Post-mortem consciousness: views of psychotherapists and their influence on the work with clients

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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"The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit."

Signed: _____

_____

Claudia Nielsen

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Abstract:

Post-mortem consciousness: views of psychotherapists and their influence on the work with clients

Claudia Nielsen

The aim of this study was to explore the views of psychotherapists on post-mortem consciousness and whether these views influence their work with clients. The mixed-methods approach used an online survey in stage one, which invited counsellors and psychotherapists to answer questions about their views on post-mortem consciousness. The sole participation criterion was that that participants must be experienced and accredited. Replies were gained from 103 participants. The survey yielded demographic information and included questions allowing for free-text responses for participants to expand on their comments. These were analysed thematically. Participants from stage one, who were willing to be interviewed for this project, were invited to make contact in order to take part in stage two of the research and 12 practitioners were interviewed. The transcripts were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Almost 70% of the survey participants indicated that questions about post-mortem consciousness influence the way they live their lives and also the way they work with clients. Additionally, just over 52% of the participants declared a belief in life after death. However, the findings from the interviews showed that 10 out of the 12 therapists who were interviewed were not aware of their clients bringing issues around death or post-mortem consciousness in their work. This may be due to: (1) therapists not having worked on issues relating to their own mortality; (2) a fear of losing credibility if the issue of post-mortem consciousness were to be discussed in the work; (3) confusion between imposing their views and allowing exploration of the topic of post-mortem consciousness in their work; (4) the absence of this theme in their professional training; or (5) the possibility that the topic of death and post-mortem consciousness was not part of clients' overt or covert presenting issues. It is suggested that the current scientific paradigm on which counselling and psychotherapy is based, represses the presenting of more open and speculative views about what it means to be human, thereby limiting issues that clients might otherwise bring to therapy. These may include belief in post-mortem consciousness. The research suggests that therapists, supervisors and trainers need to assess their own views about post-mortem consciousness to become more open to, and able to work with,

the potential presence of underlying issues that may stem from clients' views about post-mortem consciousness in clients' presenting issues.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter will contextualise the research. I will position myself in the research, state the research question and aims, and give a summary of each chapter.

1.2. Positioning statement

It was my personal interest in consciousness that motivated me to follow the profession of psychotherapy, and for over 25 years I have been learning from clients what it is to be a human being other than myself. One of the themes that is frequently present in my therapy room, either overtly or covertly, is the issue of death, which is often permeated by fear. In my experience as a psychotherapist, I have had clients who have told me overtly that they have a fear of their own death. I have also had clients where, when we explored an issue regarding panic attacks or some other anxiety further, we found a fear of mortality lurking. An example of this is a client who swallowed a fish bone which scratched her throat. The bone did not cause her any further physical problems, but the powerful anxiety and panic that she developed brought her to work psychotherapeutically with me. She also suffered from claustrophobia which prevented her from travelling in lifts and on the Tube. This was problematic because, being a business woman, she had often meetings in buildings where the lift would be the easiest travel facility. Our work uncovered her fear of her own mortality.

I am hoping to make a contribution to the field of counselling and psychotherapy by exploring a widely held, but currently actively

dismissed, perspective about the mystery that is death and what may be beyond. In the process, I hope to help in further opening up the discussion in this area, which continues to be marginalised in counselling and psychotherapy.

1.3. The context of the research

Looking into the dark corners of the popular collective psyche, we find the subject of death and the paranormal occupying much space there (Garrett, 2015). At Halloween for instance, people play out this darkness from the safety of 'having fun' as they dress up as witches, ghostly figures, skeletons and other fearful things, challenging, probably quite unconsciously, the grip these underlying fears have on them. The way we relate to both death and the paranormal is intimately connected with the mystery of consciousness.

In the current scientific paradigm (Kuhn, 1962), which advocates that the brain in some way or another generates consciousness, death of the physical body necessarily means the extinction of consciousness. Once the brain is physically dead, it stands to reason that consciousness will necessarily die out with it.

There is, however, an alternative to this mainstream view – that is, the perspective that holds the brain as necessary for the manifestation of consciousness, but not its source. This viewpoint has its exponents within the community of reputable scientists. For instance the neurophysiologist Sir John Eccles edited a book, *Brain and Conscious*

Experience, (Eccles, 1966), in which 22 of the contributors agreed that no materialist theory could account for the workings of the human brain. Further evidence comes from the research into the phenomenon of near-death experiences (Fenwick & Parnia, 2002, Greyson & Khanna, 2014, Van Lommel, 2013). The findings indicate that people who have experienced this phenomenon describe similar experiences of being somewhere else, experiencing profound peace and harmony, and often seeing dead relatives. Fenwick (2002, 2010, 2007) has also researched 'end-of-life' phenomena and found consistency in the experiences at this time as well. These included visions by the dying person and by living relatives, indicating here, too, that these experiences seem to point to access to some kind of different realm. Listening to what dreams communicate is also informative, as we learn from Von Franz (1986):

> All of the dreams of people who are facing death indicate that the unconscious, that is, our instinct world, prepares consciousness not for a definite end, but for a profound transformation and for a kind of continuation of the life process which, however, is unimaginable to everyday consciousness. (p.156)

With this in mind, I think it is reasonable to consider as possible the idea of death being a portal into a conscious experience of a different reality. Although it is true that absolute certainty on the issue is not available until we come to experience death ourselves, I wish to declare that the open mind I have with respect to what happens after death is a result of my lifelong interest in the mystery of the nature of reality, a mystery which seems to be rooted in the mystery of consciousness.

If consciousness is generated by the brain, then with the death of the brain consciousness is extinguished. The idea of an afterlife is consequently negated. This closes the door on the fundamental part of the question being asked in this research – the possibility of post-mortem consciousness.

If consciousness is a fundamental attribute or feature of reality (Chalmers, 2014, Nunez, 2010, Quincey, 2002, Seager, 2016), then it is potentially infinite and immortal. Might this be the insight of the faith traditions? Ariès (1981) tells us that 'until the age of scientific progress, human beings accepted the idea of a continued existence after death' (p.95). What changed with the age of scientific progress?

The view of consciousness as primary, or as fundamental in reality, implies that rather than *having* consciousness we *are* embodied consciousness. This means that we *participate* in the limitless or Highest Consciousness – which is also understood as 'God'. If this is so, participating in this limitless and Highest Consciousness would mean our own consciousness is limitless, making credible the idea of some form of conscious existence after death. There may be a temptation to compare this perspective with Pascal's (1623-1662) 'wager' (1995) which goes as follows: by believing in God, we win if he does exist and lose nothing if he does not. Although this is a good cover for a bet, it plays no

part in the consideration of the theory of post-mortem existence being credible, as argued in this study.

1.4. Research question and aims

The question asked in this research is: What views on post-mortem consciousness are found amongst psychotherapists who are keen to discuss such matters, in what ways do they think about such issues, and how do their views influence their work with clients? The question is asked with the aim of exploring whether such a fundamental existential issue is part of those practitioners' empirical framework and, if so, whether it comes into play in circumstances when clients bring issues which may, whether overtly or covertly, be associated with their concerns about their own mortality and what may come after. It is understood that the findings in this study do not claim to represent the overall population of psychotherapists. The focus is on the answers to the question achieved through the reflections of the self-selected sample of participants of this study.

The aims of the research are:

- to explore the views of psychotherapists who are willing to consider post-mortem consciousness as a possibility;
- to explore whether those ideas influence their work with clients.

This research – *Post-mortem Consciousness: Views of Psychotherapists and their Influence on the Work with Clients* - is divided into two parts:

the first is *views of psychotherapists* and the second is *the influence on their work with clients.*

The idea of post-mortem consciousness will be elaborated with a view to validating the idea as credible. This is because, as the belief in post-mortem existence, or life after death, is dismissed within the current secular paradigm, 'believers' are often judged in disparaging terms. Since many of the participants in this research are 'believers', it is important that they are seen as serious and credible practitioners. For this reason, I develop in Chapter 2 (Literature Review) a historical account of the belief in post-mortem consciousness, identifying in particular the two opposing strands regarding this belief: the Platonic and the Aristotelian. These have found their voice throughout the ages, up to the present time. I address the question of consciousness from various perspectives to paint a picture for the validation of the theory of post-mortem consciousness as credible.

In seeking an understanding of why eminent scholars, scientists, philosophers and psychologists are proponents of one of the two strands of belief on post-mortem consciousness - and to move the question away from the subject of evidence, which means different things to the different proponents – I draw upon a theory developed by McGilchrist (2009). This theory shines a light on how the type of attention and perception we bring into play determines the world which emerges for us, and consequently our personal ontology and epistemology. This theory is

predicated on McGilchrist's research on the tendencies of the different types of attention facilitated by the brain hemispheres.

The first part of this research, whether practitioners' belief in death as what Feifel (1959) called a 'wall' or a 'door' (an apt metaphor which I shall use throughout this study), plays a part in how they deal with clients in the therapy room. The work in counselling and psychotherapy aims to address clients' struggles, and the idea of personal mortality is a consideration which may play a part in people's anxieties. This means that clients who seek therapy may well be struggling with it consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, the growing belief in reincarnation in the West (Barua, 2017, Burris, 2016, Heflick, Goldenberg, Hart, & Kamp, 2015, Singleton, 2015) which includes the possibility of previous existences, opens up a question regarding the aetiology of clients' issues: childhood or previous lives?

The second part of this research addresses whether the belief in post-mortem consciousness influences practitioners' work with clients. The dialogical nature of the work makes this a relevant question to ask.

It must be stressed that this study is about death and what comes after; it is not about dying and all that it entails. It is not about fear of suffering prior to death. It is also not about grief and bereavement following the death of a loved person. The focus is ontological and epistemological.

Although at times I use the word 'afterlife' for variation, the term carries the difficulty inherent in what is meant by 'life'. In our embodied state, we have a clear understanding of the meaning of the term; however, with the demise of the physical body, the word may lose its meaning. For this reason, the terms 'post-mortem consciousness' and 'post-mortem-existence' seem more apposite and are used more often.

1.5. Originality

This research demonstrates originality in the following ways:

- It specifically deals with post-mortem consciousness which is otherwise absent from the discourse in counselling and psychotherapy.
- It includes the views of therapists on the topic of post-mortem consciousness which are otherwise absent from research into the counselling and psychotherapeutic professions.
- It focuses on whether therapists' views on post-mortem consciousness influence their work with clients, a topic that is otherwise absent from the counselling and psychotherapeutic literature.

To ascertain the above it uses a mixed-methods approach, which has never been used before with this subject focus.

1.6. The chapters

Chapter 2 is the literature review and places the study in context. In addition to providing a historical account and an overview of the topic of consciousness, this chapter addresses the nature of belief and situates the subject of death and post-mortem existence in psychology and psychotherapy. It identifies the gap in the professional literature of counselling and psychotherapy, that this study is proposing to fill.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and the methods chosen to conduct this research. It explains the rationale for the design, which has two stages: a survey and semi-structured interviews with therapists who see themselves as spiritual. It describes the steps taken in both methods from inception to final data analysis. It addresses issues of validity and credibility, examines ethical considerations and includes my reflections on the process.

Chapter 4 addresses the survey findings. It describes the quantitative part of the survey, setting out the demographic and multiple-choice findings, and it develops the findings from three open-ended fields included in the survey.

Chapter 5 explores the interview findings. It covers the themes devised in the interview transcripts, setting out quotes as examples.

Chapter 6 is the survey discussion. It discusses the demographics and multiple-choice findings and, in more detail, the themes constructed in the three free-text questions of the survey.

Chapter 7 develops the interviews discussion, addressing what the interview findings showed about the spiritual participants' views on post-mortem existence and their influence on the work with their clients.

Chapter 8 brings the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7 together and looks at a synthesis of the two, specifically through the lens of McGilchrist's theory.

Chapter 9 describes the conclusions and includes my personal reflections regarding this study.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Overview

This chapter will review the relevant literature and state the search strategy. It will explore the literature setting out the field of post-mortem consciousness in terms of its relevance to this study.

2.2. Introduction

The title of this research – *Post-mortem Consciousness: Views of Psychotherapists and their Influence on the Work with Clients* – tackles an important subject. The question of what happens after death is addressed at some point in life by every person (Fontana, 2010), and the answer for each person resides in the realm of their belief (Phillips, 1970).

It is a controversial subject: for some people, death of the body necessarily means the extinguishing of consciousness, a belief which is predicated on the idea that consciousness is generated by the brain (Crick, 1994). In contrast, for others, consciousness is 'non-local' (Grof, 2010), a term used to suggest that consciousness can operate outside the physical body and therefore that 'survival' after death is a distinct possibility. The non-locality of consciousness emerges from findings in the area of quantum theory in physics (Radin, 1997).

