Edith feel like she had ‘a bit of a backup’ and had boosted her confidence. She had also gathered a long list of different resources for people experiencing grief. In a similar vein, Belinda had clear boundaries of her involvement:

If somebody is crying, we're all there. I set a rule really clearly for myself- ‘do not rescue anybody’. They need the complete experience. Let them have it, but you don't need to rescue anybody. And that's the connection. It's the heart, the soul, the depths of who we are.

All of this shows that many decisions are being made unbeknownst to attendees before and at the meeting and managing attendee expectations from the outset is crucial. Sadie of King's Oak Death Café, however, had been consistently reminding attendees of the limits of support the Death Café conversation offered, but she had nevertheless experienced instances when this disclaimer did not dampen some people's burning need to talk and required collective efforts from the organiser and attendees. Sadie recalled a woman becoming quite emotionally distressed when her particular feelings about death were not picked up for discussion by the Death Café group. Sadie said that ‘luckily’ there was a psychotherapist in attendance, so she split the group up and made sure that the woman was with the psychotherapist. In the end, it was a one-to-one Death Café about the woman's personal story, more of a therapeutic session at the hands of a professional, who had sacrificed their own Death Café experience to minimise discomfort for all other attendees. Afterward, the woman complained that it was not a good experience for her. On a different occasion, a woman who had lost an adult child in a road accident attended Sadie's Death Café. Sadie thought that the group was attentively and respectfully listening to the woman's outpouring of heart. Nevertheless, afterwards Sadie received a message from the woman complaining about a lack of support from the people she was speaking with at the Death Café. This shows that when a conversation becomes dominated by grief-stricken individuals and then unexpected emotional labour is required, Death Café can become a collective performance of tolerance.

Riseholme Death Café participant Edie admitted that she often gets impatient when people take up a lot of the group's time with their own issues and don't really allow a 'conversation' around it:

It becomes a long-winded monologue and I'm afraid I get bored and impatient when individuals don't take others into account. I do think that in groups of this kind, we need to be aware of the effect we are having on others and allow everyone some space to speak. Edith [the organiser] often suggests to people at the beginning of each Café that they should be aware of this, but not everyone seems to 'hear' what she is asking.

However, Edie still enjoys Death Cafés as they are 'pleasant enough, with good snatches of conversation' and through the labour of tolerance sustains the overall ambience of the event. This was quite a frequent sentiment among attendees - they are willing to sacrifice some of the immediate enjoyment if they feel this contributes to what they see as a more urgent need. I was talking to Eve, an 82-year-old Quaker, writer, and retired teacher about people who overpower Death Café conversations. Eve didn't bring up intentional rudeness, or disregard for other people's needs, but she did mention a certain inability to be present in the conversation. She said:

I suppose there are some people who are grieving and are not ready to listen to other people's grief, that they only want to talk about their own grief. It might be difficult for someone like that if they go to a Death Café and just need to be listened to... But they're not ready to listen.

McNally (2015:133) suggests that it is an individual's 'oscillation between generating and receiving comfort that drives sociality and its ethical aesthetic form'. Here, McNally gives a more reciprocal meaning to Maffesoli's already dynamic notion of communality being produced in 'a vast scene in which everyone is at once both actor and spectator' (Maffesoli, 1988:148). This is similar to Eve's articulated difference between 'hearing' and 'listening'. 'Hearing' can be defined in the Death Café context as being exposed to a variety of other people's experiences (as in, 'hearing other people's stories'). 'Listening', in turn, denotes a more demanding way of engaging, as people evaluate their positions against others. While hearing can be considered an outcome of Death Café (e.g. 'I've heard so many different experiences and it expanded my thinking') listening is an active way of being in the event, a constituent of the Death Café experience.

Participants who remain silent during conversation are actually doing many things. Some of them, in their own words, are ‘learning’, ‘being present’, and ‘being comforted’. Some said they stay silent because they are bored, or the conversation centres around an issue that is not relevant to them but is to others, or when people dominate the conversation. Or they just don’t know what to do. For example, Doris defined a sense of dread she gets (and assumes other attendees get as well) when someone breaks down in paroxysms during the meeting: ‘You can’t do anything for them, besides being a witness, so that kind of brings out our own inability to do anything about our death’.

But broadly, what compels Death Café attendees to remain present and tolerant? Maffesoli identifies an ethical aesthetic sociality as an ‘art of living which emphasises ‘getting along’ and getting by to maintain ... solidarity ... and facilitate everyday social interaction’ (Shields, 1996:x). Getting along during encounters is there to maintain the solidarity of the collective. This is another aspect of the collective vitality of *puissance*, which essentially ‘becomes an end in itself as the group seeks to maintain and preserve its identity’ (Doidge, 2017:152). Further it can be said that while Death Café attendees enjoy the ‘feeling of liberation and relief’ (Simmel, 1950a:57) as they are able to address the subject of death, the very same transience of the encounter and separation of it from everyday life compels the attendees to get along and tolerate less than ideal situations. An interesting proposition about the role of conviviality comes from Ivan Illich (1973). He proposes the vision of convivial society as an alternative to ‘technocratic disaster’ (1973:12) where productivity is above all.

‘A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favour of another member’s equal freedom’ (Illich, 1973:12)

Drawing from Illich’s grand vision of society to a smaller scale neo-tribe, it can be said that conviviality, as an ‘intrinsic ethical value’ (Illich, 1973:11) manifests at Death Café not only by the opportunity to discuss death related matters with ease and with like-minded people (i.e. ‘ample and free access to the tools of the community’) but also with tolerating each other when there are frictions, (i.e. ‘limiting one’s freedom in favour of another member’s equal freedom’).



While in the moment the situation is endured without conflicts or comments, in several follow-up interviews attendees nevertheless expressed their dissatisfaction with conversations that focused on the needs of those who saw it as a counselling opportunity. One attendee described this situation as ‘hijacking’ the conversation. The perceived lack of mindfulness towards Death Café being a public, egalitarian forum when deep in grief was considered a significant obstacle for achieving a successful, enjoyable Death Café event.

However, it is important to recognise that this is not necessarily always negative and depending on the individuals present (e.g. those who like to primarily listen to other people speak, like Daisy), can still be considered a successful encounter. Spencer and Walby (2013) noted that the neo-tribe can become a source of mutual aid. This can be understood in instrumental terms (for example, signposting a grieving woman towards relevant support) and even if not an expected activity, it can have benefits of the reinforced sense of belonging and group solidarity (Spencer and Walby, 2013:55). While at times the neo-tribe can be characterised by strife, ‘its perdurability is derived from shared sentiment and the manifold emotional experiences of the tribe’ (ibid). Thus, in a Death Café encounter, providing emotional support might not necessarily be what attendees set out to do, but in cases when that is required, through tolerance and attempting to understand each other, brought forward by a shared intentionality to engage with the topic of death, it can be rewarded with an overall sense of satisfaction and solidarity. Kirmayer (2008) argued that maintaining empathic openness and cordiality in the face of all of the obstacles to understanding, requires an ethical stance as well as an emotional and intellectual one (Kirmayer, 2008, in Hollan and Throop, 2008:395). When Doris described a sense of helplessness at the sight of tears of a fellow Death Café attendee, she said all she could do then was be a ‘witness’. When Eve said she tolerated overly emotional people, she said she did so because she understood they needed an outlet. These are examples of momentary achievements of empathic understanding that attention and presence are requested there and then. Some individual reactions to this are born out of awkwardness and fear to say the wrong thing, others from genuinely wanting to be there for other people. All of this is nevertheless enacted collectively by the whole group and helps the

person in need to *feel* as if they are being understood. But what happens when a person does not strive to be understood?

#### **6.4.2. Tensions in understanding each other**

The following extract from Borchester Death Café illustrates an instance where, I argue, empathic understanding was not achieved. Here, Graeme, a middle-aged male, did not respond to other attendees' attempts to understand him. Part of the difficulty in this situation was that other participants were limited in their ability to relate to Graeme's personal views because Graeme appeared emotionally distanced, abrupt, and - an obstacle Hollan and Throop (2008:394) outlined - to 'not know why he thought or acted or felt the way he did'. This conversation began as a discussion about how people adjust their life after losing a close family member. Graeme said that nothing would change if he was the first of his family to die and organiser Serena asked how he would feel if his wife were to pre-decease him. Graeme didn't even stop to think: 'It would give her a break from me, she would appreciate that!'. There was some reserved laughter around the table as a response to this remark, but no one picked up on that further. It was Graeme who continued after several seconds of silence: 'Uhm, I've got no idea, I just have a different way of coping. But maybe this is not the place to say what my way of coping would be'.

Eve, who had suffered losses of her partner and brother in a short space of five years, acknowledged Graeme's statement by affirming the inability to prepare for loss:

I think this is one of those things when you don't know until it happens. I had all sorts of ideas about death and all that had gone out of the window...

Graeme was lightning quick to reassure Eve of his certainty: 'I know I wouldn't be here'. Graeme's responses became increasingly short and stern and his allusions to suicide did not invite anyone else to participate. Eve continued with a careful: 'That would be... What about your children?'. To this Graeme responded that his children were already grown up, had their own families and would be absolutely fine getting on with their lives without him. Serena silently muttered: 'Oh gosh ...'. Graeme spoke further:

They know, I've told them. If mum dies before me, then I'm gone. I've got no worries, no fear. I'll go for a walk and not come back. It's fine.

Becoming sterner with each sentence, Graeme also became increasingly dismissive of the gravity of his views and attempted to retain lightness in his voice. Graeme then said that he wouldn't want anyone to worry about his death or even have a funeral for him as it would merely be an occasion for gossip. Eve attempted again to talk about how she could not have anticipated how she reacted to her losses and that the funerals were really helpful for beginning to process that, but as Graeme was neither receptive nor offering anything back, she conceded by saying: 'I think you're quite unusual in your attitudes'. The conversation pivoted to discussing the value of personalised funerals, without Graeme contributing. After a few minutes, Serena mentioned she enjoyed looking at the dedications on park benches: 'There was a great one I saw which has captured a person for real. Let me see if I can find it on my phone'.

As she picked up her smartphone to shuffle through pictures, Graeme spoke up in a light tone: 'You've captured our attention now!' and turned towards Eve: 'I hope I didn't offend you before, sometimes I say things without thinking of the consequences'. Serena, still scrolling through her phone, but eventually abandoning her attempt to find the picture, replied seemingly on behalf of the group:

It's fine, for me it's fine. Quite often people come to Death Café and feel really relieved to be able to talk about a subject that their friends and family simply don't want to talk about.

When Serena asked all groups to reconvene for final reflections a few minutes later, Graeme turned to Eve, now with an explanation:

I don't tell this a lot to people, but I've got MS and don't necessarily have things in order, so I do apologise.

There was a marked difference between Graeme's succinct and dispassionate statements on the value of his life and his need to apologise towards the end of the conversation. In this example, we saw an unfolding narrative of Graeme's views about mourning, jumping between perspectives of his own death to his wife's death. Other participants, especially Eve, who drew from her lived

experience of unpredictable reactions to bereavement, attempted to understand further Graeme's implicit mention of suicide. Graeme was not explicitly challenged, but his stern contributions signalled that he was set in his ways and no empathic understanding could be achieved, or from the other side - sought. Later, he apologised on three different occasions, which highlighted that he kept reflecting on it throughout the evening. Eventually, he said that he was processing his MS diagnosis, but the room was getting louder, and the group's attention was directed to Serena's closing remarks, hence only Eve heard it. Graeme's dismissive statements can be seen in a new light, but only for one member of the group, who did not even get a chance to reflect on that with him (or simply did not wish to). While refusing to be understood can be a way of creating a sense of exclusivity and thereby be a means to gain power (Hoppe, 2018:182), in this case, it was spurred by an unsettled and unsuccessfully articulated reaction to a serious diagnosis. Hollan and Throop (2011:8) noted that empathic encounters sometimes allow people to know and understand things about themselves that they would not know or understand alone, but people's motives are often conflicted and not necessarily conscious. Thus, empathic understanding will always remain elusive and uncertain (*ibid*).

Hollan and Throop (2008), in their comprehensive review article state that despite the many positive connotations of empathy (in North American context) in the anthropological literature, empathy, as first-person-like knowledge of others, is rarely considered as an unambiguously good thing in the context of everyday social practice (Hollan and Throop, 2008:389). While such knowledge can be a source of aid or simply more effective interaction, it may also be a source of hurt or embarrassment (Throop and Zahavi, 2019). Because of this, people might be just as concerned with concealing their first-person-subjective experience from others as they are with revealing it (Hollan and Throop, 2008). While Death Café seems to echo with tones of openness and honesty, it is important to see how understanding and relating are invited and refused. The Borchester example above is especially relevant, as it offers a glimpse into the importance of open-ended and well-articulated communication, as well as the limits of taking the first-person perspective in order to empathise. The collective ambience of Death Café can only be achieved if participants are willing to contribute to being understood, as well as attempting to understand others in

the context of their ephemeral interaction on the topic of death. It might be said that being patiently present, supporting people who exhibit a need to be listened to is merely politeness. But in my conversations with Death Café attendees I found that it is understood as a group achievement, as doing something of value together, which is how empathy in Death Café achieves its *communalised* character.

### **6.4.3. Connection to spectacular death and postmaterialism**

Reflecting on how my analysis here is relevant in the context of spectacular death, I draw from sociologist Peter Lund (2022). Writing on grief in contemporary popular culture, Lund suggests that an increased interest into personal descriptions of grief and bereavement may, to some extent, be ‘enabled by their capability to create space for resonant relationships between subject and world - as possible emotional oases’ (2022:101). This conceptualisation - ‘emotional oasis’ - is very poignant and actually very similar to how I understand Death Cafes as patient and empathetic spaces. To further elucidate his point, Lund (2022:102) argues that:

the current influx of grief in popular culture reveals that individuals in society are longing for resonant relationships and that (re-)connecting with an emotion such as grief allows individuals to experience resonant relationships, although we may describe the grief experienced herein as grief-by-proxy. They need this since society leaves very little room for resonant relationships because it is characterised by productivity, acceleration and domination and thus the need for what I have called oases of grief is created.

I wrote that the transient empathetic relationships experienced in Death Café are powerful, enlightening and bonding, and Lund’s work provides a relevant context to place these relationships in. Lund argues that grief is becoming ‘spectacular’ in some ways, which creates a paradox because the narratives of communally experienced grief:

are concerned with making grief more visible, less taboo and so forth in the public sphere - but it is also filled with concerns that the individual experience of grief is still lonely, painful and difficult’ (Lund, 2022:94).

The public act of sharing thoughts, experiences, pain in Death Café helps attendees feel heard and understood at least temporarily, but we have to also question to what extent it alleviates individual difficulty. Further research on this would be welcomed'

### **6.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to understand how Death Café attendees come to feel 'invigorated', 'inspired' and 'energised' after a Death Café conversation. To do so, I engaged with Maffesoli's elusive concept of *puissance* - the dynamic vitality of the collective. While *puissance* is usually said to emerge from affective and highly emotionally charged shared sentiments, I extended this to include more cognitive aspects of creating a shared ambience. Fundamentally, I argue that the 'magic' of the Death Café meeting lies not in strangers sharing their deepest thoughts, as Sadie suggested at the very beginning of this chapter, but in the collectively achieved feeling of easefulness of talking about the sensitive subject of death. This creates a certain energy that many have not experienced when talking about death in other contexts and as such, is where Death Café's collective vitality lies.

I also unpacked how Death Café attendees strive to understand each other. I consider these attempts to also be contributing to the emergence of positive feelings and the collective ambience of the Death Café collective. I employed anthropologist's Douglas Hollan's notion of imaginative and illusory aspects of empathy (Hollan, 2008) to show how Death Café attendees engage in 'filling in the gaps' when attempting to understand other attendees' accounts without knowing anything else about them. As such, while in Chapter 5 I discovered how Death Café attendees negotiate divergent interpretations and heterogeneous experiences by focusing on the common ground - talking about the value of talking about death - in this chapter I showed more clearly the limits of understanding each other.

This chapter contributes to the wider anthropological literature on empathy by responding to Hollan's (2008) call to direct analytical attention towards the person to be understood, not just the empathiser. It does so specifically through discussing obstacles for achieving understanding. An outward expression of

emotional fragility places demands on the Death Café group to dedicate time, space and show emotional support. While this can still produce an enjoyable encounter, where the ‘helpers’ feel satisfied in their contribution and the ‘helped’ feel listened to, it puts strain on the fragile enjoyable collective *puissance*. For those attendees who set out to be understood, *feeling* like they are being understood is important. This depends not necessarily on the others actually understanding them, but on their willingness to allow the conversational space to be occupied by those they feel need it more acutely. Attendees and organisers who go along with these demands, even though tense or uncomfortable, nevertheless contribute to the overall construction of Death Café as a responsive and sensitive environment.

While I have described all of these interactions as happening between strangers, as the final excursion into the Death Café dynamics and also bringing into focus some of Death Café’s more conflicting features, in the next chapter I unpack the precise meanings of ‘being strangers’ within and beyond Death Café.

## **Chapter 7. Are all strangers equally strange at a Death Café? Challenging perceptions about Death Café's elective and inclusive nature**

### **7.1. Introduction**

At a Death Café people, often strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death (Impermanence, 2011).

This is the first sentence that greets people seeking information from the official Death Café website in the 'What is a Death Café' section. 'Strangers' here is an important identifier for defining who Death Café attendees might be. Media articles on Death Café tend to highlight the aspect of talking about death with strangers as well, often beginning the article title with this word (Rucki, 2013; Clark, 2018), sometimes putting further emphasis on it, such as talking to 'complete' (Thompson, 2019) or 'total' (Haoling, 2020) strangers.

No Death Café I attended ended without there being a comment or a fully-fledged conversation about people at Death Café being strangers. In my fieldwork, Death Café participants frequently expressed that being among strangers enhances their experience and most importantly, both the participants and organisers generally feel that being strangers is necessary for Death Café to work and that strangers are able to relate authentically and share deeply. These findings prompted me to inquire deeper into what 'being strangers' at a Death Café means in practice.

It might sound back to front to place analysis of such a defining feature of Death Café in the last chapter of the thesis. However, in my fieldwork, I found that 'being strangers' at a Death Café not only had multiple meanings but was also often the catalyst for the interaction dynamics outlined in preceding chapters. In Chapter 4, I discussed how important maintaining a certain social distance and lack of familiarity was for separating Death Café participation out from a person's everyday life. In Chapter 5, I showed that being strangers who are able to negotiate conflicting views by reminding each other that they are all there for the same reason is a key constituent of framing talking about death as an



enjoyable pastime. In Chapter 6, I showed that experiencing the pleasure of Death Café hinges on a collectively achieved easefulness with talking about death and realising that people can relate and attempt to understand each other without background knowledge of each other. Hence, I argue the topic of this chapter brings the insights from other chapters together.

For the same reason, however, this chapter could very well serve as almost a background chapter at the start of the thesis. Especially because this chapter has another unusual aspect - here I will present data about Death Café attendee and organiser cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Such descriptive material is usually found in the first pages of research studies as a finding in itself and I have done some of this in Chapter 2 where I presented findings on attendees' and organisers' age and professions. Placing this discussion in the last empirical chapter, however, is a measured decision. First, it is in line with the spirit of neo-tribal theory to examine first the group's collective ambiances, rather than members' individual characteristics and motivations. Most importantly, however, I found that engaging with these participant characteristics, alongside exploring the meanings of 'strangers' as perceived and enacted in Death Café meetings provided a way to interact with a major critique of the neo-tribal theory. Without a careful exposition of the neo-tribal features of Death Café, as I've done so far in the thesis, engaging with criticisms of neo-tribal theory would not be as illuminating, neither would be the specific criticism I engage with as illuminating without the descriptive demographic information about participants. I found this specific combination of the theoretical and the empirical to render unexpectedly rich insights that felt particularly appropriate to round out the thesis narrative.

Namely, this chapter responds to sociologist Elias Le Grand's (2018) call to not overlook symbolic boundaries, class differentiation, and cultural access among other 'darker' (Le Grand, 2018:20) aspects of neo-tribal associations in favour of emphasising their convivial, solidarity creating aspect. Following Le Grand, I challenge the elective and inclusive character that Death Café is often celebrated for by showing that there exist subtle elements of exclusion concerning participation in Death Cafés. Broadly, this chapter shifts focus from in-meeting interactions that the thesis has focused on so far in favour of a macro

picture of the nature of initiative itself, which in turn allows to draw the boundaries of its cultural appeal and relevance.

I outline my specific approach to this theoretical challenge first, before defining my use of the concept of 'stranger', which comes from Lofland's (1998) distinction between 'cultural' and 'biographical' strangers as I found it very useful for encapsulating my research participant self-understanding. I then move on to show that Death Café participants are not 'cultural' strangers, meaning that to some extent they occupy the same cultural world (Lofland, 1998). This is significant because it presents a challenge to the attitudes expressed in Death Café guidelines and by my research participants that Death Café is open to everyone and is inclusive, as well as universally beneficial. Then, I show that biographical strangership (Blonk, 2021), described as interacting with the previously unacquainted, is the preferred form of interacting and is key in enabling the deep intimate sharing, characteristic to defining the value of Death Café.

To delve further into that, I then introduce the framework I use to approach the concept of intimacy, which is Andreas Henriksson's (2014) theory of organised situational intimacy. The way intimacy among strangers is achieved at a Death Café depends on the maintenance of biographical strangership and is also influenced by the topic of conversation - death. Death Café attendees, however, need not be biographical strangers, just act as such, hence I posit 'being strangers' at a Death Café as part of Death Café's neo-tribal aesthetic and a particular (temporary) affectual link. Despite narratives of inclusivity and openness, the Death Café in the UK, when it appears as intended (not-for-profit, not leading to any conclusions, 'open-community' (Hammer et al., 2019)) remains an expression of a specific cultural world.

The theoretical concept of intimacy in this chapter acts as a conduit with which to understand both the power and the superficiality of the emerging feelings of communality. This is important both empirically for understanding Death Café, and theoretically, engaging with the prevalent perception of neo-tribes as formations that are inherently not serious, even frivolous and exhibit high economic and cultural consumption

## 7.2. Challenging the dominant narratives on neo-tribes

The heterogeneity of composition and membership of neo-tribes with regard to age, income, and sex has been considered one of their key features (Cova and Cova, 2002; Bennett, 2005; Hardy, Gretzel and Hanson, 2013; Kriwoken and Hardy, 2018; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018a, 2018b; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Lewis 2021; Hardy 2021 among others). Alongside this, neo-tribes are often perceived as elective, ephemeral, affective, and ritualised, serving as a source of solidarity, belonging, and conviviality for its participants (Le Grand, 2018:17). Throughout the thesis, I emphasised these features of Death Café meetings because they were most evident in my fieldwork.

Sociologist Le Grand (2018), however, argues that this emphasis on the inclusive and consensual aspects of neo-tribal lifestyles or occasions means that power relations, conflict, and forms of distinction have often been underplayed. A similar sentiment can be found in Shilling and Mellor's (1998:203) critique of Maffesoli's relentless optimism about the vitality of social life and is also one of the reasons Hetherington (2011) suggested to account for the waning academic interest in neo-tribal theory in the 2000s. Using an example of class-based cultural hierarchies and implicit symbolic boundaries surrounding alternative food consumption practices (farmers' markets), Le Grand (2018) challenged a traditional view that neo-tribal affiliations transcend class and argued that neo-tribal researchers should also inquire into elements of exclusion within neo-tribes. Here I follow Le Grand's call, albeit not taking his specific route of looking at the class aspect of neo-tribes in the context of consumption. While I do agree that there is a class aspect in Death Café attendance and I discuss that later in the chapter, I take the opportunity to enrich the literature on neo-tribes by providing an account of a more subtle instance of exclusion from Death Café membership arising from my fieldwork.

Death Café, in theory at least, is an interesting example of an inclusive gathering because the events are open to anyone. In other words, the only criteria for attending Death Café is being mortal. People in Death Café value hearing stories, interacting with people they wouldn't otherwise meet, or interact with in such a personal way; in other words, with strangers. In my

fieldwork, I also encountered an attitude that Death Cafés organised for specific communities (LGBTQI+, BAME, Jewish, etc.) go against the ‘open’ and inclusive Death Café ethos because they erect additional criteria for Death Café membership. I argue that examining the meanings of being strangers at a Death Café serves as an entry into critiquing the inclusive and elective nature of Death Café. Being strangers within a Death Café meeting is understood differently than being strangers outside a Death Café, specifically in relation to encountering heterogeneity/diversity. To begin my analysis, I first define my use of the concept of ‘stranger.’

### **7.3. Defining strangers at a Death Café**

The stranger is a rich and enduring concept in many disciplines. There is a risk of getting easily side-tracked when trying to detail the developments of the term from Simmel’s influential concept (1950b [1908]) to contemporary writings on the co-presence of strangers in increasingly multi-cultural places (Ahmed, 2000; Amin, 2008), characterised by civil inattention (Amit, 2020; Glover, 2021), thrown-togetherness (Massey, 2005), light-touch sociality (Laurier and Philo, 2016a, 2016b) among other approaches. Measuring whether to undertake such endeavour is especially important here because I do not aim to contribute to debates about defining contemporary stranger relations. While the overall argument presented in my thesis is that there is fragmentation in contemporary social life, especially in the context of collectively dealing with death, dying and bereavement and I take the broad view that there are multiple neo-tribes to which people belong to in their lives, it is the Death Café neo-tribe specifically that I claim has stakes in maintaining the particular understanding of ‘being strangers’ for its perceived success. While this chapter indeed aims to establish and analyse Death Café as an instance of social life where being strangers forms the ‘foundation - rather than the antithesis - of sociality’ (McDonald, 2019), it does not strive to establish stranger relations as analytically distinct. Instead, it is a particularistic, exclusive account of what ‘being strangers’ means at a Death Café. It uses the specific understanding and enactment of ‘being strangers’ to elucidate a more complex issue behind the sentiment of ‘complete strangers relating to each other authentically’ at a Death Café.

These circumstances enable me to use the definition of strangers that I found most suitable to analyse the understanding and enactment of this concept in Death Café, but which is, according to its author Lofland (1998) 'neither recommended (nor approved) by many scholars who claim a sociological interest in the "stranger"' (Lofland, 1998:7). In her account on metropolitan life, Lofland (1998) used 'stranger' in the 'quite straightforward, everyday, and dictionary sense of 'a person with whom one has had no personal acquaintance - biographical strangers' (Lofland, 1998:7). Indeed, when people at a Death Café refer to each other as 'strangers' and when they say they talk about death with 'strangers', I found they mean with previously unacquainted, and most often do not have intentions to get acquainted beyond the Death Café. In other words, they seek to maintain a certain social distance. Lofland introduced biographical stranger in her analysis as a departure from the classical notions of stranger inaugurated by Simmel - 'those who occupy symbolic worlds different from our own' (Lofland, 1998:7), emblematic of a basic structural assumption of 'the stranger' as characterised by 'otherness' (Jackson et al., 2017:4). In encountering a *cultural* stranger, one of the parties is defined as being strange and out of place (a newcomer, outsider) whereas the other is defined as a person who belongs to some place or collective. Lofland wrote that scholarship then had been lacking attention to relationships where both persons or groups were 'newcomers as it were, to one another' (1998:7). Many biographical strangers may not share each other's values, history, or perspective (Lofland, 1998:9) thus can be cultural strangers as well, simply because they are not acquainted and have no knowledge of each other to judge that. Thus, these two definitions are not in opposition but are different ways to understand being strangers.

Examining the interplay between Lofland's notions of biographical and cultural strangers and how they also constitute specific relationships - biographical and cultural *strangeness* (Blonk, 2021) - in Death Café also has a dynamic nature. Jackson et al. (2017:9) critiqued the tendency to focus on the idea of the stranger-as-figure, as identity associated with a person or group of people and suggested examining 'strangeness' not simply as people, but as process, practice, and performance. Following this, rather than thinking of a stranger as a figure, an individual identity, I position it as a temporary affectual link, a

communal experience that forms part of the particular Death Café neo-tribal aesthetic.

I use Lofland's category of cultural strangers cautiously in this chapter. Specifically, I use it to show the relative homogeneity of the symbolic words Death Café participants occupy, especially in relation to their attitudes towards death and dying. I will turn to outline this now.

### ***7.3.1 Death Café participants are not cultural strangers***

In this section, I aim to show that Death Café participants share significant similarities in the way they approach death, dying, and talking about it. In a way they're not cultural strangers (Lofland, 1998), where one party is 'out of place'; they all largely belong to the same cultural world regarding their attitudes towards death. In other words, even though Death Café attendees say they encounter complete strangers, there's hardly anything truly 'strange' about them. These attitudes are connected to more structural forms of belonging, such as class and religion, but I do not aim to provide an exhaustive account, or a typology of the sorts of typical Death Café attendees regarding those more complex categories. Rather, highlighting these broad similarities will provide a background for showing later how being strangers is enacted throughout Death Café interaction. Please refer to Appendix C for the available participant demographic data.

Both Death Café guidelines and my participants' views emphasise that Death Cafés attract very varied people because the only criterion for attendance is being mortal. In actuality, there are several aspects that make Death Café participants into a somewhat homogenous collective: a tendency towards expressivity; having the emotional and cognitive space to explore their death and dying concerns; relative economic security; and (most often) a non-religious orientation. These conceptualisations are not definitive, but they are remarkably similar to Walter's (2020) postmaterialist critique of the Death Awareness and Death Positive movements. I will provide some examples to illustrate this homogeneity.

First, Death Café participants share an orientation towards expressivity. One of the most striking and to the point description of people who attend Death Cafés comes from Betty, Weatherfield Death Café organiser:

Death Cafés preach to the converted. I think people come because they would have talked about it with their friends anyway. Or tried to maybe.

‘Preaching to the converted’ here means that people attending Death Cafés have qualities that make them more likely to attend, whether it is connected to their personality, or personal activities and professional experiences, as most Death Café organisers and attendees are from healthcare and death, dying and bereavement related professions. Furthermore, the choice to attend a Death Café is also connected to it being a particular social interaction, not simply because the topic of conversation is death. I recall here Mina and Beatrice’s conversation in Chapter 5 about Death Cafés being self-selective and that members of a bereavement group Beatrice attended did not like the idea of Death Café at all. While this point may seem quite simple - people participate in an activity because they think it’s worthwhile their time - I argue that it emphasises not only the elective nature for Death Café, but more importantly, the elective nature based on shared affinity towards, or comfort with engaging with biographical strangers casually on the topic of death.

This relates to the second similarity among Death Café attendees - they are able and willing to talk about death and dying in a more distanced, philosophical manner. Doris from Weatherfield Death Café had a realisation during our interview that Death Cafés were ‘a bit of a luxury’ and many fellow attendees ‘seemed to be middle class’. Doris told me she had a foster son who was a single father and struggled to make ends meet, and she thought that ‘these situations, where survival is of utmost importance mean that people just don’t have the time or energy to muse about death over coffee and cake’. A similar thread of appreciating that one has the resources to spare some time has woven through many of my interviews.

Reagan (2018), as a side note in her doctoral thesis, discussed a ‘disheartening’ aspect of the Death Café model. She wrote that the people ‘drawn to these conversations are sometimes the very people who might least need to have

them' (Reagan, 2018:300). This is a valuable observation and Jon Underwood (Tremonti, 2016) himself conceptualised having mental space to talk about death in a less emotional way as a form of 'privilege' in a radio interview for *The Current*:

With regard to the privileged groups, I think if you're subject to trauma, then it makes it more difficult to discuss death and dying in a comfortable way. Talking about death might trigger that panic and that fight-or-flight reflex. So, I think having a conversation about death in the way that we do about death Cafés is an extremely privileged thing to be able to do because we've got enough space from death to be able to explore it in comfort. And that's about as privileged as you can get (Tremonti, 2016:15:23-16:02).

Jon Underwood did not frequently talk about this publicly, even though I would consider this a very important self-aware reflection of the initiative's reach. This positions the whole Death Café group, its activity, and main shared sentiment (we need to talk more about death) as a contrast to people who are acutely and relentlessly experiencing the extreme losses the Death Café group is sometimes contemplating. This is similar to Walter's (2020) critique of the limited appeal and relevance of the contemporary Death Awareness movement. He wrote that for those who live with the risk of death daily and are preoccupied with their survival, 'the contrast with the death concerns of the post-materialists who populate Death Cafés can hardly be more striking' (Walter, 2020:101).

This links to another similarity between Death Café attendees. This is their relative economic security, especially in terms of social class. Fong (2017:238) claimed that Death Café has a 'non-class orientation toward mortality'. Fong had based this claim on the fact that attendees did not divulge information about their occupation and their class status during conversations (Fong, 2017:88). However, just because class was not the topic of conversation, does not mean that Death Cafés are then automatically attended by heterogeneous, diverse individuals from various walks of life. Peppered throughout my interviews were glimpses into how Death Café attendees 'classed' themselves, even though they weren't frequent. For example, Chester said about Weatherfield:



I think Betty and others have managed to create, probably a rather select clientele. If you look at the range of people who come to Weatherfield Death Cafés - they're middle class, for a start; they're middle class and educated.

Betty also told me she had been worried that her Death Cafés were attracting a 'middle-class museum-going sect', as she described, because they were organised in an art centre.

Building on the idea that neo-tribes are often based on style and taste, Bauman critiqued the inclusive, egalitarian aspect of neo-tribes by saying that neo-tribal identifications and lifestyles are mediated by socio-economic factors and those lacking purchase power to participate are excluded from neo-tribes. This is an important point to consider regarding Death Cafés. I mentioned in Chapter 4 that purchasing cake and coffee is often an unwritten expectation at a Death Café, especially if it is taking place at a café establishment after working hours. Most people at Death Cafés I attended purchased refreshments if they weren't provided. Organiser Simon, for example, was anxious before his first Death Café that if people weren't proactive in purchasing refreshments, the theatre café that agreed to host the event after hours would not consider it 'worthwhile' to host future Death Cafés. Thus, as cake and coffee are framed as integral parts of the Death Café experience, this could be an exclusionary aspect. Maybe this not being an issue that arose more frequently in my fieldwork already points to the fact that Death Café is for people who don't think twice about treating themselves to a cake and a cuppa. Truly, it is hard to confidently claim that social class is a factor in Death Café attendance, or mediating Death Café sociality because I have not gathered data on this systematically, a caveat that Fong also raised for his discussion on social class (Fong, 2017:91). I have established what is known about the economic and social backgrounds of Death Café attendees and organisers throughout the thesis and it seems to point to an agreement with Walter's view that the 'expressive death' and its related endeavours are more attractive to people with relative economic and existential security.

Death Café's outwardly non-religious orientation is another important feature of its participants' common symbolic world regarding death and dying. This comes through not just because it is specified in the guidelines (Underwood, 2012,

2013a) but also because it is a relatively frequent topic of conversation. In the Riseholme conversation, Alice expressed that she wished she could ‘find solace in religion’. A similar attitude of religion as a ‘safety net’ was also present in several other Death Café conversations I participated in. Again, it is hard to say with utmost confidence which spiritual beliefs are most prevalent throughout all Death Café cohorts, but Death Café organisers in my study most frequently self-identified as atheist/agnostic and Buddhist. New Age spiritualities figured as an identification prominently as well, albeit less specific in their definition. Death Café attendee religious affiliations were similar to organisers’ - mostly atheist/agnostic, followed by Buddhist leaning, New-Age spiritualities, and a low number of those adhering to a Christian denomination (Quaker and Unitarian especially). As I noted in Chapter 4, about 11% of Death Cafés are held in religious or spiritual venues, but openness to people of all beliefs and none is emphasised. For example, Upper Radstow Death Café takes place in a Buddhist centre, but their leaflet and advertisement on the Death Café website state it is ‘a secular experience, following the model started by Jon Underwood’.

The coexistence of multiple spiritual, religious, and atheist beliefs could be said to be a sphere where Death Café attendees *do* encounter difference or ‘otherness’ of cultural strangers. All of this, however, is mediated via the aesthetic tool of sociability as I evidenced in Chapter 5, and more importantly, this variety is united by Death Café participants seeing themselves united as members of a culture that has ‘lost the ability to deal with death’. Chester put this eloquently in our Weatherfield conversation:

Many of the communities in Britain are still marking death in those traditions of each of those religions. And you only need to look at the way in which observing Jews, practising Muslims do it much more like Victorian Britain. All of that is going all around us, so we’re a little enclave in a way, of mostly, presumably, mildly agnostic, atheistic-stroke-non-denominational folk.

Sixty-nine-year-old Miriam followed Chester’s thought:

We used to have rituals, we used to all go to church and you knew what happened when someone died, you knew who the undertaker was and what the funeral would be, but now it is almost like we need to create new rituals or new ways of doing it and we haven’t quite figured that out,

so we're all a bit lost. You know, if you belong to a group that has a culture and a tradition, that's a bit easier.

Here Miriam evoked the nostalgic collective Britain of the past, just as Chester did with Victorian Britain, but did not explicitly equate the Death Café group with non-religiosity like Chester. Instead, she blamed the loss of prescriptive collective behaviours concerning dying and bereavement. Death Café can thus be conceptualised as a coming together of individuals who feel there is a lack of collective meaning-making scripts in contemporary British culture. But it is not the case for many Britons, as exemplified by organiser Frida's account on attending a GraveTalk event in a neighbouring town. She noticed that the GraveTalk event was much better attended than Death Cafés (both hers and one in a hospice she sometimes visits) and a lot of people knew each other. She told me:

They never come to the Death Café but then they turn out *en masse* to these things. They've got the bedrock of Christian faith, which makes for a whole different box of worms. There is this miasmic space between me and them. It's really good if people have got a faith that carries them through, that's really helpful, but I was aware that I wanted to be careful about what I said because religious seem to enjoy getting offended. It's not my place.

Essentially, what Frida noticed was that what draws people to GraveTalk events is not the same as what draws people to Death Café events. According to Frida, people who go to GraveTalk are not looking for meaning because they already have it; they are not there to explore 'the dark nights in which you find who you are, what's in there' like Frida thought people do in Death Cafés. Fong (2017:24) wrote that it was 'most surprising that even religious attendees, many of whom hail from the Abrahamic faiths, do not proselytise or sloganeer religious maxims'. I do not think it is surprising - many Death Café attendees and organisers do not consider themselves part of organised religion and treat Death Café as a space where they are not alone in feeling similarly unaided by collective faith, even though their individual views differ. As Frida said about not having religious faith: 'There's nothing wrong with being lost, it's where you discover things about yourself and find new paths'. This sentiment also encompasses what many Death Café attendees are interested in, which is personal growth. Death Café for many is only one of the avenues for such explorations.

Finally, I found that there exists a belief that participating in a Death Café conversation would benefit human beings in general. Organiser Edith told me:

It brings meaning to people. And I think maybe people don't realise that before they go, but I think it might become a bit addictive... Allowing yourself to sort of sink into that kind of depth with others. It would be good for everyone to try.

Doris had a similar take to Edith's claim that experiencing Death Café was necessary to fully appreciate its value:

Some people say that it's not for people who are very shy, very private, but, for example, my husband enjoyed it. And he's not a particularly verbal person, but he valued it and is coming again. So I would say it *is* for everyone and it benefits everyone and they could surprise themselves if they came.

Jools Barsky, after her brother Jon Underwood's death, continued his narrative about the exceptional power of Death Café:

I know for sure that if every single person in the UK were to go to one Death Café in their lifetime, it would completely change the way we think about death - and about life (Brayne, 2020).

Edith, Doris, and Jools Barsky all spoke that if only people were willing to attend a Death Café, they would certainly see the benefits of that type of interaction. This is similar to Koksvik's (2020:964) assertion that Death Positivity discourses are predicated on an assumption of the universal relevance of a 'particular and culturally embedded ethos, which ignores cultural, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic diversity'. It also harkens back to Walter's (1994) noted tendency within revivalist engagements with death and dying to present their accounts as universally relevant.

In this section, I set out to show that Death Café attendees are not cultural strangers because they share several broad similarities in their attitudes towards death and dying which extend to more structural forms of belonging, such as class and religion. Highlighting these similarities was necessary because Death Café organisers and attendees often claim that the individuals they encounter are diverse and miscellaneous, have varied experiences and unique stories. This

is true on an individual level (as in they wouldn't meet while going about their day), but I argue that encountering a variety of personal narratives about death and dying cannot be automatically equated to encountering diversity or 'otherness'. In the next section, I will show how being strangers is enacted within a Death Café meeting and specifically, how aspects of biographical strangership are considered vital for the emergence of feelings of intimacy in a Death Café.

## **7.4. Performing 'being strangers'**

### **7.4.1. Safety of strangers**

Riseholme Death Café organiser Edith and I talked about Death Café not being a grief support resource, but she said she had noticed that being able to talk openly about one's feelings had 'worked its magic on many people, grieving or not'. The main thing Edith identified that facilitates this openness was the fact that: 'You're with people that you have no investment in, you don't have to see them again. Somehow that makes it better. Not worse'. Throughout my fieldwork, both attendees and organisers claimed numerous times that participants being biographical strangers facilitates the ease of sharing personal stories and thoughts.

One way that my participants conceptualised the interaction between strangers was that it provides safety. Specifically, it does so because disclosure of personal thoughts to biographical strangers lacks consequences outside of Death Café. This refers both to the relationship between the strangers in question and the ongoing relationships in people's personal lives. Many attendees expressed that they come to Death Café because they are wary of talking about death with their family and friends due to fear of offending or bringing up hurtful issues. This worry is eliminated at a Death Café because attendees do not know each other's backgrounds or sensitive points, thus even if a sensitive chord had been struck accidentally, it would not be a personally addressed comment. Knowledge of each other's backgrounds adds layers of complexity to the Death Café interaction. In Chapter 6, I highlighted this with several examples, such as when nurse Betty felt uncomfortable knowing that her terminally ill patient might be upset by other participants at the table as they had no idea about his condition.

Similarly, engaging in a Death Café conversation with people who one might meet while going about their day is also not desirable. For example, Pamela, a seventy-year-old from Brigadoon stated that she wouldn't feel as comfortable sharing if Death Café was with people she knew from the community, because she would have 'an idea of their views', which would make her wary of what to disclose about herself as well.

John travels for about an hour to attend Riseholme Death Café. Referring to sharing his profoundly atheist worldview in Death Cafés, he told me that if he lived down in Riseholme he might choose his words 'more carefully', so as not to offend more spiritual people. He elaborated: 'I'd like to think I wouldn't change what I say, but what if I get, like, eggs on my door'. It is clear here that Death Café participants value interacting with those they are not acquainted with because it provides freedom to address their concerns and ideas, and safety that such disclosure won't carry over to their daily lives. This aspect of separation from daily life was also discussed in Chapter 4.

Another illustration of this so-called 'freedom' and 'safety' of interaction comes from Camberwick Green Death Café. An elderly woman who had travelled for over an hour on the train to get there admitted to the group that this was the very first time in her life that she talked about being sexually abused as a child. She prefaced by saying that normally she wouldn't be telling us this, but she would never meet us again. The group was slightly taken aback but remained attentive and respectful as the woman shared how it had affected her. It is important to note that instances like this can cause issues and frictions, make people uncomfortable, or, as I've discussed in Chapter 6, people might feel obliged to 'hold space' and listen to those who use Death Café for more supportive purposes than it's intended to be.