The importance of this subject for counselling and psychotherapy lies in the fact that the end of life is an anxiety-provoking subject in Western society (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszcynski, 2015). Whether death represents a 'wall' or a 'door' is for us, the living, an enigma because, as Walker (2000) points out, 'no direct evidence to confirm the existence or nature of the phenomenon [of the afterlife] can currently be obtained' (p.19).

2.3. Search strategy

Most of the sources investigated for this study were encountered through a snowballing effect. In addition, I used Google Scholar, the University of Chester's library search facility, the British Library and various databases, including Infopsych, JSTOR and PubMed. I have also explored a number of journals, including the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, Counselling Psychology Quarterly,* the *Journal of Consciousness Studies,* the *Journal of Counselling Psychology, Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying, OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying, Death Studies, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* and many others. The keywords most used were 'death', 'afterlife', 'life after death', 'consciousness', 'thanatology', 'brain', 'mind', 'psychology', 'psychotherapy' and 'counselling'.

2.4. Exploring the field

Post-mortem existence is traditionally understood to be the province of religion (Segal, 2004), although Ducasse (1961) points out that even though religions have used the concept of an afterlife, where the 'soul' or 'spirit' will meet its rewards or punishments for the life it lived, the idea is not in itself religious. If the survival hypothesis is stripped of its religious connotations, then it is a question of fact – it either is or it is not real – however difficult it may be to get adequate evidence. Ducasse says:

> If the human personalities survive the body's death and do so discarnate, then – although their continued existence is normally as imperceptible to us as were bacteria before we had microscopes and as still are the subatomic entities of theoretical physics – those discarnate personalities are just another part of the population of the world; and their abode – if the world still has significance in relation to them – is just another region or dimension of the universe, not as yet commonly accessible to us. (p.14)

He mentions 'human personalities' – by which he means 'psychological components' (p.125) – which touches on the subject of identity and the nature of what survives. This is an important subject within philosophy and religion (Moore, 2017). Encapsulated in his statement, furthermore, is the suggestion that despite the advances that have taken place in science and technology, there is much that we do not understand about the nature of reality.

The limitation of our minds is not a recent insight. In the 16th century, Shakespeare (1951) had this poignantly expressed by Hamlet to Horatio:

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (p.1038)

Keeping to the perspective that the afterlife is not necessarily predicated on religious beliefs, this study focuses on consciousness studies, and mostly uses the concept of 'consciousness' rather than 'soul' or 'spirit' to free the concept under discussion from an interpretation within a religious framework.

Because the idea of post-mortem consciousness is so closely related to death and spirituality, this thesis will necessarily consider those two subjects very closely.

Spirituality is an umbrella term and is used in different ways. Helminiak (1996) identifies six usages. These are:

1. Spirituality as spiritual nature, a component of the human being.
2. Spirituality as a conception of the transcendence – the sense that something exists beyond the here and now.
3. Spirituality as lived-experience – meaning all those aspects of human living, including practices and rituals, which help unfold the human spiritual capacity.
4. Spirituality as spiritualism – communication with human spirits, usually of people who have died or with other spiritual entities.
5. Spirituality as parapsychology – involvement with extraordinary human powers that result in 'psychic' or 'psi' phenomena.
6. Spirituality as an academic discipline.

All, except for the last, are relevant to the way the term is used in this thesis.

This chapter will address the question of post-mortem existence from the perspectives of religion, science, psychology and philosophy. It will briefly explore historical perspectives in order to contextualise the current beliefs. It will explicate the shift from belief in an afterlife as incorporated in religious doctrine to the current materialistic stance that once the physical body is dead, consciousness is extinguished. As consciousness is central to the belief in post-mortem existence, I will explore how consciousness is considered by science, psychology and philosophy.

Because of the limitation in the length of this thesis and also because of the vast number of thinkers, especially philosophers, who have addressed subjects of relevance to this theme – such as Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Wittgenstein (1889-1951), McTaggarth (1866-1925) and Rank (1884-1939) – only a few will be included. It is, however, hoped that the picture painted will represent as accurately and impartially as possible the nature of the arguments.

The current scientific stance will be touched upon only briefly because, once the argument has been made that consciousness resides in the brain, there is nothing to be said about the afterlife after the death of the body – and consequently of the brain – because consciousness is extinguished. However, the idea that consciousness is non-local and the brain is a facilitator rather than a generator of consciousness (Radin,

2006a) opens up a wide field of phenomena to be explored, including post-mortem existence.

An analysis of the different views on the subject of death and post-mortem consciousness will be conducted through the insights into current attitudes on the subject, particularly the lens of McGilchrist's (2009) theory of the asymmetry of the brain hemispheres and their perception tendencies in worldview orientation. McGilchrist's theory is based on a consideration of the physical structure of the brain and is supported by a body of brain research into the internal experience as manifested by people with deficient left or right brain hemisphere function. McGilchrist shows that the lens of perception, as filtered by the individual brain hemispheres, results in particular perspectives on, and attitudes towards, the world. Scientific and analytical approaches are mediated by left hemisphere kinds of attention whereas the province of meaning and holistic approach is mediated by the right hemisphere. On the basis of his theory, he analysed and explained cultural tendencies and implications for society throughout Western history as induced by the typical approach of left or right hemisphere attention/perception. An interesting picture emerges from this perspective especially in considering the two paradigmatic strands which developed historically regarding the belief in post-mortem consciousness: Platonic and Aristotelian.

Intimations of an afterlife are often derived from paranormal experiences. Walker (2000) suggests that in the history of humanity, descriptions of

the afterlife have frequently been based on psychic experiences by people who have then described them to their communities, with the descriptions later becoming incorporated into religious narratives. Therefore, the evidential aspect of the subject will be addressed by looking at the literature on 'psychic' (psi) or 'paranormal'[1] experiences and parapsychology.

Interpretations vary, however. For example, apparitions and other psychic phenomena are often considered by people who experience them as evidence of consciousness surviving after death (Fontana, 2010) and by materialist scientists as being induced by brain malfunction (Blackmore & Trościanko, 1985).

Belief, as an important element in a person's orientation regarding post-mortem existence, will be explored, as will the roles of 'hope' and 'meaning'.

Death – including what may come after – is a fundamental source of anxiety to human beings (Becker, 1973). It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that it will also potentially be an issue for clients in counselling and psychotherapy. A brief overview of where it figures in the work of major psychologists will be conducted, and an exploration of the

[1] Paranormal phenomena are those not yet explained by science (Rankin, 2008). The term 'anomalous experiences' will be used interchangeably.

professional literature of psychotherapy regarding this subject will be undertaken.

Counselling and psychotherapy are Western disciplines and resources, which explains why this study was conducted within a Western, mainly Christian, setting of beliefs. However, consideration will be given to Eastern ideas, such as karma and reincarnation, which are frequently incorporated into Western discourse and narratives (Singleton, 2015).

Different psychotherapeutic orientations use different approaches to the work with clients. What will not be included in this study is how these different psychotherapeutic orientations regard the subject of post-mortem existence, mainly because no literature has been found that addresses this subject specifically. It is noted that an interesting area of post-mortem existence and other paranormal beliefs exists, as portrayed in classical (e.g. Alighieri, 2015, Milton, 2003, Shakespeare, 1951) as well as contemporary literature and culture (Garrett, 2015), but that will also not be touched upon. This literature is, however, an indication of the importance the subject has in the collective human psyche.

Despite its importance, the subject of the identity of what survives in the afterlife will also not be explored in detail, due to the limitations of the study. The concept of 'self-recognition', as a reflective awareness of oneself as an individual being in a supposed afterlife, will instead be used.

Finally, this chapter will identify the gap in the research which this study addresses.

2.5. Historical perspectives on the post-mortem argument

One way in which human beings differ from other species is by their awareness of personal existence and the inevitability of their death. This ontological confrontation with the finitude of life has occupied the minds of thinkers throughout the ages (Becker, 2011, Kellehear, 2014, Sumegi, 2014).

Scharfstein (1998) tells us that amongst the Greeks there were those who believed in post-mortem existence, such as Thales and Heraclitus, and those who believed that all things in the universe are composed of matter and therefore that there is no survival of the individual, such as Anaximander and Democritus. These two lines of thought are represented by the views of two thinkers whose ideas most reverberate down the centuries: Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed in the immateriality of the soul, which, therefore, could not succumb to death. His disciple Aristotle, however, rejected Platonic dualism and believed that death is final. Those two strands of belief had their followers throughout the ages and have them in present times. These different perspectives are important in the context of this thesis, because they inform views of therapists and clients (Bennett-Carpenter, 2014, Dick, 2014, Gazarian, Multach, Ellison, Chelminski, Dalrymple,

& Zimmerman, 2016, Kelly, 1985, Routledge & Juhl, 2010) as to whether death is a 'wall' or a 'door'. An interesting argument for these radically different worldviews is made by McGilchrist (2009), whose theory I develop below (see Section 2.8).

Religion has an important role in the discourse on post-mortem existence; in his work *The World as Will and Idea,* Schopenhauer (1788-1860) argues that 'all religious and philosophical systems are principally directed toward comforting us concerning death, and are thus primarily antidotes to the terrifying certainty of death' (cited in Cooney, 2003, p.675). In the West, the Bible as the sacred text of the Abrahamic religions, is clear: because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in eating the forbidden fruit, death, as punishment, came into being. The topic of what happens after death is, however, not overtly developed anywhere in the Hebrew Bible because, as Raphael (2009) tells us, any interaction between the living and the dead was understood to be a violation of God's law. Post-mortem beliefs were the province of Pagan thinking. However, Raphael (2009) shows that concepts of the afterlife do appear subtly in the sacred texts over the centuries in which they were written. In the early biblical period, before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 586BCE, post-mortem beliefs were associated with a lifeless realm of the dead called 'Sheol'. In the Book of Jubilees written in the late 2nd century BCE, the emergence of a dualistic aspect to the afterlife realm is present. For the wicked sinner, Sheol became a place of judgement. Evildoers 'will go down into Sheol … and into the darkness of the depths they will all be removed with a cruel death' (Jubilees 7:29). Of the

righteous, it is written that 'their bones will rest in the earth and their spirits will increase in joy' (Jubilees 23:31). These ideas came to be incorporated in the Christian narrative in the concepts of Heaven and Hell. Reward and punishment by an omnipotent God came to be a determining factor in Christians' decisions on how to live life. The doctrine of resurrection may have been a result of contact with Zoroastrianism during the period of Babylonian exile and became a fundamental Jewish Rabbinic doctrine and a prevalent belief by the 1st century CE (MacGregor, 1992). These ideas of the afterlife held sway for many centuries.

In the Middle Ages there was a convergence of philosophical and theological thought, and thinkers such as Augustine (354-430), Avicenna (980-1037), Averroes (1126-1198) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) developed their theories based on Platonic beliefs (Cooney, 2003).

With the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, two distinct streams of culture emerged in Europe: one, which developed as the Scientific Revolution, stressed rationality, empirical science and secularism, and the other, which became the Romantic movement, perceived the world as a unitary organism rather than an atomistic machine (Tarnas, 1991). At this time, the power of the Church started to be challenged and the belief that knowledge would replace revelation as the way to achieve a good life started to have real currency (Watson, 2006).

Descartes (1596-1650) is often identified as the philosopher who introduced the dichotomy of mind and matter with the separation of 'res cogitans' and 'res extensa'[2]. It was the investigation of res extensa by res cogitans which would lead to an understanding of the material world (res extensa) as inanimate and unconscious. These materialistic views were also those of Hobbes (1588-1679) and Hume (1711-1776), and were supported by studies of the brain at the time showing that the mind was unlikely to be the location of the soul (Cooney, 2003). In his book *The Machine Man* (*L'homme machine*), published in 1747, Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751) proposed that humans and animals were part of nature, and equated with physical nature. There were no 'immaterial substances', which meant the soul was an illusion (King, 2007).

The Romantic movement took thinking in a different direction, being concerned with 'a whole disposition towards the world. … Not with a *what*, but with a *how*' (McGilchrist, 2009, p.352). This strand developed a more holistic perspective in philosophy (and later in psychology). Tarnas (1991) tells us that in this movement:

> The 'sacred' remained a viable category …. and God, was rediscovered – not the God of orthodoxy or deism, but of mysticism, pantheism and immanent cosmic process; not the juridical monotheistic patriarch but a divinity more ineffably mysterious, pluralistic, all-embracing, neutral or even feminine in gender; not an absentee creator but a numinous creative force within nature and within the human spirit. (p.373)

[2] Res cogitans is the thinking part or mind and res extensa is the physical aspect of a person.