I encountered the sentiment, exemplified by words from my interview with Serena from Borchester: 'You'll never see the person again, so you can speak freely', across all Death Cafés. During the Borchester Death Café conversation forty-five-year-old Henry articulated what's good about Death Café in a similar way:

Well, the really great thing is these aren't so easy conversations to have with people one is close to. Okay, I can talk to my wife about 'let's make a will' and 'where do you want to be buried?'. We've had those conversations, um, very occasionally, but to sort of sit down and just muse about it and talk about it without worrying about the other people on the table because they're strangers, you know? And if they don't like what I'm saying, um, it's not gonna affect friendship, because it's not a friendship. So it's, it's safe and easy.

Here Henry touched on the fact that there are no consequences for the relationship between strangers - they simply remain strangers, the relationship is not transformed in any way. Transformation is more likely to be understood to happen within the individual, as Doris articulated:

It's like if you get into a train with other people in the same carriage and sometimes you will talk with them and sometimes you don't, but you get off at the end of your journey and you are in a different place and you have shared that journey with other people. We're in this together, you're doing it for your own reasons, what is in your head is in your head, but the fact is you have done it with other people and you have arrived at a different place.

Death Café is understood as a collective activity that might 'plant a seed' within an individual as per Sadie's words or cause 'a ripple effect' as Belinda claimed, to give the confidence to engage with death in various circumstances, but these are 'incidental' (Richards et al., 2020), not immediate or guaranteed effects. The most certain effects of Death Café occur within the meeting - getting people to talk comfortably about death, using a medium of a third-place environment, and the 'safety' of biographical strangers. This enables sharing of personal thoughts and experiences and is central to the emergence of feelings of intimacy between Death Café attendees. I will now turn to define my approach to this nebulous concept.

#### ***7.4.2. Intimacy between strangers***

Turning to academic definitions of intimacy, there are numerous possible conceptual understandings to draw from (e.g. Schutz, 1964; Giddens, 1992; Mjöberg, 2009; Newmahr, 2011). Dawson and Dennis foregrounded their study of social intimacy in the context of Covid-19 by saying that in anthropology and sociology especially, the concept of intimacy is 'slippery with multiple definitions' (Dawson and Dennis, 2020:1, cf. Jamieson 2011; Register and Henley

1992), but ‘its lack of fixity is part of its appeal’ (ibid, cf. Wilson 2012:32). To make sense of how being strangers works at Death Cafés I find sociologist Henriksson’s (2014) concept of organised situational intimacy useful. Henriksson synthesised several intimacy theorists in his research on singles’ cruises. This is a relevant research context because, like Death Cafés, singles’ cruises are also organised events where sociability among strangers is valued.

Dawson and Dennis (2020) write that what is definite across multifarious conceptions of intimacy is that it is fundamentally relational. Drawing on Schutz (1964), Henriksson makes an important point that in a very specific sense, intimacy is actually *not* relational. He writes:

Often, we imagine our relationships to be continuous in the sense that they retain an intimate character even when we are not present for each other. But Schutz argues correctly that relationships are never anything more than a series of situations only some of which may be intimate (Henriksson, 2014:99).

Henriksson claims then that intimacy is situational and builds from this idea, rather than that it is relational. Henriksson further builds on Newmahr (2011), who says that when sharing an intimate moment, the uniqueness of the impression of each other only belongs to the people involved in that moment and it does not belong (yet) to the connected personal lives where it would be part of several storylines (Henriksson, 2014:104). One example of this situational intimacy comes from Alex, a young man from Ireland, who during Camberwick Green Death Café told the group that he appreciated being able to talk to strangers about ‘such personal stuff and hear what others think as well’. He had been ‘looking for a fellowship’ to talk about death, ‘which is not the same as friendship’. He defined fellowship as based on a feeling that ‘you belong in this space, with these people, in this moment - like a board game night really’. Alex emphasised the uniqueness, as well as temporally bounded aspect of engaging with others in Death Café, which I addressed in Chapter 4, and that retaining social distance is key. I will now turn to explore the relationship between situational intimacy and biographical strangership using more examples from my fieldwork.



Most Death Café meetings consist of one-off attendees but in some cases, especially when a Death Café is well established locally, there are regular returning attendees. It is important to note that many Death Café attendees are there for the first, and quite possibly last, time. At the same time, there are regular attendees who enjoy this monthly or bimonthly activity. For those who only come to Death Café once, it is entirely possible that the notion of strangers is merely biographical and they do not give it much thought. For regulars who possibly see other regulars periodically, I argue it acquires a performative aspect the role of which I clarify later in this chapter, because they have to not refer to previously discussed stories or bring up what they might have found out about other regulars in past Death Cafes. I have not encountered an instance where one-off attendees found that they knew each other from elsewhere. Thus, configurations of the construction of intimacy among strangers differ slightly not only across different Death Cafes geographically, but also across different Death Café events in the same location. Some Death Café organisers I talked to had strong ideas about how attendees who knew each other, either from past Death Cafés or from their daily lives, should behave. For example, organiser Kelly from St. Mary Mead Death Café discouraged repeat attendance in general to ‘avoid cliques forming and newcomers feeling like they were intruding on a friendship group’, as well as to avoid confusion when ‘stories began being referenced without introductions’. Edith, who told me that roughly half of people, who attend her Death Café have done that two or three times before, always prefaced her Death Cafés with a gentle warning: ‘If *someone you know here* talks about something this evening, don’t assume they want to talk about that at another time’. What this shows is that it is preferred for each Death Café to be a self-contained event, with no references to past topics or interactions. Even if people know each other, it is desirable for them to act as if they are biographical strangers. Let me give another example.

Portwenn Death Café has a core group that developed over 2013, the first year of its activity. Organiser Frida does not advertise the events (besides her mailing list), reasoning that ‘those who need to speak will search and find it’. This means that many people who come there throughout the year have become real-life friends. The relationships between core Portwenn Death Café attendees are much deeper than usual for Death Café, so to uphold what Frida understands to

be the ethos of Death Café conversation, at the start of each event she emphasises that it is only appropriate to talk about people who are present that day. In Riseholme and Portwenn examples, the intimacy at a Death Café is defined as occurring in a specific time and space (situation) and moments of intimacy at a Death Café punctuate the continuous friendship relationship. This helps to solidify understanding of Death Café intimacy as situational. Most importantly, what can be seen here is that it is not essential for Death Café participants to be biographical strangers, however, enacting a certain distance is desirable. This shows that ‘being strangers’ is an experience that is partially constructed at a Death Café.

It is important to note that this is a separate issue from Death Cafés where students and teachers are participants, such as in Lochdubh Death Cafés I attended before starting my fieldwork in earnest; or a workplace Death Café, like outlined by Hammer et al. (2019). As I did not conduct follow-up interviews with students who attended the Lochdubh Death Café I only hypothesise that various mixes of superiors and subordinates obstruct engendering similar intimacy due to lack of biographical strangership and the presence of power relations outside of Death Café. This hypothesis is supported by Mitchell et al. (2021:356) who found that nursing students preferred an external facilitator, as opposed to their lecturer, to facilitate disclosure of vulnerabilities, avoid judgement and possible effect on their grades.

### ***7.4.3. The role of death as a conversational topic***

I will explore here the precise role of the topic of death in creating feelings of authenticity, uniqueness and intimacy. This will serve to solidify the role that ‘being strangers’ plays in a Death Café interaction.

Intimacy, as developed by Henriksson (2014), can be understood as experiencing something with another individual that feels unique to that situation. In other words, the emergence of intimacy can rely on:

Some actual, imaginary, or symbolic boundary that is breached in the intimate moment; that way, we feel that we have gained access to something not experienced by others (Henriksson, 2014:104).

This is drawn from Stacey Newmahr's view that intimacy 'lies not necessarily in marriage, disclosure, or sex, but anywhere that people experience each other differently enough than other people experience them' (Newmahr, 2011:172). In Death Cafés, it is important that attendees *feel* as if they are revealing something different about themselves and are experiencing something different about other people: their depth, their 'truth', and their vulnerability. Already established as situational, the intimacy at Death Café is achieved by experiencing strangers and themselves differently than the usual experience of strangers - by talking about death openly. In Death Café, attendees can enjoy the communal interaction and choose their social and emotional distance from others by not only deciding how much to disclose but also how much to interact at all, as exemplified by attendee Ellie's statement:

It's a sense of community, knowing that you're not the only one that feels or thinks like that. You don't have to talk; you don't have to share your experiences if you don't want to. You can just sit there and eat cake.

The topic of death here serves as the only thing people bring to the table which they have in common (which can be developed in different ways) hence Ellie feels comfortable just sitting there and eating cake in silence. The sense of community, a connection between people emerges because they feel that they are doing something important and useful - challenging a taboo, a practice which according to Walter contributes to a 'feel good factor' (Walter, 2017:24). Nevertheless, the conversational topic of death is considered powerful to overcome the usual boundaries between strangers. Organiser Victoria put it poignantly from her own experience:

I think the thing about talking about death is you can't really talk about death and not be in a truthful state, it seems to just encourage that. When something's hidden, then it's revealed, there's a kind of explosion of energy, as the lid comes off and all that repressed energy... you know like it used to be with sex in the 80s... suddenly everybody, including me and women in my women's group couldn't stop talking about it... I think it's a bit like that. Once the lid of repression or suppression comes off and people have a lot to share, that they have never shared with anybody else ever.

Here, Victoria does not directly mention talking with strangers, but nevertheless considers Death Café an outlet because of the existence of the death taboo:

I know it's a taboo because as somebody who has been trying to talk about it for years, I came up against this silence the whole time. With doctors when I tried to talk about it, and then with my own friends.

Death Café, as a newly emerged outlet for speaking about things people 'have never shared with anybody else ever' already supposes a certain intimacy, built on the uniqueness of experiencing one another. The combination of gathering together with people who otherwise would not meet each other going about their daily lives and talking about the sensitive and personal subject of death, for Victoria seems to result in people being able to engage in a 'real' and 'authentic' way. Crettaz himself said about *Cafés Mortels* that he was 'never so in tune with the truth as during one of these soirées', and had 'the impression that the assembled company, for a moment, and thanks to death, was born into authenticity' (Crettaz, 2010:124, my translation). Marina had experienced this in her Death Cafés as well:

What I observed repeatedly was the ability for people to remove their masks and to be really landing in a place of honesty and vulnerability. So rather than a space of emotion, I would say Death Café is a space of beauty, because when you are with people you don't know and people are stripping away our roles, our labels, start to be raw, vulnerable, for me - magic happens. It can be again lots of laughter or lots of compassion, lots of AAAAAHH this person is amazing!!! This person has lived!!! So much love in a way, so much connection.

I argue that the concept of 'being strangers' in the above accounts is used as a tool to show that humans are able and willing to share sensitive experiences, be honest and reach authenticity, but that is obscured by people not stepping outside their everyday interactions and roles, as well as a lack of opportunities (such as Death Café) to do so. The topic of death thus is the common thread for members of humanity and facilitates the emergence of intimacy and commonality that is not easily experienced among strangers otherwise. When I asked a seasoned Death Café organiser Olivia what she thought the secret of the success of Death Café was, she jubilantly proclaimed:

Because it's strangers! This is a good thing; they don't know each other outside of this. What happens is people have the freedom to say what their thoughts are about death, what they would want for themselves, what they worry about, what their experiences have been with people dying who are close to them, and nobody judges them over it. So they have the freedom to share deeply and that is a real bond. And coming together like that creates community. And I tell you what is so necessary

in our lives today - community. It's basically about intimacy. If you want to be intimate, talk about being mortal, because however much money you have or what education you have doesn't matter because you're mortal, so it is an incredible bonding experience of people.

I argue that these claims about people being authentic when talking about death with strangers arise because participants are biographical strangers, interacting with other biographical strangers differently than usual, in a more intimate way. By engendering feelings of intimacy via the uniqueness of the interaction, this transient transformation of the usual everyday interaction with biographical strangers helps build the collective effervescence - or Maffesolian *puissance* - that is crucial to the feelings of the collective bond. It follows that we can think of being strangers at a Death Café as a form of transient identification implying certain behaviour; and as an affectual link, a conduit for collective experience between those present. This collective bond transcends the individual, or more accurately, the individual is subsumed in the collective sentiment, as Edith found:

The community is out there...it's in the ether. That's the community of humankind. So I don't worry if people don't come back, because the community is always there each time and I think they've got what they needed from it.

The feelings of pleasantness, basking in collective enjoyment of breaking the taboo, and connecting authentically with others at a Death Café can be examined with the help of Hetherington's (1998:57) argument that the significance of a neo-tribe is associated with a perceived ideal of identification with others. Much of Hetherington's discussion focuses on *Bund*-like sociations in general, but as I outlined in Chapter 3, Hetherington considers neo-tribes kindred to *Bunde*, hence allowing me to draw from this work. Hetherington (1998) defines this ideal identification as 'direct and expressive form of 'thou'-like identification (Buber, 1958), which refers to an unknowable, but direct relation outside of the realm of relations with things (it)' (Buber, 1958:25ff cited in Hetherington 1989:57); as well as a 'similar understanding of 'the other' that has been taken up and considered by Levinas (1989), who sees the other as the unknowable presence of alterity (difference)' (Hetherington, 1998:94). When writing about neo-tribes specifically, Hetherington noted that the Durkheimian notion of 'the social divine' (Maffesoli, 1996, in Hetherington, 1998:95), was

more appropriate to understand how neo-tribe members identify with each other, rather than Buber's 'I-thou'. For this reason, I will not add Buber's and Levinas's philosophical concepts to this discussion.

More relevant to my analysis, although still on the topic of *Bunde*, Hetherington noted that as a factor for identification, the participants of these sociations, including neo-tribes, also seek 'value difference as a sign of moral election' (Hetherington, 1998:95). By value difference Hetherington means certain 'shared oppositional goals to those of society at large' (ibid) that allows participants to perceive themselves as 'elect, with access to some heightened sense of experience' (ibid). Hetherington writes that a sense of moral election may be achieved if 'the sense of experience and expressive forms it takes are also associated with moral values about how this is a better way to live and interact with one another' (ibid). A sense of moral election is aided by the fact that these sociations are separated from the outside world (Hetherington, 1998:95). In Death Café this value difference manifests in the sentiment that death is a 'taboo' in the Western society and participants elect to come to Death Café to break said 'taboo'. Following Hetherington, this gives participants access to a 'heightened sense of experience' - the cosy ambience outlined in Chapter 4, the enjoyment of the conversation in Chapter 5, the 'magic' of being together in Chapter 6. The moral election Hetherington outlined is also achieved because participants agree that the taboo *needs* to be broken and they are doing so via the expressive form of Death Café. This commitment then, to elect to talk and explore the depths of oneself and others, becomes visible as the one thing that separates Death Café participants from people outside Death Café, especially heightened by the perception that Death Cafés are for everyone who is mortal and anyone can elect to come.

This sense of moral election is often addressed and reaffirmed throughout a Death Café meeting as people claim they can't talk about death elsewhere (Chapter 4); talk about the value of talking about death (Chapter 5); relate on the fact that death is a heavy topic but achieving easefulness is possible (Chapter 6). Placing so much emphasis on electing to come and the importance of such conversations, combined with the internal dynamics of the events that hinge on maintaining biographical strangership which does not reveal much

about more structural elements of belonging, such as class, religion, ethnicity, creates an impression that this value difference is the *only* thing that connects the participants. I argue that this way Death Cafés become perpetuated as meetings of totally miscellaneous strangers. The fact that Death Café participants are not cultural strangers is often omitted from narratives within and about Death Café, especially in the prominent claim among Death Café proponents, perfectly encapsulated in an excerpt from a short Death Café documentary: ‘Death goes beyond, really, race or gender identity, it connects all of us and it [Death Café] is a wonderful space for humanity to meet without any of these boundaries - it’s what connects us’ (Rahnama 2020:1:31-1:54). I did encounter astute self-reflections that people who attend Death Cafés have significant similarities (like Chester and Betty talked about Weatherfield Death Café earlier in this chapter), but only sporadically.

This is significant as it not only generally overestimates the diversity of individuals encountered (or as I wrote in section 7.3.1., equates encountering various personal narratives with encountering diversity), but also overestimates the universal appeal of talking about death with strangers at a Death Café. In the following section, I will explore what happens when an initiative, that is from the outset elective, welcoming to all, etc. gets its inclusiveness challenged when electing to attend is not the main prerequisite for participation in a Death Café.

## **7.5. Exclusion and symbolic boundaries in and around Death Café**

Alongside the Death Cafés that are in principle open to everyone, regardless of age, religious belief, nationality, etc., there are also Death Cafés that are organised for specific groups, such as BAME, Jewish, Latinx, LGBTQ+, young people, homeless communities, among others. In this section, I wish to discuss an attitude I encountered in my fieldwork that dedicating Death Cafés to specific groups goes against the universal and inclusive Death Café ethos. With this example, I show the existence of subtle elements of exclusion that reside in what many think is the very premise of Death Café - that shared mortality is somehow an exceptionally powerful bonding agent. This discussion will provide insights into the possible shortcomings of what is usually considered the elective

and inclusive neo-tribal nature of Death Café. I wish to reiterate how I use the concepts of biographical and cultural strangers. In this context, I am not saying that BAME, Jewish, Latinx, LGBTQ+, etc. are categories of cultural strangers, instead, I say that when Death Cafés are organised by specific communities, these identifications take precedence over simply being biographical strangers.

### ***7.5.1. Death Cafés for specific communities***

Simon, who left a theatre job to become a funeral celebrant after a self-proclaimed mid-life crisis, had decided to host Death Cafés to boost his profile in the community. He told me that he felt apprehensive after coming across a Death Café just for the members of the BAME communities. He made a post on the Death Café practitioner's page, asking whether Death Cafés aimed towards particular groups were not against Death Café regulations. This has since been deleted, but he told me that the replies he received from other organisers were that in principle, it was acceptable to organise Death Cafés for specific groups. He reflected upon this answer further:

I'm not sure it made huge sense to me, because I think open is open, and I don't understand why it can be advertised in a way that is very much pushing a certain type of people to attend. If it is advertised strictly as an LGBT thing, then I just think: 'Why?'. I don't know an awful lot about Muslims or Hindus or whatever but I've not seen separate ones for them. I suppose it disappoints me very slightly because I think death is one of the things that unites us all and whatever I believe and whatever I want to do is up to me, but I'm interested in what other people's experiences or thoughts are, and without mixing all of those people together to discuss that, how can we possibly know? I think any segregation of any sort is always... dangerous really.

The discomfort expressed by Simon at the 'segregation' of Death Café based on belonging to a particular community, seems to show concern about being inconsistent with Death Café's ethos of openness. Death Cafés for specific groups have been organised almost since the inception of Death Café (Battersby, 2012) and there is no obvious reason that the interaction there would be any different than in 'open' Death Cafés. I do not have direct experience of Death Cafés for specific communities, but I talked to humanist celebrant Sadie who had been asked by a local Rabbi to organise a Death Café for his Orthodox Jewish community. Sadie's experience was that:



It [the Death Café] had a mix of attendees who knew each other and who didn't, and while the conversations touched upon some Jewish traditions and rituals, it very much centred on their own fears and personal experiences, so it was completely similar to any other Death Café that was not based on a particular theme or particular angle.

I argue that Simon overstated the camaraderie people might feel simply because they share the destiny of having to ultimately die. Also, Simon's concern about 'artificial' separation in Death Cafés reveals an attitude that Death Café attendees should primarily relate to each other by virtue of having elected to attend. For Simon, this way of identifying with other Death Café attendees should be at the forefront over and above many other types of belonging, which are made nearly invisible and even irrelevant, and create the illusion of Death Café participation as simply the result of the constant flux of miscellaneous faces. When attendance is pre-empted and outwardly marked by belonging to a certain group, such as religious affiliation, cultural background, or sexual orientation, for some it seems to contravene with the open nature of Death Café for all human beings who merely have elected to attend. Simon, however, did not acknowledge that he himself was a representative of the 'Death Café-going sect' (borrowing from Betty's definition of her Death Café attendees as middle-class, museum-going sec earlier in this chapter). He was not just a random member of humankind who had come across Death Cafés. Death Café proponents often perpetuate it as open and welcoming, and it indeed is for those who end up being there. However, I argue that fundamentally, building the Death Café's collective connection on these two factors (being mortal and electing to attend), and by claiming that this results in encountering diverse and miscellaneous human beings, overestimates how universally appealing, accessible and beneficial talking to biographical strangers about death is.

Several years before Simon's query, in 2013, Jon Underwood, prompted by an advertisement for a Death Café specifically for the pet-owning community, had clarified the difference between themed Death Cafés and Death Cafés for specific communities:

[...] Themes tend to narrow down the discussion. What happens if someone wants to talk about something else at a funeral-themed Death Café? Also, these events are more likely to move towards being information giving sessions which Death Café is definitely not. And it is

easy for people who know a lot about the theme to find themselves taking the role of 'experts' which also tends to skew the conversation.

However, having a Death Café for a community makes a lot of sense. We all belong to so many different groups and it is natural and appropriate to discuss death with people who know where you're coming from. And if the conversation moves around, as it always does - no problem. As such, I hope we have many more Death Cafés for different communities (Underwood, 2013c).

In contrast to Simon, who argued that we should all be able to relate to each other because we are all mortal, Underwood highlighted that people belong to multiple groups in their lives and community-specific Death Cafés can offer an even more tailored experience than the already elective association it is.

To illustrate how this is achieved, I discuss Jamie's (mid-20s male) quest to organise an LGBTQ+ Death Café as part of an outreach programme for a local charity he worked for. In our interview, which took place after his first Death Café, Jamie said that it was important to him to make sure he wouldn't just get people interested in LGBTQ+ issues attending, what he called 'spectators', and 'experts'. Jamie said he wanted to make sure that the attendees had lived experiences of belonging to that broad group and 'were able to openly discuss issues without feeling like they were being observed or evaluated'. He used targeted advertising in LGBTQ+ friendly locations and while he promoted the event on his personal social media, he posted the event advertisement on the official Death Café website only just right before the event as he was not trying to attract the general public.

The event was attended by six people who identified as LGBTQ+ and two people who worked in roles dealing with LGBTQ+ issues. Because most attendees were known at Jamie's workplace, he highlighted confidentiality - that one should be careful bringing up experiences of other people and for all the sharing to remain within the confines of Death Café. In other words, he also emphasised the situational intimacy between people who were not biographical strangers. By advertising exclusively in LGBTQ+ spaces, Jamie actively tried to achieve a Death Café where people would be free to engage in conversations with those who might have very similar experiences from the outset, instead of them trying to feel out possible similarities like in a regular Death Café. What this example

shows is that when social differentiation is brought into being when organising Death Cafés for specific groups, it is often not with a view to segregate, but with a view to safeguard the more marginal experiences from being misunderstood and misappropriated. I argue Jamie's pre-emptive efforts to safeguard LGBTQ+ Death Café attendees necessarily remind us that there are differences in our lives, that our experiences of death, dying and bereavement are neither universal, nor universally relatable, nor that everyone would benefit from sharing them with strangers that have elected to come to an 'open' Death Café.

I later interviewed organiser Emma who knew Jamie as they both worked somewhat locally for different charities. She asked me how Jamie had gone about advertising his event and I told her that he held off doing that because he didn't want people who were merely interested in LGBTQ+ issues to come. To this Emma responded:

I'm not quite sure how to phrase this but I can't quite get my head around the bit where sometimes different minority groups want to be seen the same as everybody else, but they also want to be different from everybody else. And that sort of tension and dynamics seem to go on and on...

I then said that I had come across an advertisement for a BAME Death Café that framed it as a chance for underrepresented voices to be heard. Emma replied:

It is a bit of an echo chamber there then, isn't it? Because I mean... I live in a very white area, and everybody is fairly local, living in villages where people have been there a long time. So you haven't got much of a spectrum of people from different cultures and backgrounds really. Which is a shame, but then I find it fascinating to go to Death Café and hear different people's experiences of death, so why put up a barrier for that?

Emma herself told me that her Death Cafés were attended mostly by middle-aged and elderly white people, yet it seems that she equated being able to hear various personal narratives to encountering diversity. Also, Emma insinuated that Death Cafés for specific communities were attempts to limit this supposed co-existence of diversity. Again, we see that the notion of 'strangers' here is most important when it refers to unacquainted people electing to attend a Death Café as an experience - to talk about death with other strangers. In a way, of course, they *are* encountering individuals with whom they have nothing in common as they wouldn't meet going about their daily life otherwise.

However, this simple understanding of ‘complete strangers’ coming together and being able to connect authentically on their shared mortality, overlooks how relatively homogenous people who elect to attend are. Earlier in this chapter, I showed that the notion of enacting being biographical strangers is more important to the positive Death Café experience than actually being them. This means that the essence of Death Café can in principle be replicated in any Death Café that is publicly accessible and voluntarily attended (in opposition to Death Cafés in workplaces or educational institutions, only open to those involved there), hence there is no reason why a Death Café in pre-existing communities would go against the initiative’s ethos. While not a point of view that I found many of Death Café organisers take, the hesitation expressed by some about organising Death Cafés for specific communities, possibly reveals more about their broader views on social diversity than about shared mortality.

Green et al. (2016) organised three Death Cafés in three different establishments in Bradford, UK, and found that they attracted a relatively unrepresentative proportion of the local community. The authors concluded that ‘If they are to become more open and accessible, consideration must be given to aspects such as location, timing, publicity, style, facilitation and “ownership”’ (Green et al., 2016:A21). Ruby, who organised Glendarroch Death Café as part of Dying Matters Awareness week events at a hospice she was employed at, told me that she was acutely aware that this initiative was only reaching ‘white and middle-class people who want to talk already’. Ruby considered holding a Death Café somewhere less ‘artsy’ to attract more diverse attendees, but then she told me that alongside this she had to consider in which spaces she would feel safe as a young woman. Green et al.’s (2016) observations about having more variety in ‘ownership’ of Death Cafés here seem especially pertinent.

I argue that one way for the Death Café initiative to evolve and reach more individuals is to more proactively bring them to specific communities. Attempting to maintain the ‘open’ Death Café ethos at all costs in a way sequesters it to maintain appeal only to certain ‘strangers’: those expressive, spiritually curious and explorative, sociable people, who have concerns about turning ‘existential anxiety about mortality into anticipation of customising one’s own natural, self-expressive death’ (Lofland, 1978). What Lofland here

wrote about participants in the Death Awareness movement of the 1960s and 1970s, readily applies to Death Café. These similarities are especially visible in relation to perpetuating the trope of the existence of the death taboo, as Walter (in Jacobsen, 2021:12) pointed out:

I wonder how many who attend Death Cafés do so because they feel unable to talk about death in their family? They (mis)attribute their family conversational difficulties to a societal death taboo; others in the café affirm this, so the societal taboo trope gets solidified further.

While Emma referred to a BAME Death Café as an echo chamber, many Death Café proponents seem to not consider that Death Café could be considered one as well, in terms of its approach to talking about death and dying.

### ***7.5.2. Links between neo-tribal theory, postmaterialism and being strangers at a Death Café***

Neo-tribal theory ‘favours situations in which one’s social environment can temporarily submerge one’s sense of identity’ (Malbon, 1998:39). Green (2018) argues that Maffesolien framework may help us avoid the notion of intentional or purposive individuals and the reduction of the social to a depopulated, internalized structural skeleton (Shiermer and Gook, 2019:189). As such, the dynamics of group behaviour are at the forefront of neo-tribal theoretical framework. In this spirit, this thesis presented a view of Death Café that highlights the aspects of sociality and collectivity, instead of tracing individual attendee and organiser motivations and life-stories. Thus, this is only one of many angles through which a multifaceted social phenomenon of Death Café can be understood.

I used neo-tribal theory to emphasise going against the prevalent academic narratives and framings of Death Café specifically, but this raises questions whether neo-tribal theory is only relegated to being applied to phenomena that are inherently entertaining, leisure-based as we saw through its applications in sociology, tourism and leisure studies. Choosing neo-tribal theory as one’s main theoretical framework needs to be made cautiously, having considered carefully the context in which the social phenomenon in question has been conceptualised

and written about. It has value, like I have argued in my Death Café study, but as a theory in general it is best used sparingly.

Walter wrote that one of greatest dangers of the revival of death is that ‘its expressive individualism may take over’ (Walter, 1994:198). Walter gave a relevant example that at the time of writing his *Revival of Death* (1994), volunteer bereavement counselling may have been the most frequent way in which people were introduced to the concepts of popular therapy in Britain, ‘with all the attendant dangers of obsessive introspection’ (Walter, 1994:198). A clear delineation of boundaries, temporal and personal, in Death Café, while providing some space to articulate unspoken thoughts, release some tension, and interact in an unusual way, nevertheless might have difficulty to reach any wider social/community impact precisely because of its neo-tribal nature. When people talk about talking about death and how they are engaged in something so valuable (breaking a taboo even in our case) it can be, admittedly reductively, labelled ‘navel gazing’. In a way, the particular enjoyment gained from group collectivity in neo-tribes can be said to be grounded in a collective solipsism in terms of that particular lifestyle, shared aesthetic or sentiment, valued commodity, etc. This is especially pertinent in the context of postmaterialist Death Awareness, Death Positive, and Walter’s revivalist values.

To further ground the assertion that Death Café is both a reflection and creation of some subtle class-based cultural hierarchies, I turn very briefly to Hansford, Thomas and Wyatt’s (2022) paper, which calls to examine whether public health approaches to palliative care address the needs of low-income communities. They touch on the Death Awareness movement and also critique Death Café. They believe it is ironic how Thompson et al. (2016), calling for the sociology of death dying and bereavement to be a ‘listening art’, to provide insight into the social processes and structures contributing to inequalities in death and dying, cite the emergence of the death café movement as a positive example of this. Hansford, Thomas and Wyatt (2022) postulate that despite little existing concrete evidence in terms of attendance at Death Cafes, anecdotally it can be suggested that most Death Café participants are white, middle-class, middle-aged and older women. Whilst not suggesting that any of these initiatives are not of benefit to those that participate, Hansford, Thomas and Wyatt suggest

the need to look more closely at whose needs are not being responded to and addressed. Ultimately, they suggest future research to more explicitly ask: ‘How might a focus on choice and responsibility alienate certain populations’ (Hansford, Thomas and Wyatt, 2022:10-11), especially considering that sociology has neglected the death-related experiences of working-class people, and has privileged middle-class norms, such as the importance of verbal communication (e.g. open awareness of dying, counselling), control and individualisation (e.g. alternative and natural funerals) (Howarth, 2007b, Conway, 2012). It could be said that hearing in Death Cafes that talking about death is valuable and enjoyable pastime, necessary to the dismantling of a wider taboo in the society, is a view of people who have a choice, or feel like they have a choice in authoring their own ‘good death’ by talking about it casually with strangers over a cuppa.

## 7.6. Conclusion

This chapter unpacked the meaning behind an image that has become explicitly associated with Death Café: that of complete strangers, from different walks of life, coming together to talk about death over a slice of cake and a cup of coffee. Using Lofland’s (1998) distinction between biographical and cultural strangers as a guide, I first highlighted that while elective and voluntary, Death Café participation is subject to specific cultural tastes, attitudes towards death and to talking about it, and operates in a post-material expressivist cultural world. It is not a problem per se, but it was necessary to emphasise that the narrative of ‘strangers’ coming together to talk about death overestimates how diverse and miscellaneous the participants really are.

I then showed how the value of death as a conversational topic is connected to the emergence of intimacy between strangers at a Death Café. Gathering to talk about death in Death Café evokes ideas about common humanity and is a conduit for a celebration of human sociality, hinging on the fascination that strangers are able to authentically relate to each other. I connected this to a neo-tribal feature Hetherington (1998) identified, that members seek to identify within each other a ‘value difference as a sign of moral election’ (Hetherington, 1998:95). In Death Cafés, which are in principle open to all mortals, this identification is primarily based on electing to come to Death Café. Maintaining

social distance via biographical strangership within the event (whether real or enacted) is the basis for feelings of intimacy to emerge and helps uphold the perception that the biggest, or even the only thing participants have in common is wanting to talk about death.

Jools Barsky's statement that 'the world would change if everyone in the UK attended a Death Café' (Brayne, 2020) is problematic because it foregrounds electing to attend as the only criteria for membership and the primary identification with each other within the event. A similar attitude was visible in the last part of the chapter, where I discussed organiser Simon's perception that Death Cafés for specific communities (BAME, LGBTQI+, Jewish among others) go against the Death Café ethos. This is the idea that humans are able to relate to each other because death is a common fate to all. Not everyone wants to share with miscellaneous strangers and I argue that there is value in organising Death Cafés for those who would rather engage with people with whom they share more grounded commonalities than just being mortal. As instrumental uses of Death Cafés and adaptations of the Death Café model multiply, one way to retain the initiative's 'imaginative and innovative potential' (Richards et al., 2020:569) would be for Death Café proponents to offer more opportunities to have these unguided, open, intimate conversations in specific communities. This chapter and the rest of the thesis showed that the positive, sociable neo-tribal features of the Death Café group reside in the in-event dynamics that can be replicated in groups of more or less diverse individuals.

This chapter directly responded to Le Grand's (2018) call for neo-tribal research to incorporate the 'darker aspects of neo-tribes' (Le Grand, 2018:28), such as the notions of conflict, hierarchy, symbolic boundaries, or social differentiation. According to Le Grand, this provides a more nuanced reading of neo-tribal theory beyond focusing on the positive aspects of neo-tribal experiences and overstating their integrative, inclusive, and energising character (ibid). The specific example of Death Café provides insight into how the electiveness of neo-tribes can be complex in relation to the outside world. It brings attention to the fact that the elective nature and inclusivity of neo-tribes needs to be examined in context with members' cultural worlds and their affordances and values for participation. While this attitude is inherent in anthropological



research, it has been lacking in neo-tribal writing, and in line with sociologist Le Grand, I argue that more attention needs to be placed on the cultural, social, and economic reasons for participating in neo-tribal groupings, beyond simply voluntarily electing to do so.

As a final note to this final empirical chapter, I wish to say that this notion of strangers coming together to share their thoughts and feelings about the complex and sensitive subject of death also can be said to signal something relevant to the context of spectacular death. Writing about grief blogs, as one manifestation of spectacular death Jacobsen et al. (2021) finds an interesting point, which is also relevant to my thesis overall:

These practices of spontaneous memorialisation - either in public places or on the internet - fit well with what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has termed 'liquid modernity', in which the solid, stable, static and stationary has gradually given way to the liquid, unstable, changing and fluid. However, the practices - even though they are at times customised and personalised to fit individual needs and demands - seem to be at odds with the individualisation that Bauman saw as a sign of the times and instead they inaugurate a new search for community in death and grief' (Jacobsen et al. 2021:178).

Here Jacobsen's thought is strikingly similar to my base reasoning for applying neo-tribal theory to my reading of Death Café - to see something beyond lonely individuals traversing the alienated postmodern terrain - to see the emerging feelings of collectivity, camaraderie and warmth, however flawed I presented these features of Death Cafe in this chapter. Here spectacular death and neo-tribal theory reveal each other as an interesting addition to each other's toolkits and vocabularies.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

### 8.1. Introduction

In this ethnographic study, I set out to explore the values, meanings and practices associated with organising and participating in Death Café events in the UK. After Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, detailing my research methodology and theoretical framework respectively, I offered four chapters presenting empirical data and analysis. I chose Chapter 4, charting the meanings of 'space' at Death Cafés to go first as it provided the reader with rich imagery of spaces Death Café events occupy so that the engagements detailed in further chapters could be imagined against a physical background. Chapter 5 then focused on Death Café conversations as an enjoyable experience, thus populating the Death Café space with its main activity - talk. I then moved on to delve deeper into interactions beyond conversing. In Chapter 6, I inquired into how attendees come to relate to each other and how that contributed to what organisers and attendees considered the 'magic' of Death Café. Finally, in Chapter 7, I provided some critical insights into the broader meanings of Death Café, specifically, the claims of its universal appeal, value, and inclusiveness.

As I was conducting fieldwork, I did not know that neo-tribal theory, focusing on ephemeral groupings of people based on shared sentiment, interests, style, or outlooks would become the main theoretical framework for my thesis. Once I encountered this theory, I found it especially relevant to make sense of the dominant sentiment I discovered in my research which is that in Death Cafés being with other people is valued as much as being able to talk about the sensitive topic of death. I wished to give both these aspects of Death Café experience - talking about *death* and talking about death *with other people* - equal weight in my thesis. Thus, as I sought to understand how people, gathering to talk about death come to experience affinity, connectedness, and enjoyment, and how certain behaviours and spaces can facilitate the creation of these transient feelings, neo-tribal theory felt appropriate to apply to my data. Neo-tribal theory is not a popular approach in anthropology and is not without drawbacks as I discussed in Chapter 3. This thesis aimed to further the relevance of neo-tribal theory by engaging both with Michel Maffesoli's original texts and new developments by scholars from sociology and tourism and leisure studies

that attempt to counter some of the theoretical and methodological deficits of Maffesoli's work.

In this concluding chapter, I will bring together the main findings of the thesis and outline its threefold contribution to knowledge: to the study of Death Cafés; to the theoretical utility of neo-tribal theory for death studies; and the advancement of neo-tribal theory in combination with the ethnographic method for anthropology. I also outline my suggestions for future research. I begin by discussing the findings of this study in relation to Death Café as an object of study.

## **8.2 Contribution to knowledge about Death Cafés**

This is the first study about Death Cafés that includes: participant observation of Death Café events (20); recording Death Café conversations (14); interviews with Death Café organisers (24) and follow up interviews with Death Café attendees (25). The combination of these varied datasets allowed me to build particularly rich insights into the inner workings of Death Café dynamics that lie beyond self-reported organiser claims (Baldwin, 2017; Richards et al., 2020), participant feedback surveys (Nelson et al., 2018), syntheses of emergent conversation themes (Parry et al., 2021), and other largely descriptive accounts. During the period of my fieldwork and thesis writing, most new academic publications on Death Cafés remained mostly focused on adapting and evaluating 'modified' Death Café models (e.g., Hammer et al., 2019; Bateman et al., 2020; Olives et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021) in various institutional, educational and outreach contexts. From the outset, I positioned the domination of such instrumental and purpose-driven attitudes towards Death Cafés as the main impetus for my approach, which was to take a step back, as it were, and not to take the interactions within Death Cafés for granted. It so happened that six of the Death Cafés I attended were run under the organisers' professional role and in that capacity, which confirms that Death Cafés are quite widely implemented in these outreach and engagement contexts. However, it was my goal to look at the enactments of the original Death Café ethos of unguided conversations with no particular solution or goal in mind. Thus, my research on

Death Cafés is unique among the existing literature in its methodological and epistemological orientation.

In Chapter 2, I outlined three broad questions that guided my research. In this thesis I did not devote chapters to respond directly to each research question. Aspects of these questions were addressed from different angles in all four empirical chapters, and I will now synthesise the main findings in order to directly answer each of my research questions.

**Research question 1: What can be said about the social dynamics within Death Café events? Is there anything specific about it that contributed to the popularity of the initiative?**

I found that Death Cafés were most often pleasant encounters where attendees felt they had the opportunity to speak freely and in a straightforward way about a sensitive topic in a dedicated space. After Death Café events, attendees often reported feelings of camaraderie with other participants and acknowledged the value of hearing other people's stories and views, possibly learning something practical, or gathering food for thought. Attendees also emphasised how important it was to be listened to. I unpacked this in most detail in Chapter 5 where I explored the dynamics of Death Café conversations. There, I showed that attendees and organisers were invested in keeping Death Café interactions in line with their varied understandings of 'good form', i.e., in line with their understandings of what individual and group behaviours lead to experiencing Death Café in the most valuable and enjoyable way. Synthesising Georg Simmel's and Michel Maffesoli's views, I used a conceptual frame of sociability (democratic play-form of association where the only concern for this type of gathering is to succeed in evoking a sociable moment (Simmel, 1949:257)) to argue that striving to maintain Death Café interaction as an enjoyable, conflict-free interaction was a collaborative, collective endeavour. I argued that a specific common behaviour I observed in Death Cafés - talking about talking about death - is a key part of the Death Café aesthetics. Here, I used aesthetics in the Maffesolian sense, meaning 'an emotional attraction and shared sentiment between people, with the emphasis upon the collective rather than the individual aspects of experience' (Osborne, 1997:127). Or in other words -

feeling in common (Maffesoli, 1996:74). When talking about talking about death, Death Café participants reflexively consider the activity they have gathered to engage in together, which strengthens the shared sentiment and feelings of collectivity. People participating in Death Cafés feel intensely that they are there for the same reason as each other - to 'break the taboo' of talking about death and, put simply, this temporarily bonds them together. This is a key feature of the social dynamics within Death Cafés that I discovered in my research.

The vast majority of Death Café organisers and attendees considered it to be a judgement-free zone where people could talk about anything on their minds. I addressed this in Chapter 7, where I talked about the 'safety of strangers', meaning that most people at a Death Café don't know each other outside of Death Café and are likely to not meet again. Because the relationship very rarely extends beyond Death Café and also has no (or very little) bearing on other relationships in people's daily lives, people find it easier to express their more personal, vulnerable, or contentious thoughts. Being, or acting as biographical strangers (i.e. previously unacquainted) thus is quite important in Death Cafés in order to enact such attitude of openness. Being and acting as strangers, however, is much more complicated in Death Cafés among student cohorts, or in workplace Death Cafés: settings in which people's knowledge of each other extends to other, especially hierarchical contexts, which then results in these events more resembling 'debriefing events' (Bateman et al., 2020) than Death Cafés.

The easefulness to bring up almost anything also has a different side, which I addressed in Chapter 6 and is another feature of social dynamics at a Death Café. Death Cafés are not intended to act as sources for grief and bereavement support, but they sometimes become surrogate spaces for that. This is because Death Café participants elect to attend because they agree that death is a significant aspect of human experience and also that some people who attend Death Cafés *are* suffering. Hence, as a collective, Death Café participants often feel it necessary or simply polite to hold space for emotional outpourings even though it is not the primary purpose of Death Café and might make them feel uncomfortable.

The social dynamics at a Death Café are particularly interesting because while maintaining a certain social distance is important (via maintaining sociability, addressed in Chapter 5, and biographical strangership, addressed in Chapter 7), simultaneously, people engage deeply with each other and share intimate personal thoughts. This raises a question: If a sociability is concerned with having ‘no external content’ (Simmel, 1950a) and maintaining politeness and pleasantness, sometimes even to the extent of frivolity (Anderson, 2015:13), how can it then also be intimate? Building on the notion of situational intimacy (Henriksson, 2014) I introduced in Chapter 7, here I further claim that sociability need not be incompatible with intimacy. As I have shown in Chapters 5 and 6, the perceived success of Death Café interaction often hinges on how people manage their reactions to things that do not go as expected, particularly in relation to emotional outpourings. If such a response manifests merely as tolerance in order to maintain sociability, I argue it still contributes to experiencing the moment as intimate because people at a Death Café experience each other differently than usual. They are talking about death in a way they likely haven’t before, with people they wouldn’t usually talk about death with - this situation and relation to others feels unique and thus, as per Henriksson’s (2014) suggestion, becomes intimate. Overall, the social dynamics at Death Café require effort from all participants but the combination of striving to maintain sociability, social distance, and engaging in intimate personal sharing result in a particularly effervescent social interaction which I argue contributes significantly to its enduring popularity.