As Tarnas (1991) points out, the ambassadors for these views are, amongst many others, Goethe (1749-1832), Blake (1757-1827) and Bergson (1859-1941).

Death continues to feature as central to the philosophy of some thinkers of the modern period. For Hegel (1770-1831), death is 'the sovereign master' (Burbidge, 1981), and Kant (1724-1804) argued that within our human limitations we cannot know about immortality (Scharfstein, 1998). Schopenhauer, who became best known for his pessimism and for bringing Eastern Hindu and Buddhist ideas to the West, called death the 'muse of philosophy' (Solomon & Higgins, 1996). He was a precursor to existentialism which more widely was a result of a mood which arose in the late the 19th century in which, says Gray (1951), 'all attempts to find a home for the spirit in this temporal and spatial realm are foredoomed. … Man's reason, like his soul is a stranger in a world impenetrable and unknowable, which cares not for him' (p.115). Any meaning must therefore be created by the individual himself; this includes the meaning of the place of death, which is central in existential thinking. Gray (1951) says:

> Death must be understood as a constitutive part of life, not as a mere end of life. Death is a phenomenon within life. If it is taken into life in a personal way, it will effect a revolution in our behaviour. (p118)

Gray identifies Jaspers (1883-1969) and Heidegger (1889-1976) as the foremost existential thinkers on the subject of death, both of them endorsing the view that hopes for immortality are in vain. Heidegger (1962) developed the idea of being-towards-death, as a way to focus our attention on finding meaning in life as an authentic self, in the sure knowledge that one day we will cease to exist. Another important philosopher who shaped existential thinking in the 20th century was Nietzsche (1844-1900) (Zeitlin, 1994). For Nietzsche, living amidst the 'drunkeness of life' generates a 'melancholic happiness' because, he says, 'death and deathly silence alone are certain and common to all in this future' (Nietzsche, 1974, p.225). For him there is no room for uncertainty regarding what happens after death.

In the revolution in thinking of the Enlightenment, the views negating the possibility of an afterlife became ever stronger, supported by important insights and developments in science and technology over the next centuries. In the 19th century, Darwin (1809-1882) put a nail in the coffin of the idea of a designer as the source of Creation with his book *Origin of Species* in 1859. By observing the small differences in which organisms adapted to the environment, he proposed natural selection as the explanation for the diversity in the living world. His ideas took hold as the scientific paradigm became more and more entrenched as the sole source of credibility. Today we hear from Dawkins (2006a) that:

> [Evolution is a] blind unconscious automatic process … it has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the blind watchmaker. (p.5)

In the late 20th century, interest in consciousness outside of the realm of religion started to appear more openly. Edgar Mitchell (1930-2016), the pilot of the Lunar Module of the Apollo 14 programme, had an epiphany on the way back from the moon in which he experienced the unity of everything. In 1973, he founded the Institute of Noetic Sciences (https://noetics.org) in California, which has as its aim the study of consciousness. In the same year, the Scientific and Medical Network (https://explore.scimednet.org) was created in the UK by George Blaker, Dr. Patrick Shackleton, Sir Kelvin Spencer and Dr. Peter Leggett as a platform to explore the intersection between science and spirituality.

Consciousness studies have also become an area of academic interest and there are a number of courses offered by universities in the UK, including Liverpool John Moores University, Sussex University and the Open University. Furthermore, there is a Center for Consciousness Studies based at the University of Arizona in Tucson, which has had a biannual conference, 'Towards a Science of Consciousness', since 1994. Since that year, an independent journal, the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, has been published in London.

The nature of consciousness is central to ideas of post-mortem existence as it is that which gives us our sense of 'I'. For this reason, the next section will focus on this topic.

2.6. Consciousness

My approach in this thesis is predicated on consciousness as essential to the understanding of what it is to be a human being. Consciousness is the quality of knowing itself (Lancaster, 2004) and our ability or capacity to experience. It is what gives us the experience of interiority, which Whitehead (1861-1947) calls 'prehension', Spinoza (1632-1677) terms 'cognition', and Leibniz (1646-1716) names 'perception', and which for Teillhard de Chardin (1881-1955) is 'the within, consciousness, spontaneity – three expressions for the same thing' (cited in Wilber, 1995, p.111). Wilber himself says 'the within of things is *depth*, the without of things is *form*' (p.111). Chalmers (1996) identifies it as 'the subjective quality of experience: what it is like to be a cognitive agent' (p.6). Some authors use other concepts, such as 'awareness' or 'mind', so the term is ambiguous. But as Velmans (2000) points out, 'once a given reference for the term "consciousness" is fixed in its *phenomenology*, the investigation of its nature can begin' (p.7).

Descartes' purpose in investigating res cogitans (or mind) as the possible seat of the sacred was to gain a better understanding. When he said

'cogito ergo sum'[3], he was identifying his own thinking mind as the only thing he could be certain of (Watson, 2006). In his *Meditations* he says: 'what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands (conceives), affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines also and perceives' (Descartes, 1949, cited in King, 2007, p.247). In other words, he was investigating the mystery of consciousness by means of his own consciousness.

As conscious human beings, it is part of our framework to be able to experience a variety of conscious states (Tart, 2000). The higher conscious states experience participation in something which transcends the world of the senses. One way to understand it is to cross over to the world of spirituality which is traditionally the domain of religion. Here the terminology changes and words such as 'God', 'soul' and 'spirit' become relevant. The term 'soul' is used by religion to identify that part of human beings that participates in the transcendental, and a singular experience of the transcendental is understood as a mystical union. Underhill (2002) says:

> The fully developed and completely conscious human soul can open as an anemone does and *know* the ocean in which she is bathed. This act, this condition of consciousness, in which barriers are obliterated, the Absolute flows in on us and we, rushing out to its embrace, find and feel the Infinite above all reason and above all knowledge is the true mystical state' (p.51).

[3] I think, therefore I am.

And further 'not to know about but to *be* is the mark of the real initiate' (p.72).

Forman (1999) explains his own experience of a mystical event, which he calls 'pure consciousness', as knowledge by identity. This knowledge by identity is similar to what William James (2012) called 'knowledge by acquaintance' in that it is a direct experience, cannot be communicated and can only be experienced personally. Furthermore, it is not intentional in structure. Forman (1999) says 'I do not know my own awareness as an object.... I know it simply by virtue of being aware'. (p.119)

Such direct experience happens when the mind becomes silent and only the experience of being remains. It is in the domain of devotional religion that we read about such experiences. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), a 13th-century Christian Mystic, calls it *gezucken* a state of being enraptured without sensory or intellectual content. In this state of consciousness, Eckhart encounters what he calls the summit of the soul or the purity of God. He says:

> There is something in the soul in which God is bare and the masters say this is nameless and has no name of its own … God is always present and within it. I say that God has always been in it, eternally and uninterruptedly. (Eckhart cited in Forman, 1999, p.146)

This exemplifies Forman's knowledge by identity in which the knowledge of God (also known as Ultimate Reality) is enabled by the knowledge of one's own soul. In the Abrahamic sacred texts, it is expressed as man being made in the image of God. God's name as revealed to Moses in the Bible (Exodus 3:14) is 'I AM THAT I AM', and as human beings, by experiencing our own reality in our own 'I Am', we can have an inkling of God as the Ultimate Reality (Needleman, 2009). In the terminology of consciousness, what is described is a human's experience of its participation in the infinite and immortal consciousness.

However, as Baring (2013) points out, we are in the West living progressively under a secular, materialistic philosophy with an increasingly utilitarian mindset which sees no purpose or goal for humanity other than the improvement of material conditions through scientific, medical and technological advances. The great spiritual, philosophical and cultural questions of who we are and why we are here are sidelined and ignored as irrelevant. In this materialistic paradigm, consciousness is typically understood as deriving from the brain. This leads some contemporary scientists and philosophers to conclude that it is *generated* by the brain (e.g. Blackmore, 2005a, Dennett, 1991).

2.6.1. The brain

The scientist looking at the brain, sees it as a network of some hundred billion neurons, each connected to thousands of its neighbours. Ross (2009) explains that the neurons communicate with electrical pulses,

each about 70 millivolts in amplitude and 1 millisecond in duration. Synchronised neural firings increase the strength of the neural connections, so the network has what is called a 'plasticity', which is determined by its history of inputs and responses. This electrical activity correlates with our thoughts in a way that is not well understood (Nunez, 2010) but it is not surprising that such a scientist may draw the logical conclusion that with the death of the brain, mind, thinking and consciousness are extinguished. Nunez (2010) , however, notes that electrical charge (and energy) are considered 'fundamental properties' because as far as we know, they cannot be reduced to secondary aspects of some more fundamental and comprehensive entity. This, he says, may be uncovered in the future. What he says about consciousness is interesting:

> [It] seems more analogous to fundamental physical properties like charge and energy than secondary properties like electrical conductivity, temperature, pressure, etc. Given this argument I posit that any serious study of consciousness must adopt a conceptual framework that allows for the possibility that consciousness is a fundamental property of the universe. (p.251)

A similar perspective, that consciousness may be a fundamental attribute of reality, is adopted by Ellis (2016), who postulates the importance of top-down causation in complex systems such as the brain. Although this understanding is not mainstream within the scientific community, it is by no means restricted to the scientists mentioned above (i.e. Baruss, 2010, Bohm & Hiley, 1993, Hameroff, 1998, Silberstein, 2015).

This leads us to consider the brain as a facilitator rather than a generator of consciousness. As an explanation, the metaphor of a television set is often used: the images seen on the screen are not generated within the device but the television's internal elements facilitate their projection. Such ideas are advanced by Dossey (2013), Fenwick (2002), Radin (1997) and others.

A closer look at perspectives on consciousness will help in situating views of post-mortem consciousness, which this study considers.

2.6.2. Philosophical and scientific perspectives on consciousness

In what concerns our understanding of who we are as humans, we read that Crick (1994), who together with James Watson discovered the structure of DNA, proposes that:

> The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: You're nothing but a pack of neurons. (p.3)

This view reduces consciousness to physical component parts. Similar perspectives are accepted by other contemporary philosophers and scientists, for example Dennett (1991), Armstrong (1993) and Blackmore (2005a). However, it must be stressed that no evidence has so far been shown, that the brain can generate consciousness. Popper (in Popper &

Eccles, 2003) calls this 'promissory materialism', explaining it as the acceptance that at the present time, materialism is not tenable. 'But' he says, 'it offers us the promise of a better world, a world in which mental terms will have disappeared from our language, and in which materialism will be victorious' (p.97).

Du Sautoy, the Simonyi Chair for the Public Understanding of Science since 2008, takes a different view. In his book *Investigating Things We Cannot Know: Explorations at the Edge of Knowledge* (2016), he says:

> Even if we understand which bit of the brain is firing when we do different activities, and how the physics and chemistry of the brain work, it still doesn't give us much understanding of why we have a sense of 'I'. (p.317)

Associated with the mystery of consciousness is the particular mystery of the *relationship* between body and mind (or consciousness), which equates to the question of how (or whether) brain as matter gives rise to consciousness. In the West, questions around this relationship have been addressed by Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Plotinus (204-269), St. Augustine (354-430), Thomas of Aquinas (1225-1274) and later Descartes (1696-1650), Locke (1632-1704), Berkeley (1685-1753), Leibniz (1646-1716), Hume (1711-1776), Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831) amongst others (King, 2007).

Addressing this question, Chalmers (1996) asks: how can consciousness (interiority, the ability to experience) arise from 'dead' matter – the brain? This has come to be known as the 'hard problem'. In his exploration, Chalmers does not resort to a theistic or spiritual explanation. He uses logic and rational objectivity to unpick with great philosophical detail, the mystery of consciousness including a consideration of quantum theory, which has recently become a focus of attention, where physics and consciousness come together.

Chalmers identifies the basic framework of quantum mechanics as consisting of a calculus for predicting the results of experimental measurements and points out its counterintuitive nature. With the 'wave function'[4] being at the centre of the understanding of quantum theory, the picture he says, points to reality being 'wavelike'. Having systematically looked at various options to understand the dynamics of the wave function, Chalmers determines that this must be a question of interpretation and the conclusion he reaches is that 'all interpretations of quantum mechanics are to some extent crazy' (p.356). Following this he says:

> I have advocated some counterintuitive views in this work. I resisted mind-body dualism for a long time, but I have now come to the point where I accept it, not just as the only tenable view but as a satisfying view in its own right. It is always possible that I am confused or that there is a new and radical possibility that I have overlooked: but I can comfortably say that

[4] The wave function in quantum physics is a mathematical description of the quantum state of an isolated quantum system.