**Research question 2: Are there any normative features of Death Café organisation and participation and how are they negotiated in different sites?**

The most consistent feature across Death Café events in different towns and venues was attempting to create a specific atmosphere. Organisers held various beliefs about the venues Death Cafés should be held in, should they be evening events in dedicated spaces, or blend in with urban café establishment rhythms in broad daylight. Most generally, organisers felt that ‘creating’ or ‘holding’ space *enables* Death Café conversations, hence the space should be welcoming and

‘cosy’, no matter the actual physical setting. Connected to these normative ideas, in Chapter 4 I introduced a dynamic development of Oldenburg’s (1999) ‘third place’ (a convivial, egalitarian place for informal social interaction) - the notion of ‘third-placeness’ (drawing primarily from Calderon (2016)) as a desirable quality of Death Café interaction. I argued that the Death Café group collectively evokes tangible (café-like establishment) and intangible (cosiness, egalitarian attitude) symbols of third-placeness as a challenge to societal ideas about where and with who should conversations about death happen. I argued that the ephemeral, or ‘pop-up’ nature of Death Café space is inextricable from the particular appeal of the interaction. People can enter and exit this transient intimate convivial reality with ease and can expect a similar ambience in future Death Cafés or at Death Cafés in a different locale if they wish to attend.

Another normative feature of Death Café is that many proponents, both organisers and passionate attendees, hold the view that talking about death at a Death Café is universally beneficial to human beings and that anyone can attend this event. In Chapter 7 I questioned the limits of this normative assumption that Death Café is elective and radically inclusive (all mortal humans). I argued that while such sentiment is present and enjoyed *within* Death Café events, overemphasising the transient identification with others based on being mortal and having elected to attend creates an image of Death Café that is overly diverse, open, and inclusive. The caveats of this became clear when I presented examples of negative reactions when having elected to attend was not the be-all and end-all for Death Café membership and when other forms of belonging, such as being a member of BAME, LGBTQ+ communities were brought to the forefront as a criterion for participating in events. I concluded that as a social phenomenon, Death Café is most attractive to people of relative economic and existential security and an expressive attitude towards communicating about death and dying. While anyone can attend the Death Café in principle, my research called for more explicit awareness in the future development of the franchise that it does not possess universal appeal or offer universal benefit. To this I further suggested that if there was a wish to enhance the potential of such conversations to reach more diverse cohorts, Death Cafés for specific communities would be one proactive step towards that.

Finally, in the thesis Introduction, I noted that I wished to find out whether Death Cafés really are spaces where death is not ‘taboo’ and what purpose do these specific spaces where it is appropriate to talk about death serve. I found that in Death Cafés in the UK, specific behaviours are desired and they are subject to normative regulations more than the topics discussed. Both controversial and boring topics are brought up and are mostly tolerated or gently managed because it is collectively understood that it’s a part of interacting with other people. Thus, while death itself is not ‘taboo’ at a Death Café, behaving in an obstructive and non-collaborative way is frowned upon. In Death Cafés that operate in line with the original ethos, the principle of social interaction and the act of having a conversation matters more than querying and solving specific questions about death or attempting to ‘demystify’ it, as it would be in an education-focused (Mitchell et al., 2021) or workplace Death Café, or even more so in a healthcare-based Death Café (Hammer et al., 2019; Bateman et al., 2020).

**Research question 3. Are Death Cafés self-contained events, or are there any effects of Death Café attendance that extend beyond the boundaries of the event?**

I attempted to answer this question with the help of semi-structured follow-up interviews with Death Café attendees and organisers. Interviews with attendees identified no specific outcomes attributable directly to participating in a Death Café. Attendees mainly reported that what they got from Death Cafés was the enjoyment of the ease of talking with others about the sensitive topic of death. Several organisers claimed to have witnessed such effects like attendees deciding on the type of funeral they wanted, finding relevant information, but at large, the majority of Death Café organisers were very comfortable with the uncertainty of Death Café meeting outcomes. They quite happily accepted comments that the conversation and the cake were good and that people felt ‘uplifted’ and ‘enlivened’ as affirmations of the events’ success. While some attendees made statements to the effect that Death Café had a lasting impact on their lives, such immediate evaluation is arguably the most readily observable outcome of participating in a Death Café. Importantly, these effects do not rely



on continuous attendance which is congruent with the fluidity, heterogeneity, and transience of neo-tribal membership.

I also touched on this question in Chapter 5, where I found that while in some instances Death Café conversations were defined as ‘good rehearsals’ for bringing up such conversations in the family, my follow-up interviews revealed that this was rarely actualised. Many of the people I’ve interviewed were first time Death Café attendees and while they expressed to me that their need to discuss death-related matters was satisfied and they were not at that moment looking to look into that further, I cannot claim that attending a Death Café does not have lasting impact as a result of possible change of mindset related to death.

The ease of talking about death at Death Cafés gives credence to the idea that such conversations are possible. Coming along to a dedicated space where talking about death is expected allows people to understand and consolidate that they are not alone, to experience this easefulness, and then to return to their daily lives where they may or may not continue the same as they were. Some expressed gaining confidence to eventually address these matters with their family in the future (however vaguely expressed), but my study showed that first and foremost, when trying to grasp the benefits of Death Café attendance, studies should not overlook the immediate enjoyable, educational, and social experience of each event. Data presented in Chapters 4 and 7 evidence that the convivial event reality and the interaction have very clear boundaries for the most part and while Death Café attendees experience a certain ‘sphere of freedom’ (de la Fuente, 2008:351), it might also indirectly perpetuate some challenges of talking about death outside of Death Café. The framework of neo-tribal aesthetics and the value of sociability provided an alternative view of Death Café as an enjoyable social interaction in itself, the mechanisms of which have not been explicated in much of the existing literature.

### **8.3. Contribution to the advancement of the use of neo-tribal theory**

This thesis contributed to the advancement of neo-tribal theory in contemporary death studies by applying it to Jacobsen's concept of spectacular death (Jacobsen, 2016). It also broadened the use of neo-tribal theory in anthropology. I will outline these contributions in turn now.

#### ***8.3.1. Further developments of neo-tribal theory***

The additional theoretical concepts I chose to look at Death Café - space, sociability, empathy, intimacy among strangers - are all concerned with the pop-up, spontaneous emergence and experience of human connection and were selected because they were relevant to both the empirical phenomenon of Death Café as I observed it, and the concepts within neo-tribal theory. These additional concepts, however, are very theoretically broad. The specific scholars I chose to engage with have either a close relationship to Maffesoli (e.g. Vorobjovas-Pinta, Georg Simmel), or their empirical and theoretical thought is well-attuned to expand neo-tribal theory's applicability in disciplines of relevance for my thesis - anthropology (Hollan and Throop) and sociology (Henriksson, Le Grand).

In Chapter 4, utilizing Vorobjovas-Pinta's development of neo-tribal theory, my thesis makes a unique contribution by engaging with the concept of space empirically within the framework of neo-tribal theory and as such, further expands the theory's analytical value.

In Chapter 5. Using the concept of sociability, or specifically, striving for sociability in Death Café elucidated the vague aspects of Maffesolian concept of aesthetics as a way of feeling in common (Maffesoli, 1996:74). When talking about talking about death, Death Café participants reflexively consider the activity they have gathered to engage in together, which strengthens the shared sentiment and feelings of collectivity. People participating in Death Cafés feel intensely that they are there for the same reason as each other - to 'break the taboo' of talking about death and, put simply, this temporarily bonds them

together. As such, this adds both to theoretical development of neo-tribal aesthetics and elucidates some of the activities within Death Café empirically. In Chapter 6, Using one anthropological understanding of empathy, specifically Hollan's (2008) call to study how empathic understanding emerges by moving beyond a first-person view of empathy and turning analytical attention from the empathiser to the person to be understood, I provided a theoretical and empirical development of Maffesoli's (1987, 1995, 1996) somewhat vague and underused notion of *puissance* - the energy of the collective. Using this theoretical frame I elucidated how people in Death Café attempt to understand each other in relation to the shared sentiment 'we need to talk about this sensitive subject - death'.

In Chapter 7, showcasing how the intimacy between strangers is created, I also problematised the perception among Death Café proponents that Death Cafes are open to anyone and that anyone can connect in the same way in Death Café. I argued that we must not oversee that this public forum privileged certain middle-class norms and views relating to death, specifically of verbal communication, control and individualism in pursuit of 'good death'. The theoretical concept of intimacy here was a conduit with which to understand the feelings of communality but also the superficiality of it. To neo-tribal theory, this specific combination of empirical findings being strangers at a Death Café, provides a critique that the elective nature and inclusivity of neo-tribes needs to be examined in context with members' cultural worlds and their affordances and values for participation, which has been lacking in existing neo-tribal writing.

### **8.3.2. Social anthropology**

First, I wish to highlight how an anthropological lens and ethnographic methods enhance neo-tribal theory. Vorobjovas-Pinta (2021:123) suggested that ethnographic methods have the potential to provide holistic social accounts and hence are especially useful in establishing linkages between the neo-tribal group elements: fluidity in membership; shared sentiments; rituals and symbols; and space. In turn, this helps to avoid engaging in a 'mechanistic exercise' (Sandiford, 2019) of applying the four neo-tribal characteristics to social situations and then claiming that these groupings are indeed neo-tribes. My research went further than just providing insights into how these elements are

intertwined. Carrying the anthropological approach of holism (to an extent, as addressed in Chapter 2) throughout the whole research and writing process allowed me not to lose sight of the wider context of behaviours at a Death Café. I used the specific example of Death Café to provide insight into how the elective nature of neo-tribes can be complex in relation to the outside world. I showed that Death Café attendance is subject to specific cultural tastes, which stands in contrast to a prevalent sentiment among Death Café proponents that at large, the events are accessible, universally relevant and beneficial to all mortal human beings<sup>10</sup>. Contributing to Le Grand's (2018) call to move beyond almost exclusively positive accounts of neo-tribal conviviality and solidarity, Chapter 7 brought attention to the fact that the elective nature and inclusivity of neo-tribes needs to be examined in context, paying attention to members' cultural worlds, their affordances, and values.

Second, this thesis contributes empirically to the use of neo-tribal theory in anthropology. I have shown that neo-tribal theory, which has been fruitfully applied in sociology and tourism and leisure studies to examine the collective achievements of ephemeral solidarity and sociability, can also be applied in anthropology. A neo-tribal theoretical lens was applied to ethnographic data generally in Chapters 4, 5, and 7, while Chapter 6 also engaged with some specific anthropological concerns. Definitions of empathy and how anthropologists can analyse how people understand each other have been subject to disciplinary debates (Alcoff, 1991; Fainzang, 2007; Hollan and Throop, 2008). I contributed to anthropological examinations of the concept of empathy by responding to Hollan's (2008) call to study how empathic understanding emerges by moving beyond a first-person view of empathy and turning analytical attention from the empathiser to the person to be understood. I found that neo-tribal theory, emphasising that neo-tribes are first and foremost concerned with maintaining human interaction via temporary emotional identification (Dohnal, 2007:7), was a helpful frame to look at people's *attempts* to understand each other in relation to the shared sentiment 'we need to talk about this sensitive subject - death'. Thus, as a way of interacting and engaging in the specific Death Café context, neo-tribal theory helped frame empathy as a collective

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<sup>10</sup> With the exception of deeply grieving people but that is a caveat for individuals, not 'human beings' as a whole.

achievement, emerging in the space between people, dependent on people's efforts to understand others and be understood themselves. As such, I also provided a theoretical and empirical development of Maffesoli's (1987, 1995, 1996) somewhat vague and underused notion of *puissance* - the energy of the collective, akin to Durkheim's (1995[1912]) concept of collective effervescence.

### **8.3.3. Death studies**

Based on Mokhov and Milenina's (2021) analysis of the development of the death studies field from 2010 to 2020, my thesis directly filled some of the gaps they identified in death studies literature. Mokhov and Milenina looked at publications from three of the biggest journals from this interdisciplinary field: *Death Studies*, *OMEGA*, and *Mortality*. They found that the most popular research topic was grief and bereavement; the field was dominated by psychological research; and that the field was 'considerably closed within itself in terms of academic discussion, whereas academic knowledge on death and dying is mostly in demand in psychology and medicine' (Mokhov and Milenina, 2021:233). Hence, this anthropologically oriented thesis with its ethnographic methodology is a valuable thematical and methodological contribution to the death studies field.

This thesis also engaged theoretically with several narratives from death studies. Firstly, Walter's (1994) theory of revivalism and neo-modern death set the scene within which Death Cafés take place. Walter identified a contemporary condition without the rigidity of traditional forms of organisation in relation to death, where individuals and groups seek a certain ambience of authenticity in death, while at the same time engaged in consumptive practices. While not central to the thesis, I argued that this framework remains relevant nearly three decades after its conception because of its elegant articulation of the co-existing tensions between institutionalised, medicalised, commercialised, and personally meaningful, and expressive engagements with death.

Another narrative my thesis engaged with was that there is a 'death taboo' in the Western world. While the factual existence of the taboo and the utility of this premise to death studies have been extensively questioned (Robert and Tradii, 2017; Tradii and Robert, 2019; Zimmerman, 2007; Jacobsen and

Petersen, 2020; among others) the trope persists in the popular imagination and is especially relevant in the context of Death Café, where people gather specifically as a perceived challenge to this taboo. Sweetman (2004:87) wrote that Maffesoli's work on neo-tribal sociality 'allows to address the affectual dimensions of "subcultural" involvement and the extra discursive aspects of the forms of identification involved'. In the case of Death Café, I used Maffesolian sociality and especially the neo-tribal concept of aesthetics to look beyond the discourse of dismantling the death taboo. 'We need to talk about death' is not a unique sentiment that Death Café has encapsulated. It has been around in more or less organised forms since the 1960s. It is a shared sentiment, however, that is presented in a certain way that communicates a specific style of social interaction, a specific communicative aesthetic. Thus, I found that the death taboo is both a discursive and extra-discursive premise (or tool) that for Death Café participants facilitates an exploration of relationship with others and with the topic of death.

Further, I argued that such exploration is enabled by the interplay between emotional proximity and distance which is also a constituent of Maffesolian aesthetics. Maffesoli's use of 'aesthetics' to denote the 'common faculty of feeling, of experiencing' (Maffesoli, 1996:74) has been critiqued for being 'too vague and general to do any specific work' (ibid). I argue, however, that Maffesolian aesthetics manifest in, and are constitutive of, the Death Café interaction, and I provide data to support this. I do this by building on the notion that neo-tribal formations are aestheticised in the sense that:

Their constitutive power consists in an emotional bond of belonging, and, at the same time, in the sense that the very of participation is recognised and assessed (Lorenc, 2018:17).

In Chapter 5 I showed that talking about talking death becomes an aesthetic when participants come to reflect on themselves as engaged in this shared activity. The second feature of Maffesolian aesthetics arises by enacting a particular understanding of being strangers as a temporary affectual link. Even if attendees are not biographical strangers, they are asked to maintain an image of that to create a specific interactional atmosphere.

This key feature of neo-tribal theory - the interplay between emotional proximity and distance - is especially congruent with Jacobsen's (2016) inauguration of the age of spectacular death. People in Death Cafés share personal thoughts, for some this is an emotional experience, yet there is an inherent distance, expressed through ephemeral, fleeting engagements, which creates a participatory spectacle. This feature of spectacular death has been observed by Leget (2020), whom I touched on in Chapter 3. Leget found that the developments in our contemporary culture that Jacobsen outlined as manifestations of spectacular death are paradoxical. They give us the illusion that death has become more 'available' 'visible, accessible, controllable and usable' (Leget, 2020:186-187), but on the other hand they 'make it more difficult to existentially engage with death and dying from a first- and second-person perspective' (ibid). I draw from this that by nature, spectacular death experiences are those that are created and experienced communally, rather than located within the individual. The neo-tribal theory was appropriate to explore this as Maffesoli emphasises activities of tribal groupings where feelings are produced by virtue of being together and transcend individual subjectivity (de la Fuente, 2011:71).

To further elucidate the relation between spectacular death and neo-tribal aesthetics, I highlight that one of my findings was that emotionally vulnerable, recently bereaved people should avoid attending Death Café (even though I found that most attendees respectfully hold space for emotion). A question arises, however: when the conversation gets turned away from serious emotional issues is that just a form of death denial? Is it the evidence for the existence of death taboo? I argue that such strategies are employed because emotional outpourings do not conform to the particular Death Café aesthetic of *demystifying talking about death in an informal setting*. People who attend Death Cafés mostly wish to express a shared sentiment that death is *not* a morbid or an inherently devastating conversation topic. Some aspects of death as a fact, however, *are* morbid, gruesome, and devastating. Thus, not all deaths or death-related activities are spectacular in the age of spectacular death (Jacobsen, 2020c:202). As Jacobsen articulated:

It is this curious coexistence of these different, seemingly mutually unconnected and unconnectable, tendencies that appear to characterise

our contemporary society's awkward and ambivalent relationship with death, rather than either 'taboo' or 'revival' (Jacobsen, 2020b:17).

Death Café is a particular social sphere constructed in order to express a certain orientation towards the topic, the issue of death. Instead of answering questions of 'taboo versus openness, denial versus acceptance' (ibid), the case of Death Café presents a curious type of engagement with death - a collective ephemeral and sociable communion with 'safe' strangers.

I argue that if neo-tribal theory at large explores how individuals' relation to the social has shifted, so too do the prominent death studies narratives, which have addressed how death (or spectacular death) has inhabited new everyday spaces. In an email interview with Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2021), Tony Walter restated his argument from *What Death Means Now* (2017) that 'if we need to talk more about death, it is not because it is taboo (it isn't), but because what death means now is not what it meant a generation or two ago, not least because of changing medical and media technologies' (Walter, in Jacobsen, 2021:13). Walter's and Jacobsen's theories are about how individuals in the West are creating new vocabularies<sup>11</sup> as they are navigating the newly emerging contemporary end of life issues, such as demographic aging, assisted dying, threats of the pandemic, concerns about posthumous digital footprint (Kasket, 2019), among others. Applying neo-tribal theory as a theoretical lens to Walter's (1994) revivalist thoughts and Jacobsen's notion of the spectacular death (2016) is a fruitful avenue to examine how people engage with death collectively, beyond the individual self. This thesis presents Death Cafés in a different light than existing studies do. Namely, as a form of social bonding that emerges from elective, aesthetic affinities, and according to Maffesoli, is 'centred on what is closest at hand' (Maffesoli, 1991:19) - being together with others.

Finally, I suggest that neo-tribal theory is a valuable addition to Jacobsen's (2016:14) proposed 'entirely new vocabulary to capture these many changes' in the contemporary understandings and experiences of death, dying and

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<sup>11</sup> Exemplified by proliferation of grief and dying internet blogs; increasing popularity of online memorialisation, vernacular beliefs like imagining deceased as angels (Walter, 2016); social activities such as Coffin Clubs (Coffin Club, 2022), Death Cafés, Death Over Dinner (Hebb, 2018) etc.)



bereavement. In the Postscript to his edited volume *The Age of Spectacular Death* (2020c:202), Jacobsen wrote that he was thrilled to ‘see how contributors to this volume have provided flesh and blood to the dry bones and unanimated skeleton of spectacular death’. I argue that my thesis not only does similar work for Jacobsen’s concept, but I also borrow the expression ‘providing flesh and bones’ to encapsulate how my study has contributed to the development of neo-tribal theory and advancing its value to interdisciplinary research.

#### **8.4. Study limitations and directions for further research**

The nature of ethnographic research is such that it produces a contingently framed view of lived experience, with the awareness that the knowledge produced is partial (Amit, 2000; Candea, 2007). Nevertheless, the richness of my data and my reflexivity as a researcher (extensively discussed in Chapter 2) gives me confidence that my account is a valuable insight into a portion of Death Café practices in the UK as they existed during my fieldwork period.

One of the study limitations was that I did not have a chance to talk to Death Café founder Jon Underwood. He died in June of 2017 and I began this degree in October of the same year. While I do not think the study would be drastically different, I believe certain aspects of the origins of Death Café might have been considered in more detail. Namely, that Jon Underwood was inspired by Buddhism and Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, 1986). Underwood claimed that ‘Death denial is the energy that drives the motor of consumer capitalism’ (My Wishes, 2014:9:04-9:13, Nomad Podcast, 2016:33:55-39:00) and that talking about death at Death Cafés might help create a more sustainable society (Walter, 2017:24). These sentiments, however, do not figure in the official Death Café guidelines and appear mostly in Underwood’s interviews and talks, an especially good example being the already mentioned and highly informative ‘MyWishes’ talk. In a 2016 radio interview (Tremonti, 2016), when asked what difference he thought the initiative could make to the world, Underwood seemed doubtful about the capacity for change on a grand scale:

I don’t know. It’s hard to say. I wouldn’t claim too much, because it’s only a couple of hours talking about that death, but hopefully it will galvanise

them [people who attend Death Cafés] to do what they want with their lives a little bit more, to give them a bit of a boost to pursue their dreams. And then, you know, when those people do encounter death and dying, perhaps they'll have a few more resources to fall back on, a bit more resilience, a bit more confidence. And so if that's the case, I can feel very, very pleased, because I think those are marvellous outcomes (Underwood, in Tremonti, 2016:21:38-22:12).

In this thesis, I chose not to focus on the influence of TMT on Death Café because I did not encounter it in my interviews and Death Café conversations, and also because I found that while there exists a general attitude that a cultural shift in our attitudes towards dying is necessary, participants rarely envision it having effects beyond their personal attitudes. However, this is relevant to the future of Death Café as it continues to evolve after Jon Underwood's death. Megan Mooney, overseeing the official Facebook and Twitter pages, recently (October 2021) posted several links to articles about TMT, links to workshops with 'opportunities to apply (terror management) research, reflect on their own values, worldview, biases and defenses' (Death Café, 2021c), which Death Café 'highly recommends' (ibid). There would be value for further studies of Death Café to look at how Jools Barsky, Sue Barsky Reid, Megan Mooney (and Lizzy Miles to an extent) continue Jon Underwood's legacy.

Death Café has changed since I conducted my fieldwork in another significant way. The Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020 and altered the Death Café landscape worldwide as social distancing restrictions meant the end of physical Death Café meetings. At the time of writing (January 2022) face-to-face meetings are starting up again in the UK as evident from the official website section 'Forthcoming Death Cafés' (Death Café, 2021a). For at least a year and a half, and even longer worldwide, however, Death Cafés have taken place exclusively online. Over 600 online UK Death Cafés have been registered on the website since March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. The online meetings have gathered a lot of interest from the media (Brooks, 2020; Ackerman 2020; Redman, 2020; Lantican, 2020; Ufheil 2021; Flanigan, 2021; Zigoris, 2021) and have been praised for their ability to connect people not bound to the same geographical locales. A recent media piece on the proliferation of online Death Cafés claimed that they also offered extraordinary diversity in terms of 'races, genders and ages' (Italie and Leshner, 2020). This expansion is entirely probable and is a fruitful avenue

to be explored in future research. It would enhance the account I provided in Chapter 7 about the relative homogeneity of Death Café participants in the UK.

While in general I found that all Death Cafés I attended had a feeling of communal conviviality, that was not necessarily what every single attendee I encountered had been seeking. Some people came to Death Café with practical questions and did not participate in the conversation once they were satisfied with the answers that the group, or usually the more informed facilitator, provided. Such transactional exchanges do not entirely fit my neo-tribal framing of Death Café and are important to acknowledge. Some people are simply not seeking a community of like-minded people, but instead are seeking out resources for their specific concerns.

At the other end of the spectrum, the data I chose to present in the thesis also fundamentally affected the direction of my theoretical orientation. Namely, I chose not to focus on providing an account of the most frequently addressed topics in Death Café conversations. ‘Revealing’ and ‘demystifying’ the content of Death Café conversations has been a prominent theme in numerous early media publications on Death Café, such as Soper (2013), Taufen (2013), Dennis (2013), who all fundamentally ask: ‘what do people really talk about at a Death Café?’. Tauber et al.’s (2021) academic study provides a content analysis of Death Café conversations, which serves a similar purpose of demystification of death talk in public. If I was ever engaged in a ‘demystification; exercise in my research, it was about how people interact in Death Cafes and what they gain from it, not the details from their personal stories. Jon Underwood had made revealing comments about Death Café conversations in his speech for London Social Media Week in 2014:

I could tell stories of what people told that would make your hair curl, but I can’t because what happens in Death Café, stays there. But believe me, people just tell it like it is, they tell their truth, they say things that you feel have sort of fermented inside for years and years (MyWishes, 2014:49-4:16).

In this promotional event for entrepreneurs, Underwood built audience’s curiosity by claiming that ‘hair raising’ stuff is discussed in Death Café, but it is tantalisingly confidential. In 2014, I believe it only perpetuated exoticism concerning the topic of death and a curiosity about what topics are being

broached behind the closed doors. Hence, consciously going beyond examining the content of Death Café conversations influenced my theoretical framework and as such, the data I presented was especially suited to provide novel insights into neo-tribal theory.

Researching online Death Cafés would also help further define the value of the recent application of neo-tribal theory to interactions in the virtual realm (Johnson and Ambrose, 2006; Hardy, Hanson and Gretzel, 2012; Robards, 2018; Clay, 2018; Hart, 2018; Hardy, Dolnicar and Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021). Currently, the merit of this theoretical development is limited to *locating* the neo-tribal features in digitally mediated interactions, such as online dating, tourism forums, other social media. In this thesis I drew significantly on Maffesoli's original emphasis on the importance of physical co-presence, thus a comparative study of the dynamics of interactions in online and face-to-face Death Cafés would provide more clarity on the importance of such embodiment for neo-tribes.

In connection to the mentioned increased diversity and intersectionality of online Death Café meetings, there would be value for future research to explore how such cohorts negotiate talking about death. Would they continue emphasising *mortality* as a commonality for all human beings and relate based on that, or would narratives of *death and dying*, subject to inequalities, for instance, based on gender identity (Necati, 2021) and race (Edwards et al., 2019), be tackled head-on? I observed a Facebook conflict between Death Café Facebook page admin Megan Mooney and a small UK town-based Death Café Facebook group (not naming to protect anonymity). On June 19, 2020, the official Death Café Facebook page posted a link to the article 'Why Race Matters: Racism is a public health problem' (Death Café, 2020). Local UK Death Café Facebook group then posted on their own page that they wished to dissociate from Megan Mooney's post because it was not 'relevant to the Death Café concept that the late Jon Underwood espoused' and accused Megan Mooney of abusing her admin privileges. While this is one anecdotal example where a group did not consider issues of race to be pertinent to Death Café conversations, exploring how this is negotiated in more diverse groups would further enhance or

critique my framing of Death Cafés as spaces where people often *talk about talking about death*.

A similar critique has been given the contemporary Death Positivity movement. Francis (2019:97) noticed that:

Eager to bring the conversation to marginalised communities, Death Positive leaders (which are mostly white, middle-class women) miss that the conversations are already happening. How can Death Positive movement engage with death activism of Black Lives Matter?

These words were written before the latest wave of protests following the murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020. Since then, the conversation has been advanced on how to foster good death in a racist society (Beech, 2020) and the importance of social justice issues in the Death Positive movement (Gooden, 2020). This thesis was a narrative of Death Cafés as spaces for social *interaction*, rather than tools for social *action*, and I maintain my critique of their instrumental usage and the adaptation of the Death Café model to reach specific goals. The insights gained from this research, especially those outlined in Chapter 7, however, suggest that there is scope to further the initiative's relevance and value without compromising on its original ethos. Specifically, I suggest that it would be fruitful for the movement's spearheads to emphasise the value of creating Death Cafés for specific communities.

Mine was a study of Death Cafés in a British context and findings from a study of similar scope and nature on interactions in Death Cafés internationally might differ significantly. For example, I did not find humour as such to be a particularly prominent feature in Death Cafés I attended, but Heald (2020) did in her master's dissertation on Death Cafés in South Africa. More international evidence is needed to be able to confidently claim that there is cultural variation in Death Café interactions and that Death Cafés in the UK are more reserved due to culturally valued politeness and the relatively affluent and educated cohort of attendees.

Finally, I suggest that to further define the value of including Death Café as a 'cultural intervention' (Clark et al., 2017) to end of life policies and compassionate communities projects, there would be merit in conducting

research of similar scope on Bereavement Café (also Grief Café (The Good Grief Trust, 2019)) and GraveTalk initiatives. Both Bereavement Café and GraveTalk serve a similar role as Death Café but have received much less attention from media and academics (Kevern and Sanders, 2015; Nolan, 2018; Heywood and Stewart, 2020). In contrast to Death Café, Bereavement Café focuses on shared experiences of loss and offers more practical support and signposting, while GraveTalk attendees are more likely to know each other and interact in their daily lives than strangers at a Death Café. In theory, more practically oriented and locally embedded GraveTalk could result in the creation of more sustainable end of life and bereavement support networks, however, it might alienate people who do not belong to the Church of England. Throughout my fieldwork, I also noticed that some hospices across the country chose to host Bereavement Cafés and GraveTalk events over Death Cafés. Researching motivations for this would also be useful. Rich, possibly comparative accounts on motivations, experiences, and outcomes of participating in these initiatives would provide a clear view of what each talk-based approach brings to communities and individuals. This is beyond the remit of neo-tribal framework I took up in this thesis, but I argue that the value of collective co-presence and enjoyment of Death Café should not be overlooked when using the Death Café model for various projects and policies. I wish to end this thesis with a closing vignette that highlights some of the specific value that Death Café offers individuals.

## 8.5. In closing

At the meeting of East Bromwich Death Café, one of the attendees who contributed to the discussion most was Winston, a sixty-year-old man who had recently been widowed. He disclosed a lot about the pain and isolation he felt after his bereavement but was hesitant that a Bereavement Café would be useful for him. Instead, he said that Death Cafés were valuable because:

We can share our own stories. Other people can be interested in death narratives for different reasons and be coming from different places, which makes for a different sort of environment. Whereas if it had been a Bereavement Café, the focus would be on that particular aspect... and I think that's quite a valuable thing because it's actually broadening your reality by being validated by a different group of people. Here you don't say: 'Oh we're this little special group, we're all struggling in similar ways and therefore we need to talk about it'. You can actually come here and

say: 'Well, I'm struggling with this, but I'm also interested in that', and someone else can say what they're interested in.

Winston here articulated that Death Cafés offered a wide gamut of emotional and intellectual depth and distance regarding the subject of death. In addition, when Winston was at a Death Café, he was not just a widower, defined by his bereavement, in contrast to what he thought happened in a support group or a counselling setting. For Winston, Death Cafés offered a chance to select which part of his experience or his identity to bring to the table. Winston's grief was palpable in his moments of silence but he engaged vivaciously in a discussion of the possibility of uploading one's mind onto cloud storage and smiled heartily when twenty-one-year-old Ida asked to hear more about his wife's hobbies. Death Café allows attendees to encounter a variety of individual situations, experiences, and relationships with death. Even more, because death, dying and bereavement are exceptionally capacious concepts, relevant to different people in different ways at different points of their life, every attendee's existing or non-existent relationship with death is a valid reason to be at the Death Café.

Seeking an ephemeral connection with strangers who share a need to talk about death need not signify loneliness and lack of human connectivity in contemporary societies (Koksvik and Richards, 2021). Rather, I argue that by enabling individuals to experience easefulness when addressing a difficult subject and to experiment with interacting with strangers in an unusual way, Death Cafés act as temporary 'flashes of sociality' (Shields, 1996:xii), enlivening participants' social lives and contributing to the 're-enchantment of daily life as a site of enjoyment, pleasure, and togetherness' (Evans, 1997:223). To give Death Café founder Jon Underwood the last word: 'Those are marvellous outcomes'.

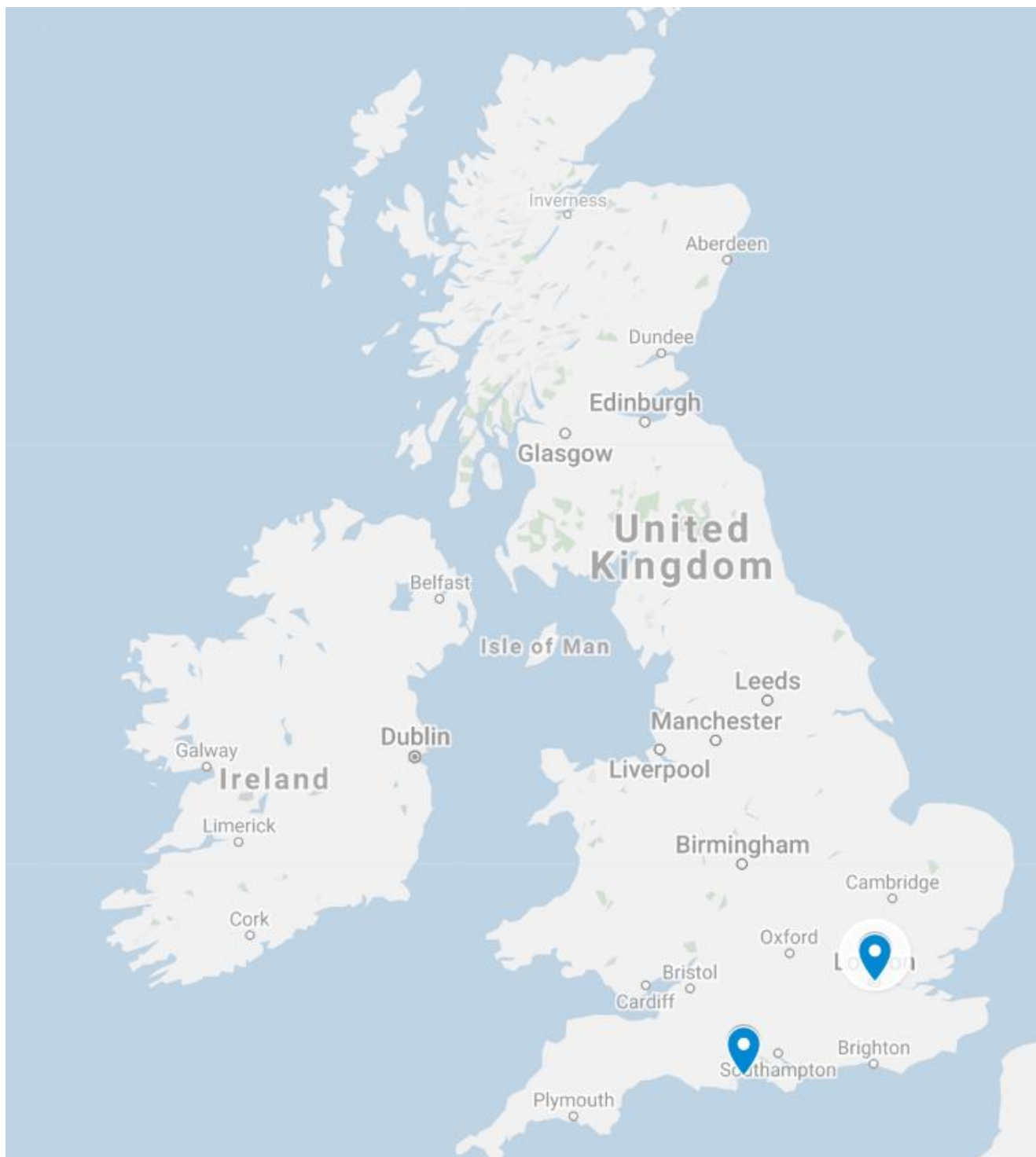
## Appendix A. Illustrating the spread of Death Café in the UK.

Year	Number of Death Cafés registered on official Death Café website <a href="http://www.deathcafe.com">www.deathcafe.com</a>
2011	1
2012	3
2013	37
2014	158
2015	247
2016	307
2017	345
2018	405
2019	498
2020 until UK lockdown March 23 <sup>rd</sup>	105

Illustrations on the following pages show geographical locations (cities, towns) of Death Café events in the UK.



# 2012



# 2013



# 2014



# 2015



# 2016





# 2017



# 2018



# 2019





## 2020 - until UK lockdown March 23rd



## Appendix B. List of Death Cafés attended

Table 1. List of attended Death Cafes.

No	Month, Year	Pseudonym	Organisers' pseudonyms	Description	Conversations recorded (how many)	Number of attendees	Pre-selected research tables?
1	March 2018	Lochdubh 1	Grant	Two one-off Death Cafés with students from a local college in a rural area of the country. Organised by my primary supervisor in collaboration with a local college.	Yes, 2	18	No pre-selected research tables and students were not told beforehand that research is taking place
2	March 2018	Lochdubh 2			Yes, 2	14	No pre-selected research tables and students were not told beforehand that research is taking place
3	October 2018	Riseholme	Edith	An evening time Death Café occurring every other month in an artistic area of a major urban centre. Established in 2017.	Yes, 1	28	Pre-selected research table where selected participants were informed of research beforehand
4	November 2018	Brigadoon	Morag, Pearl and Michael	Death Café run once or twice a year since 2015 in a small city in the north of the country. Current	Yes, 3	14	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed

				venue - hotel bar, taking place in the morning.			about research beforehand.
5	November 2018	Weatherfield	Eleanor, Betty, facilitator Doris	A quarterly evening time Death Café in a scenic market town. Established in 2017.	Yes, 1	25	Pre-selected research table where selected participants were informed of research beforehand
6	November 2018	Tilling	Nicola	Monthly daytime Death Café held in a cemetery in an urban centre in Southwest England since 2015.	No	14	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
7	November 2018	Borchester	Serena and her co-host Melanie	An evening time Death Café in a small market town. Established in 2016 and occurring every other month.	Yes, 3	16	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
8	November 2018	Upper Radstow	Kaya	Monthly evening time Death Café in a Buddhist centre in a major urban centre. Established in 2014.	No	19	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
9	December 2018	Akenfield	Millie	Monthly evening time Death Café in a suburban town near a major city, established in 2018.	Yes, 1	13	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
10	December 2018	East Bromwich	Victoria, Leida and Nick	Monthly evening time Death Café in a major city run since 2015 by a group of end-of-life doulas	Yes, 1	18	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed

							about research beforehand.
11	February 2019	Wokenwell	Orla	Death Café run by a bereavement charity in various libraries in the area since 2017. Timing varies.	No	7	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
12	February 2019	Riseholme	Edith	A second visit to Riseholme Death Cafe	No	26	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
13	March 2019	King's Oak	Sadie	A walking Death Café in the woods in a major city, usually taking place indoors in various café venues. Established in 2017, occurring monthly.	No	9	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
14	March 2019	Camberwick Green	Olivia	The last one of long-running (since 2013) tradition of Death Cafés in an affluent area of a major city.	No	29	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
15	March 2019	Portwenn	Frida	Monthly/every other month Death Café in a spa town, now venturing into neighbouring towns. Established in 2013.	No	3	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
16	May 2019	Darrowby	Violet	A weekend morning Death Café occurring every other month in a small market town, run since	No	4	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed

				2015 by the local community centre.			about research beforehand.
17	May 2019	Chigley	Roy	A one-off Death Café, run in a hospice by the hospice chaplain during Dying Matters Awareness Week 2019.	No	7	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
18	May 2019	Glendarroch	Ruby	A one-off Death Café, run by a member of hospice staff in a public café in the North of the country during opening times during Dying Matters Awareness Week 2019.	No	23	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
19	May 2019	St. Mary Mead	Davina and Kelly	This Death Café took place in the evening after a death-related theatre play in a spa town. Originally established in 2017 and held quarterly	No	19	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
20	June 2019	Tannochbrae	Lucy	The second-ever Death Café in a unitarian church in the North of the country. Taking place on a weekend morning.	No	11	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.

Table 2. Length of organiser experience with Death Cafes

Death Café organiser (pseudonym)	Death Cafe	How long they've been holding their Death Café for
Grant	Lochdubh 1 and 2	2 one off events in March and April 2018
Edith	Riseholme	Held every other month since March 2017. I attended the fourth and the seventh events Edith has held.
Morag, facilitators Pearl and Michael	Brigadoon	Held twice a year since April. 2015. I attended the sixth Brigadoon event.
Eleanor, Betty, facilitator Doris (altogether)	Weatherfield	Held quarterly since May 2017. I attended the sixth Weatherfield Death Café.
Nicola	Tilling	Nicola has run Tilling Death Cafes monthly since 2015, didn't specify the number.
Selena	<b>Borchester</b>	I attended the 12 <sup>th</sup> Nailsworth Death Café, run every other month since 2016.
Kaya	Upper Radstow	Regular events held since 2014, I haven't interviewed Kaya so didn't get a chance to ask, but registered online are over 40 Death Cafés.
Millie	Akenfield	I attended the 7 <sup>th</sup> Akenfield Death Café, organised monthly or every other month since 2016
Victoria and her co-hosts Nick and Leida	East Bromwich	Since September 2015. They didn't specify, but said they held over 30 Death Cafés.
Orla	Wokenwell	Didn't specify the number but the charity runs them every month to every other month since 2017.
Sadie	King's Oak	I visited the 17 <sup>th</sup> Death Café Sadie held since starting in 2016.
Olivia	Camberwick Green	Olivia has held over 40 Death Cafes since 2012. I attended the very last of her Death Cafés at the time, she could not provide me a precise number.
Frida	Portwenn	Frida holds Death Cafes monthly/every two months since 2013, unsure of precise number but quoted over 40.

Violet	Darrowby	This Death Café is run regularly since 2015 every other month with a break in 2017 when the old organiser left. I attended the 24 <sup>th</sup> Settle Death Café.
Roy	Chigley	Roy has experience hosting LGBTQ+ Death Cafes outside the hospice, in the hospice this was the third Death Café.
Ruby	Glendarroch	Second for Ruby, only hosted once a year for Dying Matters Awareness Week
Davina and Kelly	St. Mary Mead	5 <sup>th</sup> St. Mary Mead Death Café since 2018.
Lucy	Tannochbrae	Held Death Cafés at various intervals throughout the year, since 2016, I attended the 5 <sup>th</sup> .
Tina	Ledshire	I talked to Tina before she hosted her 4 <sup>th</sup> Death Café, held since 2018
Simon	In thesis unnamed	I talked to him before his first Death Café.
Laura	In thesis unnamed	Third, occasional Death Café associated with Dying Matters campaign
Belinda	In thesis unnamed	Belinda Used to hold her Death Cafés in her narrowboat at different points alongside a large river since 2014. Said she hosted over 60 now.
Marina	In thesis unnamed	About 30 Death Cafés held from 2013 to 2018.
Emma	In thesis unnamed	Third Death Café, held as part of her job role at a charity.
Jamie	In thesis unnamed	I talked to Jamie before his first Death Café and also after it.
Sienna	In thesis unnamed	I talked to Sienna before her first Death Cafe
Lydia	In thesis unnamed	At the time of interview Lydia had held 15 Death Cafes.

Table 3. My presence in recorded conversations.

No	Pseudonym	Conversations recorded (how many)	Number of attendees	Was I present at the table?
1	Lochdubh 1	Yes, 2	18	Yes, for one conversation. Me and three women.
2	Lochdubh 2	Yes, 2	14	Yes, for one conversation. Me and three other women.
3	Riseholme	Yes, 1	28	Yes Edie, Owen, Albert, Miriam, John and I
4	Brigadoon	Yes, 3	14	Yes, for one conversation. Mavis, Iris, Charles, Arthur, Ruth.
5	Weatherfield	Yes, 1	25	Yes, for one conversation. Chester, his wife Anne, Ellie, Betty's husband James, Doris, Miriam, Scarlett and I
7	Borchester	Yes, 3	16	Yes for one conversation. Clara, Helena, Ezekiel, his wife Jennifer, Grace, and I
9	Akenfield	Yes, 1	13	Yes, with all Death Café participants that night.
10	East Bromwich	Yes, 1	18	Yes. Winston, Leida, Victoria, Ida, Darcey, Nick and two more female attendees who agreed to be recorded but not named.
Total	I was present in 8 out of 14 recorded conversations.			