> I think dualism is very likely true. I have also raised the possibility of a kind of panpsychism. Like mind-body dualism, this is initially counterintuitive, but this counterintuitiveness disappears with time. I am unsure whether the view is true or false, but it is at least intellectually appealing, and on reflection it is not too crazy to be acceptable. (p.357)

Although this dualistic perspective is rejected by contemporary mainstream science and philosophy (e.g. Dawkins, 1989, Dennett, 1991, 2003, Hawking, 2011, Strawson, 2003), Chalmers is not unique in his view. Other philosophers and scientists, such as Bohm (1980), Goff (2018), Laszlo (1993) and Polkinghorne (1996), take similar views, arguing that consciousness may well be an attribute of a more fundamental reality in the universe. To accept this, we must start from the premise that we have very little understanding of the ultimate nature of reality or its causes. As Lancaster (2004) points out, 'just as we are unable to explain what caused matter to exist, or life to originate, so the causation of consciousness must remain mysterious' (p.21).

Harding (2006), describing his own experience of the Anima Mundi, the 'soul of the world', reminds us that the 'animistic perception is archetypal, ancient and primordial' (p.21). Shamanism and Animism, which are considered 'urreligions'[5] by King (2007), are predicated on the perception that Nature is imbued by spirits and this spirit world is intimately entwined with the material world (p.52). According to Wilber

[5] The term urreligion refers to the oldest or even the original form of religious traditions, contrasting with organised religion. The prefix 'ur' denotes original, primitive, primeval.

(1995), there is a 'Deeper Order' which is said by spiritual traditions to underlie the universe.

Highlighting the limitations of our capacity to apprehend the ultimate nature of reality, Rovelli (2017) makes some astounding propositions about reality, about space, about time and about the infinitely small in his book, *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*. There are no 'things' in the universe, only 'processes' which are always in relation to other processes. The world is probabilistic, not predictive. Much of it is a mystery to us, and science aims to give us the best possible explanation at the time –always knowingly open to future correction. Rovelli says:

> The world is more extraordinary and profound than any of the fables told by our forefathers. … To accept uncertainty doesn't detract from our sense of mystery. On the contrary: we are immersed in the mystery and the beauty of the world. The world revealed by quantum gravity is a new and strange one – still full of mystery, but coherent with its simple and clear beauty. (p.233)

The February 2017 issue of the magazine *New Scientist* carried a cover story entitled *Essence of Reality: The Search for the Most Fundamental Thing in the Universe* (Ananthaswamy, 2017). The author develops the argument that the true bedrock of reality might be *information*. Understanding that information (as content of consciousness) is one of the characteristics of *experience*, the step towards understanding information as consciousness is close, if not identical. A similar point is

made by Ward (2017) who comments on Hawking's book *The Grand Design* (2011). In his book, Hawking argues that space-time does not come from nothing but comes from some non-material reality, which Ward argues might fit a God-like model.

If consciousness is a fundamental attribute of reality, as argued above, it follows that it must be infinite and immortal, and cannot be extinguished. If we are 'embodied consciousness', or 'consciousness manifesting in human form', it follows that our consciousness cannot be extinguished. In this particular model, the brain is seen as a facilitator, rather than an originator of consciousness (Dossey, 2013, Fenwick & Parnia, 2002, Radin, 1997).

2.6.3. Psi or the experience of the paranormal

If consciousness is infinite, and if we accept that we cannot explore it because we cannot stand outside it, we must accept, as shown above, that much may be beyond our understanding. And if consciousness is non-local and entangled as Radin (2006a) suggests, then some of its manifestation may fall outside what science can explain. These manifestations can be classified under the umbrella term 'psi' (psychic phenomena).

Paranormal or psi experiences are ubiquitous in the population (Rankin, 2008) and therefore both clients and therapists may have such experiences. Psi according to Tart (2001), are experiences which in terms

of our current scientific understanding, cannot happen. They include clairvoyance[6], telepathy[7] and precognition[8].

An example of a credible and detailed account of precognition is the experience of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) who had a vivid pre-cognitive vision of a fire in Stockholm about 300 miles away, which he shared with friends at a dinner party. Swedenborg was an inventor and an eminent scientist who had an early understanding of brain functioning 200 years before neuroscience became a discipline. He had a number of powerful mystical or paranormal experiences (Radin, 2006a). Paranormal experiences are studied by parapsychology, and modern parapsychology had its inception with the work of J. B. Rhine (1895-1980). Rhine achieved fame for his research in ESP (an acronym he coined for extra-sensory perception) in the Parapsychological Laboratory he founded at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, in the late 1920s. He aimed to find reliable evidence of psychic phenomena using scientific experimental methods. Amongst the paranormal phenomena he researched were clairvoyance, telepathy and psychokinesis[9] (Beloff, 1993).

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[6] Clairvoyance is the ability to access correct information by as yet unexplainable means.
[7] Telepathy is mind-to-mind communication with no identifiable carrier energy.
[8] Precognition is knowledge of the future that does not have a logical, predictable basis.
[9] Psychokinesis is mental action affecting matter

The field of psi phenomena is, however, controversial. Views are predicated on how mind or consciousness is understood, whether originating in or being facilitated by the brain. Persinger (2001), for instance, argues that all behaviour and all experiences are created by a dynamic matrix of chemical and electromagnetic events inside the brain. He maintains that 'there has not been a single type of paranormal experience that is not understandable in terms of known brain functions' (p.523). Lindeman and Svedholm-Häkkinen (2016) looked for a more social explanation; they equate belief in religious or paranormal phenomena with inadequate understanding of the world. They studied 258 Finnish adults and found that:

> The results showed that supernatural beliefs correlated … with low systemizing, poor intuitive physics skills, poor mechanical ability, poor mental rotation, low school grades in mathematics and physics, poor common knowledge about physical and biological phenomena, intuitive and analytical thinking styles, and in particular, with assigning mentality to non-mental phenomena. (p.736)

However, Blackmore (2005b), who has a materialistic orientation, has had an out-of-body experience herself. In her rejection of an explanation of the experience in the realm of the paranormal, she acknowledges that the psi hypothesis leads only to unrepeatability[10]. She admits that we are in

[10] Tart (1973) refutes this, pointing to hundreds of successful parapsychological experiments published in the literature.

ignorance and have to retain an open mind. To this, Sheldrake (2006) says:

> Telepathy … only seem 'paranormal' if we define as 'normal' the theory that the mind is confined to the brain. But if our minds reach out beyond our brains, just as they seem to, and connect with other minds, just as they seem to, then phenomena like telepathy … seem normal. They are certainly normal in the sense that they are common. They are not spooky and weird, on the margins of abnormal human psychology, but are part of our biological nature. (p.40)

In the controversial nature of the field, we find the interesting experience that befell Michael Shermer, a science writer and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine (www.skeptic.com). In 2014, he himself had a paranormal experience on the day of his wedding, when an old transistor radio belonging to his bride's grandfather spontaneously started to play a romantic piece of music, interpreted by the bride as a message from her much-loved granddad. In an article in *Scientific American* (Shermer, 2014), he says:

> I have to admit, it rocked me back on my heels and shook my skepticism to its core as well … Had it happened to someone else I might suggest a chance electrical anomaly and the law of large numbers as an explanation.

Psychical phenomena are not without a serious academic body of interest. The Society for Psychical Research (https://www.spr.ac.uk) founded in 1882, says on its website that it was the first scientific organisation to examine the claims of psychic and paranormal phenomena. Its aims are to gather information and foster understanding

through research and education. It has two publications, one of them carrying peer-reviewed articles (e.g. Puhle & Parker, 2017, Wahbeh, Carpenter, & Radin, 2018).

Because of the ubiquity of paranormal experiences in the population, it is likely that clients will have had such experiences, which may have elicited responses ranging from awe to fearful distress, which they may wish to discuss in therapy. Furthermore, therapists and clients may experience paranormal phenomena in the therapy room, as was the case with Cameron (2016), who had the uninvited psi experience of visualising a client's unspoken feelings as a wiggly jelly-bean in front of the client's chest. Cameron did not find that experience helpful. On the other hand De Peyer (2016) who formed a very strong therapeutic alliance with a client, describes the psi phenomena, which she called 'psychic resonance (p.158), which occurred between them, as helpful and healing. In the book, *Psi in Psychotherapy* (Tanous, Schwinge, & Bambrick, 2019), three practitioners – a psychic (Alex Tanous), a psychiatrist (Elaine Schwinge) and a psychotherapist (Andrew Bambrick) – describe their work with clients using their gifts and knowledge. Tanous, describing his work in psychotherapy, says:

> Higher consciousness is spirituality and the power that lives within us is universal … The healing is not from me, the psychic, but rather it is because I am attuned to the consciousness of the Universe, to the heart and mind of God, and that lets the power flow through me and healing takes place. (p.146)

It can be assumed that when a person has an experience of the paranormal, the evidence dispenses with the need for belief, as there is first-hand knowledge. But for others, belief plays an important part.

2.7. Belief

An overall exploration of the (limited) literature on belief which I have consulted shows that the question of belief is fundamentally epistemological. Identifying the origins of belief, Ward (2014a) says that 'beneath and prior to interpretation and the conflicts of meaning, lie sets of remembered associations and assumptions woven tightly into the processes of how we make sense. These associations and assumptions have been taught and arrived at' (p.12). In other words, what we believe in is a product of our learning combined with the assumptive and instinctive within a framework of meaning. Peterson (1999) says: 'Meaning is the most profound manifestation of instinct[11]. Man is a creature attracted by the unknown; a creature adapted for its conquest. The subjective sense of meaning is the instinct governing rate of contact with the unknown' (p.468).

Ricoeur (1974) grounds hermeneutics in phenomenology and describes the ontology of understanding not as a 'mode of knowledge but rather as a mode of being' (p.6). Similarly Gendlin's (1981) concept of 'felt sense'

[11] Vaughan (1979) explains the difference between intuition and instinct. Both are inspirational impulses originating deep in a person's psyche, but, whereas intuition forces itself into consciousness by means of bodily cues, instincts remain unconscious.

describes an embodied response which a sense of understanding can elicit and which informs cognition. 'To understand', says Dewey (1997), 'is to grasp meaning' (p.107). A belief is also informed by 'tacit knowledge' – a term used by Polanyi (2009) to indicate that 'we can know more than we can tell' (p.4). William James (1896) expresses the view that optimism in life and inner confidence are related to a positive belief aligned with the person's needs.

True belief, therefore, is knowledge or meaning anchored not only in reason but also in inner experience. In his book *The Non-existence of God*, Everitt (2004) builds an argument around the theistic God, which he describes along the lines of Freud (2008) as the 'Father in the Sky', to show rationally how his existence cannot possibly be proven. God indeed cannot be proven logically or rationally, for belief goes beyond reason. It must 'resonate', it must, as Ricoeur (1974) says, be experienced in our being. Taking this idea further, Professor Keith Ward says in his book *The Evidence for God* (2014b), that 'reason, while being an invaluable rule of procedure, will not decide ultimate questions of how you interpret human existence at the most basic level. Matters of fundamental perspective lie deeper in the human heart and mind than that' (p.134).

In exploring the nature of belief in his book *Unbelievable: Why we Believe and Why We Don't*, Ward (2014a) defines belief as a 'disposition'. It is affect-laden but not an emotion. Whilst a belief can be conscious, logical and rational, it is not solely conscious. As an implicit knowledge, it is

disposed towards deeper sets of values. Ward says that 'the 'disposition towards', that is one of the characteristics of believing, lies between sentience and *scientia*'[12] (p.30). In the case of philosophers and reductionist scientists who see consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the brain, their disposition is towards a randomly evolved universe in which life – all life including human life – is meaningless. The other branch of the argument is towards a meaningful universe in which the ultimate nature of reality is beyond our understanding, or what our minds can perceive. It is part of a person's 'mode of being' (Ricoeur, 1974), and 'tacit knowing' (Polanyi, 2009) and very much a 'felt sense' (Gendlin, 1981) to see the world in which we humans live as meaningful and purposeful. It is about knowing that we are part of a much larger, deeper reality which we cannot understand within the limitations of our rational mind, but about which we can have an inkling through another dimension of our being, sometimes called the heart, the soul or the spirit.