## Appendix C. Interviewed Death Café organisers and attendees

Table 1. Interviewed Death Café organisers

No	Pseudonym	Age (if known)	Occupation	Death Café hosted	Type of interview	Did I attend their Death Café?
1	Edith	55-65 (estimate)	Funeral celebrant, previously a teacher.	Riseholme	Skype (video)	Yes, twice
2	Morag	52	Counsellor, motivational speaker, workplace mediator	Brigadoon	In person	Yes
3	Eleanor	72	Retired hospice worker and psychotherapist	Weatherfield	In person	Yes
4	Betty	53	Hospice worker, nurse in the past, now in a different NHS role	Weatherfield	Phone	Yes
5	Doris	67	Massage therapist for a cancer support charity, volunteer for a mental health support charity.	Weatherfield (takes on solely facilitator role)	In person	Yes
6	Serena	48	Trained as body psychotherapist, now co-runs a funeral home.	Borchester	Skype (video)	Yes
7	Millie	31	Pathological anatomist at a hospital.	Akenfield	Skype (video)	Yes
8	Victoria	60	End-of-life doula and jewellery maker.	East Bromwich	Phone	Yes

9	Sadie	39	Independent celebrant	King's Oak	Skype (video)	Yes
10	Olivia	70+ (estimate)	Psychotherapist, bereavement counsellor, death educator.	Camberwick Green	In person	Yes
11	Frida	62	Massage and yoga teacher, trained dementia carer.	Portwenn	In person	Yes
12	Violet	50	Community centre administrator with an interest in holistic healing and also working as a homeopath.	Darrowby	In person	Yes
13	Ruby	30-35 (estimate)	Administrator at a hospice.	Glendarroch	In person	Yes
14	Roy	68	Hospice chaplain.	Chigley	In person	Yes
15	Lucy	50-55 (estimate)	Unitarian chaplain	Tannochbrae	In person	Yes
16	Tina	50-55 (estimate)	Civil celebrant, teacher and nurse previously.	Ledshire Death Café in North of the country run two-three times a year since 2018	In person	No
17	Simon	50	Funeral celebrant and trainee counsellor, previously theatre actor and director	I talked to him before he hosted his first-ever Death Café in a suburb of a big city.	Skype (video)	No
18	Laura	65	Christian Minister in the West of the country.	Occasional Death Café, associated with the Dying Matters campaign	Phone	No
19	Belinda	66	Author, speaker, podcast host on the topics of spirituality, consciousness, and death and dying.	Used to hold her Death Cafés in her narrowboat at different points alongside a river since 2014.	Skype (video)	No

20	Marina	54	Psychic artist, channel and energy healer.	Marina was one of the early adopters of Death Café in the UK and ran them in a major metropolis from 2013 until 2018.	In person	No
21	Emma	52	Florist, cancer support counsellor in a major city.	Runs Death Cafés as part of her job role in a local charity	In person	No
22	Jamie	25	Charity worker in the same major city as Emma.	Ran one Death Café as part of public engagement for a charity he works in	Phone	No
23	Sienna	43	Hospice worker, training to be a soul midwife. Lives in a secluded town in the South of the country	When I talked to Sienna, she was about to hold her first ever Death Café, on her mother's death anniversary	Skype (video)	No
24	Lydia	46	Celebrant and author	Has been holding Death Cafés in a town close to Tina since 2017.	Phone	No

Table 2. Interviewed Death Café attendees.

	Death Café attended	Name	Age	Occupation	Type of interview	Time at Death Cafe
1	Riseholme	Albert	68	Retired academic	Phone	First
2	Riseholme	John	32	Film producer	In person	Third
3	Riseholme	Alice	46	Adult learning disabilities social worker	Phone	Second
4	Riseholme	Owen	87	Retired photojournalist.	Video (Skype)	Third
5	Brigadoon	Mavis	73	Retired teacher	phone	Second
6	Brigadoon	Iris	49	Worked for the NHS, trained to be a homeopath, now is an independent ordained minister.	phone	Second

7	Brigadoon	Charles	58	Council worker dealing with cremations and burials	Phone	First
8	Brigadoon	Maggie	57	Holistic therapist	Phone	First
9	Brigadoon	Pamela	70	Retired nurse, midwife, manager for various NHS services.	Phone	First
10	Weatherfield	Ellie	55	Freshwater ecologist	Phone	Second
11	Weatherfield	Scarlett	61	Carer	Phone	First
12	Weatherfield	Miriam	69	Retired counsellor and psychotherapist.	Phone	First
13	Weatherfield	Chester	70+	Retired doctor and academic	Phone	Second
14	Borchester	Grace	72	Worked as a secretary, in public relations, publishing, now retired and obtained a certificate in botanical illustration as well as finished counselling training.	Phone	Third
15	Borchester	Eve	82	Retired GCSE level teacher for adults, university tutor.	Phone	Second
16	Borchester	Frederick	66	Retired landscape gardener	Phone	Fourth
17	Borchester	Henry	45	Trained as a counsellor, out of work at the moment.	Phone	First
18	Borchester	Ava	51	Obtained degrees in psychology, organisation behaviour, is currently training to be a counsellor	Phone	First
19	Borchester	Clara	37	Carer and end-of-life planner	Phone	First
20	Akenfield	Daisy	41	Designs and delivers workplace learning and development courses	Phone	Third
21	Akenfield	Fay	60	Retired NHS worker (role unclear)	Phone	First

22	Akenfield	Molly	70	Retired lawyer and bookshop keeper	Phone	First
23	East Bromwich	Ida	21	Journalism student	Phone	First
24	East Bromwich	Darcey	43	Cabin crew	Phone	First
25	I also conducted a face-to-face interview with Pauline (70+) who I reached out to after I found out she wrote a fiction novel with Death Cafés as part of the plot. She went to Frida's Portwenn Death Café to research it for the book.					
<p>Other pseudonyms appear in the thesis. Some people agreed to participate in recorded Death Café conversations but did not want to have follow-up interviews. These are Mina (48), Beatrice (76), Graeme (51), Ezekiel (69), Jennifer (65) and Helena (51) from Borchester. Winston (60) from East Bromwich. Beth (56) and Cecilia (56) from Akenfield, Abigail (45), Barbara (75), Claire (45), and Dianne (44) from Brigadoon. Student Ariadhna and lecturer Grant from one of Lochdubh Death Cafés, as well as Jasper (73) from Camberwick Green Death Café.</p> <p>At Wokenwell Death Café, I did not record the conversation but took notes after. I gave pseudonyms to those members of the group I quote in the thesis: Rita, Seamus, Rhys, Doris, Megan. I also refer to one participant from St. Mary Mead Death Café as Debra.</p> <p>Several other Death Café participants agreed to be recorded, but for any follow up preferred to be contacted by email. They are: Edie (66): retired teacher from Riseholme, Arthur (66): retired academic and parish minister from Brigadoon. Greta (44): social media accounts operative, secretary from Brigadoon. Polly (51): manual worker in a medical lab, trained and volunteered in counselling, from Tilling Death Café Emily (82): retired probation officer from Tilling Death Café.</p> <p>All Lohdubh attendees attended first time, as well as everyone else mentioned in this section of the table besides Pauline, Beatrice, Mina, Helena, Cecilia, Barbara, Dianne, Rhys, Polly, Edie and Arthur. I do not have data about those people who I haven't interviewed, where the information about the number of their attended Death Cafes did not come up in the recorded Death Café conversations.</p>						

## Appendix D. Semi-structured interview question guides.

For interviews with attendees:

### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- Could you tell me about your professional background?
- How did you first hear about Death Cafes?
- Why did you decide to attend the first time? When and where was that? How was the experience?
- Have you attended any more Death Cafe events after the one we met at? Do you go to other Death Cafes? [If attended more than one] Why do you continue going to them?

### DEATH CAFÉ EVENTS

- Is there a format you prefer? e.g. one large group, several smaller ones. Why?
- What do you think of having cake and coffee at a Death Café?
- What topics do you enjoy the most/what topics are most valuable for you?
- Have you ever felt unsatisfied by a Death Café conversation?
- Has anything ever made you feel uncomfortable at a Death Cafe? Have you witnessed/ been a part of any conflicts/disagreements?
- Do you have any contact with people who attend Death Cafés outside the event?
- How do you think my presence as a researcher impacted the Death Café event we met at?

### DEATH CAFÉ INITIATIVE IN GENERAL

- What are your thoughts about Death Café in general? What do you get out of it? Why do you think other people go to Death Café?
- Do you know a lot about history of Death Café? Is that important to you?
- Do you talk about Death Café with friends/family? If yes, why? If no, why? Have you come across any disapproval from anyone if you talk about Death Cafes?
- Do you think Death Cafes are for everyone? If so, why, if not, why?
- Do you think anything has changed in your life as a result of going to a Death Cafe? What about in other people's lives?

For interviews with organisers:

#### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- Could you tell me about your professional background?
- How did you first find out about Death Cafes?
- Why did you decide to get involved? How long have you been organising them? [If stopped organising] What made you stop?
- Do you go to other Death Cafes? Do you know any other organisers/interact with any of them?

#### DEATH CAFÉ EVENT LOGISTICS

- How many attendees do you usually have? Do you know them/interact with them outside the Death Café?
- How did you go about choosing and approaching the venue?
- How do you advertise your Death Café?
- Is there a format you prefer? e.g. one large group, several smaller ones. Why? Have you changed the format since you started?
- Do you follow Death Café guidelines strictly? Do you ask for attendee feedback?
- What do you think of having cake and coffee at a Death Cafe?
- How important is it for you whether people come back to your Death Café?
- Have any conflicts/ unusual situations happened in your Death Cafes?
- [If I attended] How do you think my presence as a researcher impacted your Death Café?

#### DEATH CAFÉ INITIATIVE IN GENERAL

- 
- What are your thoughts about Death Café? Why do you think people go to Death Cafes? What do you get out of it?
- Would you consider yourself a part of Death Café community?
- Have you come across any issues or disapproval about your involvement with Death Café?
- Do you know a lot about history of Death Café? Is that important to you?
- Do you think anything has changed in your life as a result of going to a Death Cafe? Have you seen any impact of Death Café on other people's lives?
- Do you think Death Cafes are for everyone? If so, why, if not, why?
- What do you think the future holds for the Death Café initiative?

## Appendix E. Ethics Approvals

27/7/18

Dear Solveiga

**College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

**Project Title:** Death Café conversations: an exploration of content and form

**Application No:**

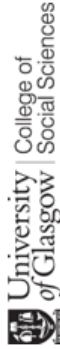
The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: \_\_\_\_\_27/7/2018\_\_\_\_\_
- Project end date: \_\_01/02/2021\_\_\_\_\_
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: ([https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_490311\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)) (Unless there is an agreed exemption to this, noted here).
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Yours sincerely,

Dr Muir Houston  
College Ethics Officer





Ethics Committee for Non Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

**NOTIFICATION OF ETHICS APPLICATION OUTCOME – UG and FGT Applications**

Application Type: **New** Date Application Reviewed: 09.02.18

Application Number: FG/ACM/01485

Applicant's Name: Soveiga Zibaitis

Project Title: What happens at a death café?

**APPLICATION OUTCOME**

- (A) Fully Approved  Start Date of Approval: 23/02/18 End Date of Approval: 01/10/18
- (B) Approved subject to amendments  If the applicant has been given approval subject to amendments this means they can proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval, however they should note the following applies to their application:
  - - - - - Approved Subject to Amendments without the need to submit amendments to the Supervisor
  - - - - - Approved Subject to Amendments made to the satisfaction of the applicant's Supervisor
  - - - - - The College Ethics Committee expects the applicant to act responsibly in addressing the recommended amendments.
- (C) Application is Not Approved at this Time 
  - - - - - Subject to Amendments made to the satisfaction of the School Ethics Forum (SEF)
  - - - - - Complete resubmission required. Discuss the application with supervisor before resubmitting.

Please note the comments in the section below and provide further information where requested.

If you have been asked to resubmit your application in full, send it to your supervisor who will forward it to your local School Ethics Forum admin support staff.

Where resubmissions only need to be submitted to an applicant's supervisor. This will apply to essential items that an applicant must address prior to ethics approval being granted. As the associated research ethics risks are considered to be low, the applicant's response need only be reviewed and cleared by the applicant's supervisor before the research can properly begin. For any application processed under this outcome, it is the Supervisor's responsibility to email [fg@col-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:fg@col-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk) with confirmation of their approval of the re-submitted application.

**APPLICATION COMMENTS**

Major Recommendations:   
   
 Minor Recommendations:

Muir Houston would normally feature on your plain language statement but for this course, and for the ethics permission granted for the small number of interviews done for this course, please change this to Jo Fernie's details: Jo.Fernie@glasgow.ac.uk

Please retain this notification for future reference. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact your School Ethics forum admin support staff.

## Appendix F. Participant Information sheet for recording Death Café conversations



College of Social  
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

### Study title: Death Café conversations: an exploration of content and form

Researcher details: PhD candidate Solveiga Zibaite – School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow, Dumfries Campus, Scotland.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

#### What is the research about?

This project is about the increasingly popular Death Café movement. It aims to record and analyse how people communicate in such events.

#### What will I be expected to do?

You are being invited to participate in a Death Café conversation. In Death Cafes, people gather and talk about anything related to death, dying and bereavement that interests or worries them. The conversations are not guided, there is no agenda or end goal and any topic can be discussed as long as all participants feel comfortable. This is a regular Death Café, except that if you decide to participate in the research, the conversation will be recorded. The event is scheduled to take around two hours. You are able to leave anytime you want. I am here both as a participant and as a researcher. I will speak honestly and openly and my words are subject to analysis in the same way as any other person who agreed to take part.

#### How will the data be used?

The data collected throughout the study will be analysed and used to inform my PhD thesis. It may also be used in future publications such as academic journal articles, books, and presentations at academic conferences.

#### What will be known about me?

You will be assigned a pseudonym. All personal data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet, separate from research data (transcripts of Death Café conversations) and will be safely and securely destroyed 10 years after the thesis is submitted in line with recommended

Data Protection guidelines. Research data will also be stored in a secure, locked cabinet for 10 years after submission of the thesis. I will ask you to put down your age, because I am interested in exploring whether there is a difference in how different generations discuss death and dying.

Please note that assurances of confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

I am funded by the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences Scholarship.

If you have any general questions about this research project, please get in touch with the principle researcher of the study - Solveiga Zibaite by phone \_\_\_\_\_ or email [s.zibaite1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:s.zibaite1@research.gla.ac.uk).

My primary supervisor is Dr. Naomi Richards. Email: [n.richards@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:n.richards@glasgow.ac.uk)

In case you have a complaint, please contact the College ethics officer Muir Houston: [Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

## Appendix G. Consent form for recording Death Café conversations



University  
of Glasgow

College of Social  
Sciences

### Consent form

**Study Title: Death Café conversations: an exploration of content and form**

Researcher details: PhD candidate Solveiga Zibaite – School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow, Dumfries Campus, Scotland.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet or the above study, at the Death Café event taking place on \_\_\_\_\_ and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- I consent to the conversation being audio-recorded.
- I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.
- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- I understand that the research data collected will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research by Solveiga Zibaite and in future publications, both print and online

Please date and sign below to confirm that you have read the above statements and wish to take part in the research.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (BLOCK CAPITALS): \_\_\_\_\_

Age of Participant (exact or approximate, based on your preference): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

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Part of my research is evaluating whether Death Café attendance has any lasting effects on people's lives. For this reason, I would like to conduct follow up interviews within a year from this event.

The interview would take place in person, via Skype or phone, lasting no longer than 60 minutes. All personal data will be anonymised.

If you agree to be contacted about the possibility of participating in a short interview, within one year from the date of this event, please write down your contact details below.

You are under no obligation to take part in the interview even if you have signed this consent form.

I agree to be contacted about the possibility of conducting a follow up interview within one year from today.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (BLOCK CAPITALS): \_\_\_\_\_

I prefer to be contacted by

email: \_\_\_\_\_

Or/and

phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Or/and

Other (e.g. Skype): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H. Participant Information Sheet for follow up interviews



University  
of Glasgow

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College of Social  
Sciences

### Participant information sheet

**Study Title: Death Café conversations: an exploration of content and form**

Researcher details: PhD candidate Solveiga Zibaite – School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow, Dumfries Campus, Scotland.

You have already participated in the first part of my research by attending a Death Café on (DATE, TIME, PLACE). Because you agreed to be contacted, you are now being invited to take part in a follow up interview. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

**What is the research about?**

This project is about the increasingly popular Death Café movement. The aim of this part of the research is to evaluate whether Death Café attendance has any lasting effects on attendee's lives.

**What will I be expected to do?**

During this interview, you will be asked about your impressions about the Death Café event you attended. The Interview will not last longer than 60 minutes.

**What will be known about me?**

You will be referred to by a pseudonym. All personal data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet away from research data and will be safely and securely destroyed 10 years after the thesis is submitted in line with recommended Data Protection guidelines. Research data will also be stored in a secure, locked cabinet for the same time period.

Please note that assurances of confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

**How will the data be used?**

The data collected throughout the course of the study will be analysed and used to inform my PhD thesis. It may also be used in future publications such as journal articles, books, and conferences.

I am funded by the College of Social Sciences Scholarship.

If you have any general questions about this research project, please get in touch with the principle researcher of the study - Solveiga Zibaite by phone or email [s.zibaite1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:s.zibaite1@research.gla.ac.uk).

My primary supervisor is Dr. Naomi Richards Email: [n.richards@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:n.richards@glasgow.ac.uk)

In case you have a complaint, please contact the College ethics officer Muir Houston: [Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

## Appendix I. Interview Consent Form.



College of Social  
Sciences

### Interview Consent Form

Research by PhD candidate Solveiga Zibaite

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- I consent to the interview being audio-recorded.
- I acknowledge that I will be referred to by pseudonym.
- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- I understand that the research data collected will be retained in secure storage for 10 years from the submission of the PhD thesis for use in future academic research by Solveiga Zibaite and in future publications, both print and online.

Please date and sign below to confirm that you have read the above statements and wish to take part in the research. You can withdraw at any point without reason.

I agree to take part in the interview

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (BLOCK CAPITALS): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_



# Appendix J. List of support networks and useful resources

## Support Networks and Useful Resources

### Age UK Scotland

Call Silver Line Scotland 0800 4 70 80 90

<http://www.ageuk.org.uk/scotland/>

### Breathing Space

A free, confidential and anonymous phone line service for anyone who is experiencing low mood or depression, or who is unusually worried and in need of someone to talk to.

Phone 0800 83 85 87 (Monday to Thursday 6pm - 2am and from Friday 6pm through to Monday 6am) or visit the Breathing Space website <http://breathingspace.scot/>

### British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy BACP

It's good to talk: Sometimes it's difficult to say what's on your mind. Talking to a therapist can help you cope with difficulty and make positive change. <http://www.bacp.co.uk/>

### Carers Scotland

We're here to make life better for carers. We give expert advice, information and support. We connect carers so no-one has to care alone, we campaign together for lasting change and we innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers. <http://www.carersuk.org/scotland>

### Citizens Advice Scotland

Free, confidential, impartial and independent advice about almost anything, including NHS services and your rights. 0300 303 4321. Offices in Dumfries, Castle Douglas and other outreach offices

<https://dacas.org/>

### Childhood Bereavement Network

Confidential information and support line for families and professionals when a child has died and when a child is bereaved and resources for bereaved children and young people, families and all professionals.

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/>

### Compassion in Dying

Planning for the end of life is something that few of us want to think about when we're healthy. Lots of us don't consider how we might want to be cared for until we witness the death of a loved one, or experience the first symptoms of an illness. <http://compassionindying.org.uk/>

### Compassionate Friends

Support for bereaved parents and their families. Phone 0845 123 2304. TCF is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents who have suffered the death of a child/children.

We offer support both directly to bereaved families and indirectly by fostering understanding and good practice amongst professionals concerned with child death and by increasing public awareness.