Belief in post-mortem consciousness, therefore, is shaped not only by external learning but also, and perhaps especially, by an internal intuitive framework of meaning. Within this particular belief as a credible possibility, the concept of meaning is worth a closer look.

[12] Sentience is the ability to experience sensations and scientia is knowledge based on demonstrable and reproducible data (i.e., science).

2.7.1. Meaning

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) says in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (2004) that 'meaning, is a primary motivation in life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives' (p.105). In his book *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, Peterson (1999) makes a similar claim, pointing out that man is attracted by the unknown, and that the search for meaning is a basic instinct. He says:

> The pursuit of meaning exposes the individual to the unknown in a gradual fashion, allowing him to develop strength and adaptive ability in proportion to the seriousness of his pursuit. It is during contact with the unknown that human power grows, individually and then historically. Meaning is the subjective experience associated with that contact …. Abandonment of meaning, by contrast, reduces man to his mortal weakness. (p.468)

Meaning is therefore the metaphorical north of the compass by which we live our lives. If death is indeed a door into some other kind of existence, it would make sense that there should be a correlation of meaning between this life and the next, within the familiar framework of cause and effect. Moore (2017), indeed, theorises that the afterlife would make sense only if it entailed a degree of continuity in what he calls 'contiguous worlds'.

Our views of death as a matter of ultimate concern are necessarily implicated in the meaning we give it. Feifel (1977) tells us that 'life's ultimate meaning remains obscure unless it is reflected upon in the countenance of death' (p.xiv).

Meaning in life is recognised as a major contributor to the experience of a rewarding life. This view is supported by Scioli and Biller (2009), who tell us that it is one of the core elements of 'spiritual integrity', which in turn are some of the more important building blocks of 'hopeful resilience'. Under 'meaning in life' they include both personal and cosmic meaning. On the personal level are life experiences, which emerge from a framework of values and principles. The cosmic aspect refers to the belief that we are part of a larger whole of a transcendental nature which the authors see as a 'prerequisite for purpose in life, which can become a guiding force in the worst time' (p.211). It is relevant to note that research done by Routledge and Juhl (2010) indicates that a mortality salience increases death anxiety for individuals who lack meaning in life.

Proulx and Heine (2006), who developed what they call a 'meaning maintenance model' propose that people construct worldviews to provide them with a sense of meaning because meaninglessness is, according to them, the ultimate terror.

The role of hope plays an important part in belief in post-mortem consciousness.

2.7.2. Hope

Hope is a resource for the impulse towards a meaningful aim. Narrowing it down to its fundamental active components, Synder (1994) says that

'hope is the sum of the mental power [agency] and waypower [pathways] that you have for your goals' (p.5).

Once it has been proposed that post-mortem existence is a valid theory, the core question is whether hope should matter. Depression is known to be characterised by a deep sense of helplessness and hopelessness (Abramson, Alloy, & Metasky, 1989, Garber & Seligman, 1980, Seligman, 1975). Much of the role of the therapist is to help clients to find ways to empower themselves. Death, as part of life, is the ultimate helpless state: inevitable and unavoidable. The role of hope in life, in general, and in the face of death, in particular, can therefore not be underestimated.

Exploring the nature of suffering, Cassell (2004) says that hope is 'one of the necessary traits for a successful life' (p.41). It is grounded on expectations of new and better experiences and is predicated on imagination, belief and desires (Ward, 2014a). A significant threat to hope is the perception of loss of control in relation to the future. MacIntyre (1979) makes the following assessment of such threat:

> Hope is in place precisely in the face of evil that tempts us to despair, and more especially that evil that belongs to our own age and condition … The presupposition of hope is, therefore, belief in a reality that transcends what is available as evidence. (p.310)

'Terror management theory' (Solomon et al., 2015) argues that this 'evil that tempts us to despair' (MacIntyre, 1979, p.310) – the fear of death – is what leads us to engage in cultural worldviews and denial projects for protection and defence. Hope, however, as belief in a reality that transcends what is available as evidence, enables us to face and transcend that fear.

In their paper 'Understanding the Role of Hope in Counselling', Larsen, Edey, and Lemay (2007) identify hope in the process of therapy as an important future-oriented process aiming towards a personally meaningful fulfilment.

With regard to the afterlife in specific, the value of hope is clear for Jung (1967b). He says:

> Leaving aside the rational arguments against any certainty in these matters, we must not forget that for most people it means a great deal to assume that their lives will have an indefinite continuity beyond their present existence. They live more sensibly, feel better, and are more at peace. (p.332)

These ideas are reference points within a particular worldview. Their ontological and epistemological orientation in life can differ fundamentally from one in which those points of reference are absent. Can there be an explanation for this?

2.8. McGilchrist's theory of worldviews – explaining the filters of perception

In his magisterial work *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, psychiatrist and English scholar McGilchrist (2009) develops an interesting theory about the emergence of paradigms which explains the twin ontological and epistemic approaches of the Scientific Revolution and Romanticism as described above, and the consequential philosophical orientation towards the world in the West. His theory also provides an explanation of the radically different views that exist on the natures of consciousness and reality. His explanation is rooted in the asymmetry of the brain.

Curiosity about the two hemispheres of the brain goes back a long way. Greek physicians in the 3rd century BCE speculated about it, although it has never been really understood (McGilchrist, 2009). In the late 19th century, physician Paul Broca (1824-1880) discovered that the left hemisphere plays a particular role in speech (Oppenheimer, 1977). In 1874, Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911) published a series of articles titled 'On the Nature of the Duality of the Brain' (Jackson, 1874) in which he declared that the 'left half of the brain is that by which we speak … [whereas] the right is the half by which we receive propositions' (p.84). The idea that the brain hemispheres differ functionally held sway throughout the 20th century (Popper & Eccles, 2003). As recently as 1976, Jaynes published his book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976), in which he argued that in

millennia past the human mind operated in a non-conscious way based on a divided brain with separate functions: one part which spoke and the other which listened. McGilchrist brings something new to this narrative.

He starts his argument by pointing to the physical asymmetry of the brain, which is:

> asymmetrically larger on the left side …. and appears to have been twisted about its central axis, the fissure between the cerebral hemispheres. The brain is not only wider on the left towards the back but also wider on the right towards the front. (p.23)

His theory suggests that although no immediate explanation exists for these asymmetrical expansions, they are likely to be related to function. However, rather than the hemispheres differing only by the *nature* of their function, McGilchrist's theory argues that the fundamental difference is in the *quality of attention* exercised by each of the hemispheres. Attention is not just a tool for absorbing information; it is a much more fundamental ontological component. Needleman (2009) posits that 'the quality of man's attention is the key to the meaning of our lives and the possible growth of our being' (p.204), and he goes on to say that '*I am my attention*. Everything else is given, not *mine*' (p.205).

A simplistic explanation of the roles of the hemispheres is importantly discarded. In a text on his website, McGilchrist (2015) says:

> The crude, old ideas that logic and language are in the left, and images and emotions in the right, were exploded long ago. Each hemisphere is involved in absolutely everything we do. But it is hardly a scientific response to throw one's hands up in despair as a result and dismiss the topic of hemisphere difference. One needs to examine one's thinking and see what it is one is missing. As soon as one stops asking the question appropriate to a machine – 'what does it do?' – and asks the question appropriate to part of a person – 'in what manner does it do what it does?' – the answer starts to become clearer. Differences between the hemispheres in birds, animals and humans ultimately relate to differences in attention, which have evolved for clear reasons of survival. But since the nature of the attention we bring to bear on the world changes what it is we find there, and since what we find there influences the kind of attention we pay in future, differences of attention are not just technical, mechanical, issues, but have significant human experiential and philosophical consequences. They change the world we inhabit.

The right hemisphere, McGilchrist suggests, is attuned to the whole, overall patterns, meanings and living things. It engages with the new and the unknown. It appreciates the 'being' of what it encounters. The left hemisphere breaks up what the right hemisphere is presenting, analyses it and re-presents it in a utilitarian way. The left hemisphere distances itself from lived experience in order to categorise it intellectually. It seeks the familiar. We appreciate the world through our right hemisphere attention and cope with it with our left.

McGilchrist describes his research with subjects with brain lesions as well as with healthy subjects, using techniques involving temporary experimental hemispheric inactivation, the deliverance of perceptual stimulus to a single hemisphere, and information from EEG

(electroencephalogram) recordings and functional neuroimaging. The core of his findings is that the 'nature of the attention that one brings to bear on anything alters what one finds; what we aim to understand changes its nature within the context in which it lies; and we can only ever understand anything *as* a something' (p.29).

Going on to explain the nature of the attention of the hemispheres, McGilchrist says that the right hemisphere is responsible for every kind of attention except focused attention. That is the remit of the left hemisphere. The right hemisphere is holistic and its attention seeks meaning, connection, exploration and relation. It has primacy in the interaction with whatever exists; it sees more of the whole picture. The left hemisphere is analytical, rational, logical and conceptual and its role is to analyse and evaluate rationally with the aim being 'to make explicit'. The right hemisphere is, therefore, 'the primary mediator of experience, from which the conceptualised, re-presented world of the left hemisphere derives, and on which it depends' (p.226).

The author identifies the right hemisphere as the master and the left as the emissary. The master views the bigger picture and needs the logic and rationality of the emissary (left hemisphere) in order to be grounded in its worldview and decision-making. However, the master can be betrayed by the emissary when the latter adopts the stance of being invulnerable and omnipotent. McGilchrist points out that in a world in which the left hemisphere is the dominant perception, experiential knowledge is

substituted for gathering of information and wisdom becomes ungraspable. The world becomes more virtualised and skills become reduced to algorithmic procedures. Technology flourishes as an 'expression of the left hemisphere's desire to manipulate and control the world for its own pleasure, accompanied by a vast expansion of bureaucracy, systems of abstraction and control' (p.429).

Although further exploration of this argument is beyond the remit of this chapter, the relevance of McGilchrist's work to this research is in enabling us to understand, through this framework, the culture out of which the different perspectives emerged on what happens after death: survival or extinguishing of consciousness.

Part II of his work is an exploration of how the divided brain influenced Western culture. His contention is that there were times in the history of the West when the balanced working relationship between the hemispheres was disturbed. The Enlightenment, he says, 'can be summed up in the cognitive content of a relatively small number of beliefs' (p.352), meaning a left hemisphere mindset which allowed a narrow focus on the observable world of scientific exploration. McGilchrist makes the interesting point that the Industrial Revolution, which benefitted from the technologies developed by science, enabled mechanical production of goods and brought in the concept of perfected identical units. This came to affect expectations in ontology as well as in the outside world. Modernity, McGilchrist says, 'was marked by a process

of social disintegration which clearly derived from the effects of the Industrial Revolution, but which could also be seen to have its roots in Comte's vision of society as an aggregation of essentially atomistic individuals' (p.389). This influenced what came to become the discipline of psychology, which according to Kelly and Kelly (2007) was 'deeply rooted in earlier 19th century thought, with an approach advocating the deliberate emulation of the presuppositions and methods – thus, it was hoped, the stunning success – of the "hard" sciences, especially physics' (p.xvii). Like in the hard sciences, in psychology the psyche, as well as behaviour, came to be seen as subject to principles and laws. A typical example of this was behaviourism (Watson, 1930) and to some extent Freudian psychoanalysis which uses the term 'mechanism' – a word attributed to machines – to explain much of what goes on in the human psyche (Kelly & Kelly, 2007).

This left hemisphere approach leads to an understanding of the body as a biological machine rather than an organism, with the logical conclusion that with the death of the body, the brain – and consciousness – is extinguished. The possibility of an afterlife is thus dismissed as an impossibility.

Belief is intrinsic to understanding our inclinations, and, as explored in Section 2.7. above, Ward called belief, a 'disposition towards' a tendency mediated by sentience and scientia. Sentience (an intuitive disposition) is

facilitated by the right hemisphere and scientia (derived from focused attention) by the left.

For cultures, societies and individuals that see the world through right hemisphere perspectives (i.e., holistic, open minded and tolerant of uncertainties) post-mortem existence is acceptable as a true possibility.

Death and what may happen after is an important topic in human psychology: it is to this that I turn my attention next.

2.9. The topic of death in psychology

Both pioneers of the discipline of psychology, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), included the concept of death in their theories. They lived at a time when a preoccupation with death was shared by a number of eminent contemporaries: biologists, psychologists and existential philosophers (Ellenberger, 1994). Against this background, Freud postulated the existence of two basic instincts: Eros and Thanatos – the creative and the destructive instincts (Freud, 1964). Thanatos was understood to have as its aim 'to lead what is living into an inorganic state' (p.380). About death itself, comes the insight that 'we cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators' (Freud, 2013, p.16). The idea of immortality came, according to Freud (2013), from people contemplating the corpses of loved ones and developing ideas about the soul surviving death. Immortality came to reside in the unconscious and those feelings

percolate into consciousness, making people feel immortal. The afterlife is therefore an illusion and, in *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 2008), Freud states that the need for religion, including belief in an afterlife, exists in order 'to make tolerable the helplessness of man' (p.18).

Freud lived at a time of heightened interest in the paranormal (Beloff, 1993). This included phenomena often associated with the existence of spirits and entities existing in another dimension (Rankin, 2008). Credibility in the late 19th century, however, was nevertheless associated with left hemisphere-type science and materialism (Kelly & Kelly, 2007). In a paper written for the Conference of the Central Committee of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1921, Freud wrote that psi phenomena are an 'attempt at compensation, which seeks to regain by other – supernatural – means the lost appeal of life on this earth' (cited in Devereux, 1953, p.57). Freud talks about a 'general human inclination towards credulity and belief in the marvellous, … the fascination of irrationality' and the 'secret motives of the occultist movements to come to the aid of religious belief threatened as it is by the progress of scientific thought' (p.93). Following this mentality, Devereux confirms that when the analyst is confronted with reports of 'psi phenomena', s/he will think about the patient and the data in terms of psychoanalytical theory and not entertain the possibility of those phenomena being valid in their own right.

Jung, however, had a different, more right hemisphere-type perspective. In the online Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained (Society for Psychical Research, 2008), we read that during a lecture given to the Society for Psychical Research, Jung (1919) said, 'I shall not commit the stupidity of regarding everything I cannot explain as fraud'.

In his auto-biography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1967b), Jung mentions having had a number of pre-cognitive dreams and psi experiences. His mother and cousin had mediumistic gifts, so this was known territory for him. With regard to questions about what may happen after death, he says, 'the question of immortality is so urgent, so immediate and also so ineradicable that we must make an effort to form some sort of view about it' (p.332). He further advises that this is a realm in which reason cannot help us, and recommends that we should be attentive to hints from the unconscious, for example, in dreams. Jung had a particular perspective on the subject, having had a near-death experience in January 1944 following a heart attack, after which he wrote, 'what happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imagination and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception of it' (cited in Yates, 1999, p.6).

Jung belongs to a community of thinkers who were interested in psi phenomena and the afterlife. Others who can be mentioned are Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), H.J. Eysenk (1916–1997), Sandor Ferenczi (1873–1933), William James (1842–1910), Pierre Janet (1859–1947) and

Frederic Myers (1843-1901), as well as scientists such as David Bohm (1917–1992) and Sir Oliver Lodge (1851–1940) and some Nobel Prize winners such as Marie Curie (1867–1934), Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and Wolfgang Pauli (1900–1958) (in Cardena, 2017).

In the 1970s in the US, from within the Humanistic Psychology movement of Rollo May (1909-1994), came a book by Koestenbaum entitled *Is There an Answer to Death?* (1976). In it the author puts forward the perspective (or possibility) of consciousness as indestructible (as discussed above) following the Sanskrit saying 'tat twam asi' ('I am that' – or indestructible, eternal consciousness). He argues, as have others, including Jung, that we cannot prove the existence of an immortal soul through the use of logic or rationality. 'Logical proofs', he says, 'are not related directly to questions of living and meaning' (p.166). What he calls the 'Solitary and Silent Center' which in meditation apprehends the Cosmic Consciousness and points to the Eternal Now, can only be *experienced*. Koestenbaum makes the interesting point that once we understand the subjective nature of the observer, it becomes clear that in the self-referential proposition, 'I am mortal', the 'I' is reduced to an object. Saying 'I am mortal', therefore, makes no sense, as the implication of that experience is 'not of an object being gone, but of the subject that observes all objects as being gone' (p.172) – which is an impossibility.

A completely different approach is found in existential psychology which is distinctly secular. It is informed by existentialist philosophers with the

'here and now'[13] orientation. Van Deurzen (1997) for instance, cites Heidegger's (1962) argument that the concept of time is crucial to our self-understanding. How we are and how we relate to what happens *in time* is what philosophically and ontologically determines how we live our lives. Commenting on Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence[14] (Nietzsche, 1988), van Deurzen suggests that repeating what we are and what we do, over and over, and still relishing our fate, provides a secular goal to follow: 'not to be saved in the afterlife by God, but to make something of life on earth in this particular fashion' (p.247). She argues that our aim is to 'open ourselves up to the destiny that is ours, rather than trying to evade it' (p.248). 'Fate' and 'destiny' in her proposal are interesting choices of words as both relate to the idea of predetermination by supernatural forces, or 'sentences of the gods' (theosphaton in Greek) (Chambers, 2003).

Within the existential tradition of psychotherapy is the work of existential psychiatrist and therapist Yalom (2008a) who says:

> The existential worldview on which I base my clinical work embraces rationality, eschews supernatural beliefs, and posits that life in general, and our human life in particular, has arisen from random events: that, though we crave to persist in our being, we are a finite creature: that we are thrown alone into existence without a predestined life structure and destiny. (p.200)

[13] Focusing on the present moment both in space and in time.
[14] A thought experiment that considers what it would be like for us if we were to re-live our life experience over and over.

This perspective is shared by anthropologist Becker, who in 1974, won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death* (1973). In this book, he proposes that death anxiety is an existential condition which causes us to find ways to deny our mortality by immersing ourselves in activities and in what he called 'immortality projects', which are embedded in our culture, religion and society. This idea was taken forward by social psychologists Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszcynski (2015) who developed the aforementioned terror management theory. This theory proposes that underlying everything we do, lies the terror about the inevitability of our annihilation in death, which expresses itself as anxiety. This terror causes us to embrace cultural values and to seek meaning, and this includes developing ideas of an afterlife. In Greenberg and Arndt (2011), we learn that the theory is rooted in a long tradition of thought regarding human awareness of death and its role in psychological functioning. Terror management theory was developed to explain the motivational underpinnings of self-esteem, defence and prejudice.

Not all panic or anxiety, however, is negative or detrimental; some is a result of creativity or transition to a new way of being (Stern & Marchesani, 1999).

Although popular, and certainly relevant for shining a light on the subject of death within the area of psychology, terror management theory is, however, not without its critics (e.g. Fessler & Navarrete, 2005,

Kirkpatrick & Navarrete, 2006, Leary, 2004, Leary & Shreindorfer, 1997, Navarrete & Fessler, 2005, Synder, 1997, Wisman & Heflick, 2016).

2.10. The subject of death in psychotherapy

Prior to ideas about the afterlife comes realisation of the inevitability of our death. This is an issue which needs to be confronted by every person at some point in their life, and it is often a source of deep anxiety (Becker, 1973). It is to be expected that clients may bring these difficult issues to counselling and psychotherapy when these fears break through their conscious awareness. It is also known, however, that these fears are not always conscious. They can manifest in fear-suffused experiences such as panic attacks, phobias and obsessions (Starcevic, 1989, Stravynski, Basoglu, Marks, Sengun, & Marks, 1995, Zimri, Hayley, Ramin, James, & Igor, 2013). In such cases, the practitioner's sensitivity to the subject will be needed to tease out the fundamental issues which are causing the disturbance. Although there is a plethora of counselling and psychotherapy books and articles on the debilitating issues of anxiety, phobia, panic attacks and obsessions (e.g. Bourne, 2015, Cisler, Olatunji, & Lohr, 2009, Milosevic & McCabe, 2015, Orsillo, 2011, Rhona, 2017, Simpson, Neria, Lewis-Fernandez, & Schneier, 2010), my exploration of the professional literature found scarce reference to the link between fear of death and these conditions.

Similarly, Bennett-Carpenter (2014) found the literature on psychotherapists' consideration of the subject of death, including their own death, to be very sparse. Bennet-Carpenter says:

> If psychotherapists, health-care providers and other caring people who deal with mortality issues, cannot face the idea of their own future deaths, how can one expect others – especially patients – to do so? … [My psychotherapist] talking and writing about dealing with the idea of his/her own future death is what helped me, and continues to help, in my own attempt to face up to the idea of my own future death. Some patients very much need this specifically, aside from all other issues that may arise or be involved. (p.362)

Therapists' views on death are important. Although Bennett-Carpenter does not mention the issue of after-death existence, this is, as discussed above, part of death anxiety, being the ultimate question relating to a person's future, so it might be germane to expect that therapists have given thought to this subject. In this respect, Rowan and Jacobs (2002) point out that therapists need to be authentic in the therapy room, by which they mean 'genuine' and generally aware of their own being. Having clients in mind, they say that when we are with an inauthentic person, 'it may be appropriate to be inauthentic ourselves' (p.127). Relating this statement to therapy clients, we can see that it has implications for the safety and freedom that are offered around disclosure of their most intimate and fear-provoking issues. The therapeutic space is unique, and therapists can be said to take on some of the roles which are the province of spiritual leaders such as priests and shamans (West, 2004). As with those professionals, it is a matter of ultimate concern for therapists to

confront their own issues around death as part of the therapist's process (Baldwin, 2013).

The question of a possible afterlife is likely to loom in some proportion in a person's reflections on their personal mortality. Although the focus of this research is on therapists' views, the question of clients' views and experiences in relation to death and the afterlife is important, given the dialogical nature of the therapeutic process. This aspect, however, is not part of this study.

2.10.1. The presence of the afterlife in the therapy room

Ideas about the afterlife vary across the spiritual traditions, but the commonality amongst them is the understanding that actions in this life will affect what happens in a future life. Life, as meant here, is understood as some kind of conscious experience.

The ideas of going to Heaven as a reward and to Hell as a punishment, are central to the values by which the individual is encouraged to live within the Christian and Islamic traditions. Although the strength of this narrative has declined in the 21st century, Hailparn and Hailparn (1994) tell us that the Catholic patient might bring to therapy, challenging issues of shame and guilt (amongst others) relating to actions considered 'mortal sins', which carry the risk of eternal damnation. In particular, people who have had experience of living within a fundamentalist environment of any religion, where the threat of eternal punishment in the afterlife may have

been the means to ensure compliance, may present very specific issues and need specific attention (Moyers, 1990). 'Shattered faith' syndrome (Yao, 1987) refers to the sense of loss, confusion and isolation from which people who have left fundamentalist communities suffer. Typically forbidden to talk to outsiders about their experiences whilst members of such communities, these clients may suffer from a profound sense of guilt, anxiety and depression.

One other post-mortem existence which has been gaining credibility in 21st century Western society, is 'reincarnation', also known as 'transmigration' or 'metempsychosis', which is a belief widely held in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Although this belief is well embedded in Indian culture, MacGregor (1992) argues that it is not at all incompatible with Western thought, as it is based on Platonic tradition which teaches the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, within the worldwide free flow of information of the contemporary world, Eastern ideas have more easily been able to permeate the Western psyche, and the concept of reincarnation has attracted interest not only through popular literature but also in academia, where work exists on reincarnation, including studies of children who remember past lives. Two researchers of note in this field are the late Professor Ian Stevenson (1918-1997) of the University of Virginia, who published his findings in *Children Who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation* (2001), and Professor Erlendur Haraldsson (1931 –) of the University of

Iceland, who with James G. Matlock published, *I Saw a Light and Came Here – Children's Experience of Reincarnation* (2017).

Concepts of 'karma' and 'reincarnation' have become part of the Western vocabulary (Fenwick & Fenwick, 2001, Fontana, 2010, Kübler-Ross, 1991, etc.). Sumegi (2014) explains karma as 'self-oriented intentional action, … the energy of mental habit patterns which replicate themselves endlessly into the future, manifesting in actions of body, speech and mind that create further mental habit patterns, on and on' (p.205). Karma is the driving force in the cycle of birth and death.

Reincarnation, as an afterlife model, poses an intriguing question for counselling and psychotherapy, because it implies previous lives in which actions and attitudes may have influenced what happens in this life. The consequence is that issues which may be afflicting a client may not have their origins in early life, as traditional therapeutic modalities suggest, but may be a consequence of actions in past lives. This approach has brought about the development of 'past lives regression' or 'past life therapy' as an established therapeutic modality, albeit not recognised by the main professional bodies of the UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) and the BACP (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy). Its organisations, however, have a considerable presence on the internet (e.g. Past Life Regression Academy, 2008, Spiritual Regression Therapy Association, 2010, The Past Lives Therapists Association, 2015). Affiliated therapists offer their services, and there are

a number of books available on the market (e.g. Binder, 1992, Linn, 1997, Moody, 1991, Schlotterbeck, 2002).