We recognise that many who have suffered the loss of a child feel a bond with others similarly bereaved and wish to extend the hand of friendship. <http://www.tcf.org.uk/>

### Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

Cruse are a charity, staffed by volunteers, to give bereavement support to people throughout Scotland. We have teams in the major population areas plus we are able to provide support across the country by phone National Phonenumber 0845 600 2227. <http://www.crusescotland.org.uk/>

### Dignity in Dying

We believe that everyone has the right to a dignified death. This means a choice over where we die, who is present and our treatment options, access to expert information on our options, good quality end-of-life

care, and support for loved ones and carers and control over how we die, our symptoms and pain relief, and planning our own death. <http://www.dignityindying.org.uk/>

#### **Dying Matters**

Encourages people to talk about their wishes towards the end of their lives, including where they want to die and their funeral plans with friends, family and loved ones. Their website will help you start those conversations. Talking about dying makes it more likely that you, or your loved one, will die as you might have wished and it will make it easier for your loved ones if they know you have had a 'good death'. <http://www.dyingmatters.org/>

#### **Final Fling**

Final Fling is for people who like to be in control of life and death decisions. Know your options. Make choices. Leave instructions. Stay in charge. Right till the end. And meantime, live life to the full. <https://www.finalfling.com/>

#### **Friends at the End**

Is a voluntary society dedicated to legalising Assisted Dying in the UK. We are a membership organisation with many of our members retired doctors, lawyers, academics as well as campaigners for the right to die as and when we choose. <http://www.friends-at-the-end.org.uk/>

#### **Gifted by Grief**

On this site, Jane Duncan Williams encourages you to explore the idea of dying, death and grief. How it can be transformative for you in many ways, not just the practical. But also, to consider what would happen if you were to die soon. <http://giftedbygrief.com/>

#### **Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief**

Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief is working to make Scotland a place where there is more openness about death, dying and bereavement so that people are aware of ways to live with death, dying and bereavement and that people feel better equipped to support each other through the difficult times that can come with death and dying. <http://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/>

#### **Independent Age**

This website is aimed at family, friends and carers who want to talk to a relative about difficult and sensitive subjects. It may also help if you are an older person and want to talk about a sensitive subject yourself. Talking to family about your plans for the future can be difficult, especially if you want to broach subjects like moving into a care home or making a will. If you want to be able to talk more openly to your relative, there are ways you can approach these sensitive topics. You can also find information, advice and services to support you. <https://www.independentage.org/information/personal-life/advice-for-family-and-friends?q=information/personal-life/difficult-conversations>

#### **My decisions**

This free and simple website will help you plan ahead for your future treatment and care [https://mydecisions.org.uk/?utm\\_source=cidwebsite&utm\\_medium=homepage&utm\\_campaign=CIDHOMEPAGE](https://mydecisions.org.uk/?utm_source=cidwebsite&utm_medium=homepage&utm_campaign=CIDHOMEPAGE)

#### **National Association of Widows**

WAY is the only national charity in the UK for men and women aged 50 or under when their partner died. It's a peer-to-peer support group run by a network of volunteers who have been bereaved at a young age themselves, so they understand exactly what other members are going through. The stereotype of a "widow" or "widower" is someone in their seventies or eighties. However, the sad reality is that more than 142,000 men and women in the UK are widowed under the age of 50. <https://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk/>

**National Council for Palliative Care**

Designed for carers, families and friends of dying people, this online resource tries to answer some of the questions people may have about what happens in the very last days and hours of a person's life. [http://www.ncpc.org.uk/sites/default/files/user/documents/What\\_to\\_Expect\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ncpc.org.uk/sites/default/files/user/documents/What_to_Expect_FINAL_WEB.pdf)

**Organ donation (Scotland)**

Here's where you can find out more about organ donation, before making your choice. Remember – whatever you decide, it's crucial to make sure your wishes are known, so be sure to tell your loved ones. You can now choose to donate, choose not to donate, withdraw your details from the NHS Organ Donor Register, or update them.

<https://www.organdonationscotland.org/more-information-your-choices-explained>  
<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/research/facilities/brain-banks>

**Pushing up the Daisies**

In May 2016, a small group of people from Todmorden in Yorkshire created a mini festival to make space for those tricky conversations. We all know someone who has died, someone who has been bereaved and someone who will miss us when we're gone. And yet, nearly all of us struggle with thinking about, planning and talking about death. Especially with the people we love the most.

<http://www.pushingupdaisies.org/>

**Sands – Stillbirth and neonatal death charity**

Sands supports anyone who has been affected by the death of a baby before, during or shortly after birth. They offer emotional support and information for parents, grandparents, siblings, children, families and friends, health professionals and others. 020 7436 5881. <https://www.uk-sands.org/>

**Sunlife Insurance: Free On-line Funeral Planner**

A useful free planner

<https://www.sunlife.co.uk/life-cover/over-50-life-insurance/perfect-send-off/>

**Winston's Wish**

Winston's Wish is the leading childhood bereavement charity in the UK. It offers practical support and guidance to bereaved children, their families and professionals. <http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/>

# Appendix K. Underwood (2013a). Guide to running your own Death Café.

Reproduced here with Donna Molloy's permission. Also available online: [https://deathcafe.com/site\\_media/files/guide.pdf](https://deathcafe.com/site_media/files/guide.pdf)

## DEATH CAFE

### Guide to running your own Death Cafe

#### Introduction

This guide is for those who are looking to host Death Cafés or conversations about death. However, you are welcome to read this whoever you are. We recommend you read the page on [What is Death Cafe](#) before reading this guide.

This is a copy of version 2.1 of our guide. The master version, with links, is kept on our website at <http://deathcafe.com/how>.

It has been written by Jon Underwood with input from a number of others. In particular, thanks goes to [Sue Barsky Reid](#) who developed our core model.

This document is open to discussion, edit and improvement. Please post constructive suggestions or queries on the [Death Cafe practitioners page](#).

Thank you for your interest in Death Cafe!

#### 1. Working with us

1.1 Death Cafe operates a free affiliate scheme. This means people who sign up to our principles are authorised to do certain things, i.e.:

- Use the name Death Cafe for their events.
- Post events to our website.
- Talk to the press and others as an affiliate of Death Cafe.

1.2. Our principles are that Death Cafes are always offered:

- With no intention of leading participants to any conclusion, product or course of action.
- As an open, respectful and confidential space where people can express their views safely.
- On a not for profit basis.
- Alongside refreshing drinks and nourishing food – and cake!

1.3 It's also worth stating here what Death Cafes is not:

- Death Cafe is not a bereavement support or grief counselling setting. Death Cafe doesn't work for people who, for whatever reason, aren't able to discuss death

comfortably and openly. There are many projects better set up for this.

- Death Cafes aren't an opportunity to give people information about death and dying - regardless of how good or important it is. Rather we create time to discuss death without expectations. For this reason having guest speakers and information materials available is actively discouraged
- Death Cafe doesn't work as a method of community engagement, research or consultation. It shouldn't be used for these purposes.

We have established this structure to keep Death Cafe positive. This is also to prevent the use of this concept by those with an interest in leading people to conclusions, products or a specific course of action.

1.4 When you post your Death Cafes on our site you'll be asked to sign up to our 'Working with us' document which contains all our terms and conditions. To see this [click here](#).

## 2. What do I need to hold a Death Cafe?

2.1 The things needed to hold a Death Cafe are:

- A host and facilitator.
- A venue with refreshments booked for a certain time and date.
- People who want to talk about death.

That's it! The Death Cafe format is flexible, lightweight and straightforward. What makes it special is the discussion about death, there is no need for bells and whistles.

The sections below give more detail the things you'll need to hold a Death Cafe.

## 3. Hosting a Death Cafe

A Death Cafe host is the person or people who make the Death Cafe happen. Being a Death Cafe host tends to be an enlightening and pleasant way of working with death in the community, and investing in your personal growth.

3.1 The main qualities of a host are enthusiasm for talking about death and dying and high ethical standards. It also helps to have good organisational skills, the ability to build relationships, good networks and patience! Ideally you'll have attended a Death Cafe before organising your own but we recognise this is sometimes not possible.

3.2 The activities of a Death Cafe host are likely to include:

- Recruiting and co-ordinating the other people involved in the Death Cafe.
- Arranging the venue and refreshments for the Death Cafe (see section on Venues, refreshments and timings.)
- Letting people know about the Death Cafe (see section on Publicising your Death Cafe.)



- Ensuring the quality and safety of the event.
- Dealing with RSVPs if you decide to have them.

3.3 The steps involved in hosting a Death Cafe begin with a thorough read of this guide. After that, they roughly consist of:

- Agreeing who will do what.
- Finding the venue and setting the date.
- Letting people know.
- Holding and enjoying your Death Cafe.
- Writeup / debrief and evaluation.

3.4 As a host you're responsible for the safety of your Death Cafes. Death Cafes tend to be very safe and positive events and we have had very little incident in our 200 Death Cafes to date. Having said that, to ensure the safety of your Death Cafe please:

- Check all facilitators meet the criteria in the section below.
- Have a minimum of 2 Death Cafe people at the event, especially if the Death Cafe is in a domestic setting.
- Ensure you know where and how to refer people who need more support.
- Refuse to admit anyone who comes to a Death Cafe intoxicated.
- Ensure people know that Death Cafe is not a bereavement / grief support resource.

3.5 We're now fortunate to have a number of experienced Death Cafe facilitators in our community. If you've questions please post them to the [Death Cafe practitioners page](#). Some hosts are open to mentoring others in their Death Cafe work. Please feel free to get in touch with them via their profile pages.

#### 4. Being a Death Cafe facilitator

Facilitation is essential to Death Cafe. This role can be summarised as making people feel safe to talk about death. Death Cafes tend to be very nice to facilitate - everyone there wants to talk about death and most have a lot to say. Facilitators can be the same person as the host or different but unlike hosts, a facilitator only performs her/his role during the Death Cafe session.

4.1 In general the facilitator's role consists of:

- Welcoming people to the Death Cafe and introducing the session.
- Ensuring, during the discussion, that our guidelines are respected especially regarding tolerance for others' views.
- Bringing people into the discussion if you think they want to say something.
- Moving the discussion on if things get stuck.
- Managing any difficult situations. Fortunately these instances are very rare.
- Closing the session and asking for evaluation.

4.2 We don't insist that facilitators have a formal qualification in, or specific level of experience with, death and dying - we believe that death belongs to everybody.

However, all Death Cafe facilitators should:

- Be able to listen to and discuss all aspects of death and dying with equanimity.
- Have good group facilitation skills.
- Be able to handle any issues or problematic situations at or arising from the Death Cafe.

Along with the skills above, the main qualities of a facilitator are enthusiasm for talking about death and dying, empathy, clear boundaries, flexibility and a friendly manner.

4.3 In the Death Cafe there are no hierarchies. We all meet simply as people who are going to die. As such any facilitators who work around death and dying should be willing to leave their professional identity at the door.

4.4 In general facilitators leave a Death Cafe feeling uplifted, but this doesn't always happen. It is not unusual to feel concerned or even downcast. If you'd like to discuss any aspect of what you've heard please post to the [Death Cafe practitioners page](#) or [contact us](#).

## 5. Venues, refreshments and timings

### Venues

A good venue is important as a pleasant environment helps people relax and talk about death. Death Cafe is very flexible and has been run successfully in a variety of setting including people's homes, cafes and restaurants, community spaces, festivals halls, tents and parks.

5.1 The following questions might help you find the right venue for your Death Cafe:

- Where will you feel most comfortable and relaxed?
- Where will you get free, or if not inexpensive, room rental? Houses and cafes mostly tick this box.
- Where is it easy to obtain refreshments? Cafes are good in respect of this as people can just buy their own refreshments.
- Where is a convenient location within the community?
- What might be an interesting and different venue and so catch people's attention?

5.2 Experience shows that once you decide on a venue and set the time and date, everything tends to fall into place. We would recommend you confirm your date a minimum of 1 month before the Death Cafe to allow time to let people know.

### Refreshments

5.3 As you'll have seen, it is one of our principles to have refreshments at a Death Cafe. The linking of death, food and drink comes from Bernard Crettaz's Café Mortels concept. Mr. Crettaz said that 'nothing marks to community of the living like sharing food and drink'.

5.4 Death Cafe likes to talk about cake a lot, and cake is certainly popular. However any sort of food and drink is ok so this can be geared to your community. We have a preference for vegetarian food and it is good to have vegan options. Occasionally alcohol (in moderation) has been drunk at Death Cafes with no observable ill effects.

5.5 There are a range of options for providing food and drink and it is worth making reference your choice when you publicise your Death Cafe. Some options are less expensive and time consuming than others. These include:

- Hosting a potluck where attendees contribute food to share.
- If you're holding your Death Cafe somewhere that sells refreshments, asking people to buy their own. This might persuade venue owners to give you the space.
- Making your own food and drink for the Death Cafe.
- Asking someone else to provide the food and drink, either voluntarily or (if there's no alternative) professionally.

5.6 If you decide to have home prepared food or potluck, please have regard to food preparation and handling guidelines and regulation. These vary greatly from area to area, and from community to community. It is the host's responsibility to ensure that any food and drink provided is safe.

### Timings

5.5 People often ask how regularly they should organise a Death Cafe. The answer is that there are no recommended timescales - hosts organise them whenever feels right. A minority of Death Cafes take place monthly but most are on an as-and-when basis. Sometimes people organise a run of 4 or so Death Cafes and then take a break.

5.6 The average time to a Death Cafe is around 2 hours. It is possible to have longer and it is also possible to have a meaningful Death Cafe in an hour. When considering your timings please remember that people often arrive late and take time to settle.

5.7 There is no particular day of the week or time that works particularly well for Death Cafe. In general weekday evenings and weekend afternoons have been most popular. It's worth considering what works well for you and is accessible for those who want to come.

5.8 One final thing to say in relation to Death Cafe timings - don't rush! Taking the time to plan delivers a better event.

## 6. The Death Cafe session

6.1 **Please note:** The Death Cafe model doesn't include having specific topics, set questions and (in particular) guest speakers. We ask you not to have these at your Death Cafes. Our view is that, when it comes to death, people have enough to discuss already.

To elaborate, giving extra input or setting too much of an agenda risks being presumptuous, restrictive and/or disempowering. As such we favour offering a



group directed session offering participants time to reflect on and share what they think is important. In our experience this yields the best results.

6.2 This refers to the Death Cafe session itself, which is always straightforward and open discussion about death. It is ok to situate your Death Cafe in a wider programme of events and this has happened a number of times at large events focused on death. Death Cafes could also happen in other settings too, such as art shows, film screenings, political debates, training sessions and days of spiritual practice. However the Death Cafe should always be separate from these, and observe our principles. Only the Death Cafe part of such events will be advertised on this website.

6.3 In general Death Cafes are open to, and respectful of, people of all communities and belief systems. However it is fine, and can be very good, to have Death Cafes for specific communities and belief systems. For example we have had a number of Death Cafes specifically for the **LGBT** community. In the same way it is possible to have Death Cafes for other communities / groups e.g. Muslims, young people, older people, homeless people etc. Wherever possible these should be facilitated by people who are from that community.

6.2 There are 2 basic ways to hold a Death Cafe and it's best to decide which you'll use in advance:

- Cafe model. This is when there is facilitator with the group throughout the discussion. In this case, the ideal group size is between 6 and 12 people. Generally 3 would be a minimum group size and 20 a maximum.
- Salon model. This is when the groups are self facilitating. Generally the facilitator/s would give an introduction and then float between groups when needed. This works better for large Death Cafes. In this case the group size would generally be between 4 and 8 people.

6.3 Generally Death Cafes are for adults. However occasionally people have asked to bring children / young adults, or just shown up with them. When they have been admitted the session has been fine for them and their parents, but sometimes other group members have felt inhibited. If you decide to admit young people please ensure you're adequately set up for this to be safe, and ask the consent of other group members.

Like life, a Death Cafe has a start, middle and an end:

#### **Start**

6.4 At the start of your Death Cafe it is good to set out some things:

- What Death Cafe is and where it has come from (see [here](#)) and our principles (above).
- Whether you're asking for donations and, if so, what these are for (see Death Cafe and money below).
- Some basic ground rules: listening when people are talking, respect for others'

views and confidentiality.

- What you're going to do in the session.
- Ask if there are any questions before continuing.

6.5 In terms of confidentiality we generally say that we share feedback for publication on the Death Café website, but no information is linked to any particular person. It's also good to ask whether people are comfortable with photos being taken if you plan to do so. If there are any journalists present it is appropriate that they identify themselves to the group. If the Death Cafe is to be filmed or recorded then attendees should be notified before the event.

### **Middle**

6.6 As we've said, a core model is a group-directed discussion without specific topics, questions or speakers. Basically there is no agenda. As such the session tends to run as follows:

- The facilitator asks the group to introduce themselves and say why they've come to Death Cafe. This gives an opportunity for people to say whatever they want to say. Everyone takes a turn apart from people who don't want to speak. People volunteer some amazing things! If the facilitator is with the group, she/he takes a turn to speak too. This part of the Death Cafe can take some time - up to an hour in a group of 10.
- After that the facilitator asks if anything came up for the group whilst people were speaking - thoughts, questions or reflections. This may feel challenging or risky for the facilitator but attendees tend to take over the discussion and the time flies by.
- If, after trying the group-directed approach, you think your attendees would prefer a more structured session then it is ok to introduce a couple of specific questions. It is good to have these in mind anyway in case they would help the discussion. It is good to keep any questions very open. Please don't ask more than 3 - the Death Cafe tends to fly by and it doesn't work to try to do too much. It is always possible to have more Death Cafes!

### **End**

6.7 After the allotted time, or if it feels like you've finished, bring the Death Cafe session to a close. It's good to give people between 5 and 20 minutes notice so they have a chance to share anything they want before the end.

6.7 Please thank everybody for attending and ask them to evaluate the session. In due course people will be able to submit their evaluations on this site. In the meantime we have a form which you can download [here](#).

6.8 It's good to stay around after the session has ended to talk to anyone who wants to talk. It's also good to debrief with the other hosts and facilitators sometime after the event.

## **7. Publicising your Death Cafe**

The objective of Death Café is to 'increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives'. Publicising your Death Cafe is a great way to do this. You'll be talking to people about death whether they're coming to your Death Cafe or not.

7.1 As soon as you're ready, please post your Death Cafe to this site. You can do this [here](#). You can also give updates about your Death Cafe (e.g. 'we're full!') that will appear on the main news pages.

7.2 It's also worth thinking about how you will publicise your Death Café locally. The Death Cafe website reaches a number of people but reaching out yourself is really effective. Ways that you can do this include:

- Reaching out to your personal networks. Let your friends, family and social circles know you're doing this (if you want to).
- Contact the local press and also others working in media whom you know. The media are often interested in Death Cafe and of course they need things to write about - what better than death! The traditional way to do this is send a press release and follow up with a phone call.
- Post on social websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Meetup. To avoid confusion we ask people not to start blogs or twitter accounts with Death Café in the title. It is fine to start Death Café facebook pages for your Death Café but please be willing to let others in your area post their Death Cafes there too.
- Identify communities of interest locally (e.g. students, artists, philosophy groups) and connect with them.

7.3 Some hosts prefer to request RSVPs from potential attendees. This enables them to control numbers and communicate prior to the session. The only disadvantage of requesting RSVPs is the increased admin. RSVPs are only essential if the Death Cafe is in a private location and many hosts prefer to do without. When you post your Death Cafe on the site there is an option to add a booking form to your Death Cafe page. If people fill this in we will send you an email. Your email address is never displayed on this site.

7.4 Some people like to create their own Death Cafe posters to post on line and / or put up locally. This is fun but printing and design can be time consuming and expensive.

7.5 When talking to the media as an affiliate of Death Cafe here we ask you to:

- Wherever possible convey our principles i.e. not for profit, with not intention of leading people... etc.
- Credit Jon Underwood with founding Death Café based on the work of Bernard Crettaz.
- If you're in the United States please add that Lizzy Miles was the first person to offer Death Café in the US.
- Please ask them to give a link to [deathcafe.com](http://deathcafe.com).

7.6 Once people find out that you're offering a Death Cafe, be prepared for some

interesting conversations. However these can be extremely valuable and in themselves meet the objectives of Death Café. Sue Barsky-Reid says 'There is something a bit eccentric about doing a Death Café. However, if you're anything like me, you'll like being thought of as an eccentric!'

## 8. Death Cafe, money and sponsorship

8.1 We request hosts to help make Death Cafe sustainable by minimising the costs of your event. It really isn't necessary to have very expensive cakes, or order a Death Cafe stamp or pay for a posh room. What makes a Death Cafe special is the conversation about death. However we do recognise that Death Cafes sometimes cost money to organise.

8.2 There are 3 ways to organise your Death Cafe in terms of money:

- Offer it for free. This is the most straightforward way. Please acknowledge those who have contributed to the Death Cafe being free in your publicity.
- Ask for a non-specific donation e.g. by saying something like 'donations welcome' on your publicity. The amount received from donations is variable and rarely very much. People need to be reminded to donate at the start and end of the session.
- Request a specific donation e.g. \$4 per person. If you do this please clearly set out what the donation is going to be used for so people can see that it accords with our not-for-profit ethos. A specific donation is different from a ticket price in that people shouldn't be excluded who aren't able or willing to pay it.

8.3 Death Cafes never have a ticket price or exclude those who can't afford to donate.

### Sponsorship

8.4 We also accept contributions towards our Death Cafe. Organisations or people who contribute are called sponsors. Their contributions can take a number of forms such as:

- Money for expenses.
- Donation of a room.
- Provision of drinks and refreshments.
- Access to networks.
- Allowing employees to organise the Death Cafe during work time.

8.5 Our current policy is to acknowledge sponsors in the text about the Death Cafe. We don't include the names of organisations in the title of the Death Cafe. However this is under review as some in our community believe that sponsorship contravenes our principle of not leading people to any conclusion, product and course of action.

8.6 There are some types of organisations we never accept sponsorship from or associate with:

- Large private sector organisations in the death and dying sector.
- Political organisations.



- Campaign groups whose remit includes contentious issues involving death such as right to die, abortion or vivisection.

8.7 We reserve the right to reject sponsorship at our discretion. If the amount of sponsorship is larger than that needed for the Death Cafe or to discuss our policy please [contact us](#).

## 9. Death Cafe quick start guide

9.1 Here's a rough checklist of what you need to do to organise a Death Cafe:

- Read this guide from cover to cover.
- Decide who is going to do what regarding refreshments, publicity, facilitation etc. and how this will be done.
- Decide on your venue and set the date and time.
- Post the Death Cafe the Death Cafe website.
- Let others know - friends and family, media, networks.
- Enjoy your Death Cafe!
- Evaluate, writeup and debrief.

9.2 If you have any questions about any of this please post them to the [Death Cafe practitioners page](#)

### Final remarks

This guide is likely to change as time goes by. Please get in [contact](#) if you'd like to play a role in maintaining it, or have specific suggestions for improvement. In time I would like to establish a wiki for this document.

If you have any questions please post them on the [Death Cafe practitioners page](#).

In the meantime thanks for your interest in holding a Death Cafe and good luck with your events!

Death Cafe is provided by [Impermanence](#)

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