Amongst the many books on this theme, is that of the Jungian analyst, Dr. Roger Woolger (1944–2011), *Other Lives, Other Selves: a Jungian Psychotherapist Discovers Past Lives* (1987). Woolger's approach is grounded in the Eastern reincarnation model in which actions and attitudes in past lives affect one's current life, and current actions and attitudes will affect future lives in a karmic cycle. This view is aligned with Jung's acceptance of the idea of rebirth which, in different forms specific to different cultures, Jung saw as a primordial affirmation of mankind. As such, Jung maintained, it is based on archetypes, as all affirmations relating to what he called the 'suprasensual' are (Yates, 1999). Woolger's (1987) work with patients' perceived 'past lives' put them in touch with experiences in supposed former existences. The most diverse of these past lives, however, he says, are part of their psychic inventory. He ends his book with this statement:

> The question of whether reincarnation is proved … seems to me somehow irrelevant. At best the question strikes me as an intellectual defence against daring to search more deeply into one's own soul for what we have in common with all humanity'. (p.335)

Addressing the idea of whether reincarnation might be a belief of clients and what this may mean regarding issues brought to counselling and

psychotherapy, Peres (2012) asks the question, 'Should psychotherapy consider reincarnation?'. Suggestive that this idea finds resonance in certain quarters of the profession is an article by Tomlinson (2016), carried in a recent issue of the journal of the professional body UKCP. Tomlinson, an author of three books on past-life regression, acknowledges that the market is unregulated and that anyone can call themselves a past-life therapist. He makes the point, however, that there is a demand for this kind of therapy.

2.11. Current mortem and post-mortem literature

As mentioned above, there is a plethora of books on death and dying both popular and professional, available to the reader at present (e.g. Badham, 2013, Kellehear, 2014, Mannix, 2018, Modi, 2014, O'Connell, 2017). A search for 'death and dying' in Google Scholar will yield over 1.6 million hits. 'Afterlife beliefs' will yield over 76,000 hits.

There is a dedicated field of death studies, with some well-known names in the hospice movement such as its founder, Cicely Saunders (1918-2005), and Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004). Predating those pioneers, was Herman Feifel (1915-2003), who is considered the father of the death movement, thanatology (Lamers, 2012). Feifel was a psychologist and joined the US Army in 1942. After the Second World War the subject of death was considered taboo, and was identified as 'the new pornography' following Gorer's article 'The Pornography of Death' (1955). Feifel, however, challenged the prevailing

paradigm and edited two major works on the subject, *The Meaning of Death* (1959) and *New Meanings of Death* (1977), which featured the thoughts on the subject of death of prominent thinkers such as Carl Jung (1875-1961), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and Paul Tillich (1886-1965). No contribution in either book deals specifically with ideas of life after death, although, having validated telepathic perceptions as a psychological fact, Jung states that:

> The nature of the psyche reaches into obscurities far beyond the scope of our understanding. …. So if anyone should draw the conclusion that the psyche, in its deepest reaches, participates in a form of existence beyond space and time, and thus partakes of what is inadequately and symbolically described as "eternity" – the critical reason could counter with no other argument than the *non liquet* of science (Jung cited in Feifel, 1959, p.14).

Feifel's intern, Robert Kastenbaum[15] (1932-2013), went on to become another major figure in the field of death studies. He founded the journal *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying* (SAGE) and published amongst other books, *Is There Life after Death* (1984), *The Psychology of Death* (2000) and *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (2003). Since then, much literature about death and dying has been published, including academic journals such as *OMEGA* (mentioned above) and *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* (Taylor & Francis), published since 1996. Most of that literature deals with processes, events and

[15] Note that Peter Koestenbaum and Robert Kastenbaum are two different authors.

attitudes up to the moment of death by the dying and with bereavement issues for the people left behind. Very little deals with concepts and ideas of what happens after death.

Other authors have, however, attended to this subject. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who worked with dying people, wrote a book called *The Tunnel and the Light: Essential Insights on Living and Dying* (1999), in which she describes her experiences with dying patients and what she saw were credible signs of an afterlife. She describes her increased sensitivity and observation of unexplained phenomena at the time patients were close to death, including reports of near-death experiences[16] and death bed visions. She also wrote the book *On Life after Death* (1991), in which she refers to her experiences with those patients and argues her belief that death is a portal to some other kind of conscious experience.

Near-death experiences have been researched by Fenwick and Parnia (2002), Van Lommel (2001), Greyson (2010), Tassell-Matamua (2013), amongst others. The research into near-death experiences is controversial. There are some who view such experiences as consequences of abnormal brain physiology; for example Blackmore (1993) and Dawkins (2017), and others who are more accepting that near-death, and other out-of-body experiences are an indication of the non-

[16] Near-death experiences involve the mind leaving the body and 'travelling' to what is understood to be a separate realm usually interpreted as an afterlife.

locality of consciousness, meaning that the mind interacts with the brain but is not created by it (Radin, 1997). A powerful example is that of Pam Reynolds (1956-2010), who in 1991 had a 'standstill' operation to remove a brain aneurism. This involved a deep hypothermic cardiocirculatory arrest during which she had an out-of-body experience in which she saw what was going on in the room, and could later describe it accurately to the surgeons involved (Fontana, 2010). Other similar cases have been reported (e.g. Beauregard & O'Leary, 2007).

However much mainstream materialist science dismisses the possibility of post-mortem existence, this idea has its place in the collective psyche. In his book, *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination*, Garrett (2015) explores the afterlife as a subject in contemporary art, films, TV shows, music and the media, stating that:

> In literature as ancient as the early Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, we find human beings speculating on what might follow death, expressing their hopes and fears, trying to make sense of death and how our actions in this life may affect what follows death. Today, through the music and imagery of rock bands like U2, Iron Maiden and AC-DC, in story lines of TV programmes such as *Lost*, *South Park* and *Fantasy Island*, in the implied theology of films such as *The Corpse Bride, Ghost* and *Field of Dreams* … and within the supernatural landscape of ghosts, shades and otherworldly way stations in the Harry Potter novels and films, writers, musicians and artists of all sorts continue to investigate those hopes and fears. (p.17)

However, within the area of counselling and psychotherapy, professional literature on post-mortem consciousness is sparse.

2.12. The gap addressed by this research

Having considered the field as explicated above, this study addresses a gap in research which exists in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy.

The topic of death is currently widespread in interdisciplinary publications (e.g. Cowan-Jenssen, 2007, Mannix, 2018, O'Connell, 2017, Podoshen, Andrzejewski, Wallin, & Venkatesh, 2018, Yurevich, 2017) and is present in the social activities of 'death cafés' which are popular in many of the major cities around the world. What is addressed less in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy is the topic of post-mortem consciousness.

When psychotherapist Bennett-Carpenter (2014) writes about his experience with his own therapist in the US, he argues that it is crucial for psychotherapists to talk and write about dealing with their own future death, both for themselves and their patients. But he does not touch on the topic of his therapist's view of what may happen after death.

Questions around post-mortem consciousness have been found to be ubiquitous irrespective of belief in God. Preliminary findings of the research programme Understanding Unbelief (Bullivant, Farias, Lenman, & Lee, 2019), based at the University of Kent, found that a high proportion of atheists and agnostics have beliefs belonging to a spiritual

orientation, such as supernatural phenomena, life after death, reincarnation, destiny and astrology. The study ran between 2017 and 2019 with the aim of understanding atheism and other forms of 'unbelief' in six countries (the UK, the US, Brazil, Denmark, China and Japan). Unbelief is defined as 'a state of lacking (especially religious) faith or belief' (Bullivant & Lee, 2016, p.7).

One of the few studies specifically on afterlife beliefs is that of Singleton (2012, 2015). The author notes that a number of scholarly books had recently been published on the topic of the afterlife (Casey 2009, Eire 2010, Fontana 2009, Miller 2010, all cited in Singleton, 2015), although few studies addressing this subject have been undertaken. In his studies he found a widespread acceptance of reincarnation belief which, however, is increasingly self-directed, personal and detached from tradition (p.466). Other recent studies and publications address the interest in post-mortem consciousness (e.g. Carr & Sharp, 2014, Heflick et al., 2015, Lee, 2016, Sumegi, 2014), and Garrett (2015) sets out to demonstrate the ubiquity of interest in the afterlife in the popular imagination.

In the light of the interest in the West in post-mortem consciousness in general and reincarnation in particular, Peres (2012) asks the question: should psychotherapy consider reincarnation? He argues that there is a need to take into account the cultural baggage that clients/patients bring to psychotherapy. The author is clear that it is not a question of whether reincarnation is a valid phenomenon, but of whether professionals should take into account clients' beliefs in the therapeutic process. He agrees

with Bohart (2000) that clients, rather than therapists, are the agents of their own recovery. Therefore, clients' cultural framework and belief systems will be an important wellspring of self-healing resources. Peres suggests that an empathic approach by therapists can be of great benefit for those people who believe in reincarnation and have a sense that their difficulties have their origins in a supposed previous life. Acknowledging that such an approach is unconventional and possibly at odds with the prevailing materialist paradigm, the author proposes that it may be helpful to remember that there is no reliable way of distinguishing between true and false memories as both can be recalled with equal vividness. Furthermore, memories of supposed previous lives may reveal important psychological dynamics present in an individual's current existence. Peres encourages practitioners to find out about clients' spiritual beliefs (to include beliefs in reincarnation) at the assessment stage in order to incorporate the client's ontological and epistemological orientation into the therapeutic framework.

It follows from the above, therefore, that thoughts regarding what may happen after their personal death will have occurred to both therapist and client. Counselling and psychotherapy are dialogical processes so what the client brings will be received internally by the practitioner in some way which is likely to influence his/her response (e.g. Kilgore, Sideman, Amin, Baca, & Bohanske, 2005, Shafranske, Malony, & Newton, 1990). Therefore, if a client brings to therapy issues around death anxiety or post-mortem existence, the therapist's own belief system

may determine how this topic will be processed. On this, no research has been found.

2.13. Conclusion

This chapter looked at the literature in which this research is placed. In raising the questions of what happens after death within the psychotherapeutic work with clients, I considered the wider context of the history of those beliefs down the ages in order to contextualise current views on the topic. I highlighted the two strands respectively supporting and dismissing the idea of post-mortem consciousness and originating in the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, which have had repercussions down the ages to the present times. Today, they reflect the spiritual and the materialist epistemologies. I also developed briefly the theory of McGilchrist which explains how the different kinds of attention and perception facilitated by the left and right brain hemispheres influence the world which comes into being for each of us, determining our ontology and epistemology. His theory also offers an explanation of the current materialistic paradigm, which submits that consciousness is generated by the brain and therefore extinguished upon death. This approach eliminates the possibility of an afterlife, as death is seen as final.

Because the belief in post-mortem consciousness is predicated on consciousness being immortal and infinite, I presented a brief overview of the subject of consciousness in Western philosophy and science. I also

looked at psi or the paranormal, which Moore (2017) identifies as possible 'leakages' from other worlds.

Belief is fundamental to the orientation towards death and what comes after, and I showed that belief is made up of a number of elements which include learning, experience and an embodied felt sense. Meaning is a central aspect and hope plays an important part in belief in post-mortem consciousness.

This chapter also covered the topic of death in psychology and considered the views of Freud and Jung in relation to death, the humanistic approach and the existentialist approach. It covered the subject of death and post-mortem consciousness in psychotherapy. It showed that the subject of post-mortem existence is present in the collective psyche which includes both clients and practitioners in counselling and psychotherapy. It made the point that death anxiety is likely to include anxiety about what may happen after death which may be brought overtly or covertly to psychotherapeutic work. How this subject is dealt with in therapy depends on the views of therapists on post-mortem existence. No research on this has been found.

The next chapter will describe the methodology used in this research.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and Methods

3.1. Overview

This chapter will describe and explain the methodology and methods used in this study. It will offer a rationale for the choices made and describe, in detail, the processes undertaken. It will demonstrate the analysis step by step, to show how the results and findings were reached. The chapter addresses the issues of validity and credibility as well as ethical considerations. It also includes a section on my reflexive engagement with the research process.

3.2. Aims of the research

To recap from Chapter 1, the aims of the study are:

- to explore psychotherapists' views on post-mortem consciousness;
- to explore whether those ideas influence their work with clients.

A recent study commissioned by the BBC (ComRes, 2017) showed that the population in the UK is fairly equally divided between people who believe death means the extinguishing of consciousness and people who

see death as a portal into some other kind of conscious experience (see Figure 1).

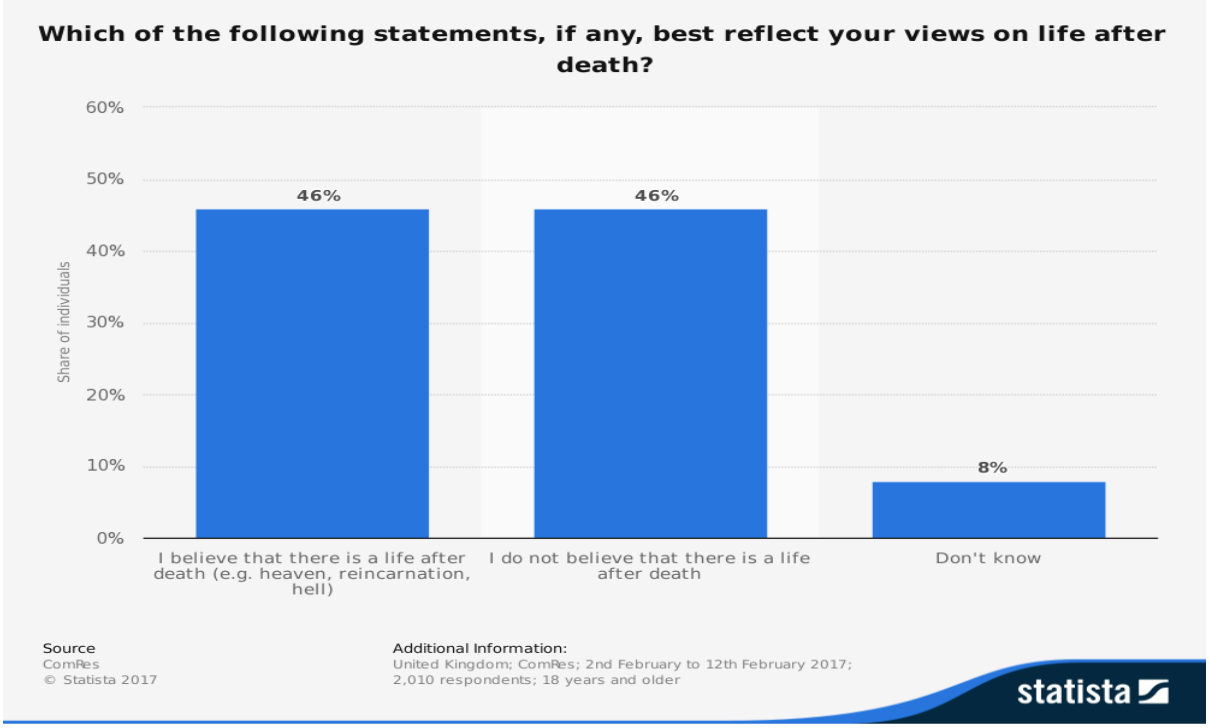

Figure 1– ComRes (2017)

This research provides an examination of how practitioners involved in this study orient themselves towards this question and the implications for their work with clients.

3.3. Methodology

Theorists in qualitative research stress the importance of considering the researcher's worldview[17] when making decisions about a choice of

[17] Worldview means 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Guba, 1990, p.17), it is also understood as 'paradigm' (Guba & Lincoln in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.191) or for Crotty (1998) it is epistemology (p.8).

method (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2013, Creswell, 2014, Crotty, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Willig, 2013).

My own worldview argues that the world is a meaningful place and my understanding is that meaning is predicated on epistemological and ontological signifiers of lived experience. This orientation falls within the framework of social constructivism. Furthermore, experience interpreted within a framework of meaning is a phenomenological type of knowledge, which sees the world as experientially diverse. It is within this worldview context that this qualitatively driven study sits.

A helpful description of four relevant worldviews in qualitative research is given by Creswell (2014) (see Table 1).

Postpositivism	Constructivism
• Determinism • Reductionism • Empirical observation and measurement • Theory verification	• Understanding • Multiple participant meanings • Social and historical construction • Theory generation
Transformative	Pragmatism
• Political • Power and justice oriented • Collaborative • Change-oriented	• Consequence of actions • Problem-centred • Pluralistic • Real-world practice oriented

Table 1 – Creswell's relevant worldviews

Evaluating these approaches for this research, I arrived at the following considerations in relation to their use in this study.

The *postpositivist worldview* is a deterministic perspective that uses the lens of cause and effect. It uses measurements to develop numerical results, is reductionist and uses tests to explore hypotheses in research questions. As a key aim of this study is to explore and understand therapists' views on post-mortem consciousness, and its effect on their experience of living and working with these views, this is not a suitable methodology.

The *transformative worldview* in research is intertwined with politics and addresses social issues, such as inequality and oppression of minorities, from a social–political perspective. It is also not a suitable methodology because a social and political framework is not the primary focus of the question this study is asking.

The *constructivist worldview* considers meaning as central to a person's understanding of the world in which they live. This meaning is constructed and informed by the historical and social environment into which we are born. Researchers use an inductive process to generate a theory or pattern of meaning. As I am interested in the meaning therapists make of their views on post-mortem consciousness, I considered this methodology for this research, but I decided against it in favour of the last type proposed by Creswell, which felt more suitable.

The *pragmatic worldview* is not concerned with particular methods but uses all approaches available to understand and find solutions to a problem. It uses pluralistic and multi-method approaches, such as mixed-methods, to achieve the necessary knowledge.

The early philosopher of pragmatism John Dewey (1859-1952) exploring the nature of truth, argued that 'a belief is true when it is the product of objective experimental inquiry. … But inquiry may lead to different truths in different situations. … It depends on factors such as interest, habit and context' (cited in Hickman, Neubert, & Reich, 2009, p.12). This approach is congruent with my own belief and worldview.

In this study, I used a quantitative and a qualitative element to analyse data. Yardley and Bishop (2008) point out that quantitative methods are useful because they have high levels of 'internal validity', which means strong conclusions can be drawn from them. On the other hand, qualitative research seeks to uncover meaning, understanding the data within a context. Therefore, the authors say, 'combining the internal validity of quantitative methods with the external validity of qualitative research can … be a very productive way of mixing methods' (p.358).

Some of the mainstays of the pragmatic approach are:

- It is not committed to any one system of philosophy or reality.

- Researchers have freedom of choice in terms of the methods, techniques and procedures of research which best meet their needs and purposes.
- Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in a social, historical, political and other contexts.
- Truth is what emerges from a well-conducted inquiry.

In my view, the pragmatic approach is the most appropriate methodology for this research, permitting the use of mixed methods to explore the views of psychotherapists on post-mortem consciousness and whether they influence the work with clients.

Qualitative research prioritises process, explanation and meaning over cause and effect. As with all other research techniques it aims to acquire knowledge and understanding but its particular approach is naturalistic, seeking to describe and understand the complex nature of human experience in a contextual way (Walker, Cooke, & McAllister, 2008). In qualitative research, the researcher is considered the instrument by which the research takes place (Frost, 2016). This means that the engagement with the data is personal and subjective. One way of conducting this engagement is through what Smith (2004) calls a 'temporary clearing' (p.256). This is a mental suspension, as much as possible, of the researcher's own belief as s/he immerses himself or herself in the data as well as in the context in which the material is situated. In a counterintuitive way, the author suggests an attitude of

'unconsciousness' in the engagement, to allow elements of surprise or the unexpected to show themselves in the data. This, the author argues, will allow the researcher to see things in the data which s/he may not otherwise see. This subjectivity must be acknowledged and made explicit as much as possible when it comes to the interpretation of the data.

In their book *The Art of Inquiry,* Coppin and Nelson (2005) use different terminology to suggest a similar approach. They explain the invitation of the psyche into the research work and suggest that:

> An abiding allegiance to the psyche as a creative partner, which is first and foremost a matter of attitude, ensures a firsthand experience of the complexity and fluidity of psychological work. As the project takes shape, researchers will cycle through many phases including moments of insight, clarity and brilliance and moments of tedium, despair and frustration. … The intention … is not to reach the bottom or the end, but to dance with the psyche as she moves, calling and receding, but never finishing. (p.94)

Romanyshyn (2007), addressing the same phenomenon, also encourages researchers to attend to messages from the psyche during the research process. He says:

> I want to emphasize that when one keeps soul in mind in the research process, one is called into a work by something other than one's intentions. This something other is what I described …. as the unfinished business in the soul of the work, the unsaid weight of history in the work that waits to be said. (p.63)

This intuitive approach felt congruent with my own way of being and was complemented by the method of mental imagery as a tool for deeper understanding of an issue developed by Thomas (2016). Thomas is a colleague and friend and was engaged in writing a book on the use of mental imagery to help development and deeper understanding of projects. I was used as a guinea pig and, upon her request, developed an imagery of my research from the very early stages. In this process, my research project, then still without a clear focus, appeared as a building with shallow foundations in surroundings which included poorly built structures – favelas. The message I took from it was that I needed to dig further down to ensure the focus was solid and the project would make a difference. As the project evolved, the building transformed into a large and tall building covered in dark glass preventing anyone from looking in. Intuitively, I felt that the project already existed and I needed to *uncover* it – along the lines of the idea that a sculpture exists inside the stone waiting for the sculptor to chip the surplus away. For some time in my imagery, I was not permitted entry to the building, until at some point – once I had submitted my first chapter – I was allowed in. I could then explore the building. However, different floors only became open to me as the project progressed. I spent time in meditation in this imaginary building, met philosophers and scientists (curiously – given the subject of the research – not religious figures), and felt that I gained a degree of clarity and direction. I generally feel that my research benefitted from the experience.

3.4. Methods

This study asked the question: 'How do therapists' beliefs about post-mortem consciousness influence their work with clients?' along with the sub questions, 'What are their beliefs?', 'How do they understand their beliefs?' and 'Do they influence their work with clients and if so, how?'

The research was conducted using a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach (Hesse-Biber, Rodriguez, & Frost, 2015) in two parts. Following the pragmatist approach of Creswell (2014), the first part was a survey which had both a quantitative element and a qualitative element to it. The second part was conducted using individual semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Online surveys first started to be used in the mid-1990s and have since then been growing in popularity. The low cost involved, the proliferation of survey platforms and the potential for high distribution make online surveys a more attractive choice than paper or telephone surveys (Couper & Miller, 2008). The flexibility of surveys lies in their analytical facilities which include the cross-tabulation of quantitative data, coupled with the possibility of collecting data for qualitative analysis. In addition, internet surveys provide anonymity for respondents (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and the attraction of being available at all times. Van Selm and Jankowski (2006) caution against lengthy questionnaires, highlighting the rule of thumb that 'the longer the questionnaire, the less likely people will

respond' (p.441). They found that a plain, simple questionnaire provided better results than a more sophisticated one.

Most of the data in this study underwent a qualitative analysis. Qualitative research is based on the idiographic ontological and epistemological orientation of the researcher. The way the data were analysed was particular to my ontological and epistemological orientation, which means that someone with a different ontological and epistemological orientation, would have analysed them differently. I will show, however, that my particular analysis was carried out systematically and with rigour, with awareness of my subjective perspective, which renders the analysis trustworthy and credible.

3.5. Research design

Creswell (2014) points out that philosophical assumptions inform the design of research. Based on Creswell's pragmatic worldview approach, I felt free to use the methods I thought would be most appropriate to addressing the research question. A difference, however, needs to be highlighted between the pragmatic approach and the approach of bricolage which is similar in permitting the use of multiple methods but different in the way it is conducted. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) use the concept of 'montage', which in cinematography is a method of editing images, as a metaphor for the approach of bricolage in qualitative research. Bricolage allows for the use of whatever strategies or methods are at hand and if the researcher needs to invent techniques and/or

methods, s/he can do that. It is also a method that can be ongoing, changing and taking new form as the researcher as bricoleur adds different tools and methods to what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) call the 'puzzle'. This present study used a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design of quantitative and qualitative data, using established methods of descriptive statistics and interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results were then integrated in an overall interpretation of the findings.

Hesse-Biber (2010a) points out that mixed methods can fulfil three objectives: *triangulation*, by which data collected quantitatively and qualitatively are used to examine the same aspect via two different methods; *development*, by which the results from data collected by one method are used to develop or inform another method; and *complementarity,* by which one method is used to give greater understanding to a research question or clarify a given research result. This study conforms with the *complementarity* model, as both methods used (survey and semi-structured interviews) helped to enrich the understanding of the research questions (stated at the beginning of Section 3.4.). It uses a qualitatively driven approach in which the quantitative data takes a secondary role and are understood to assist with the elaboration and clarification of the qualitatively driven research question (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015). The results of the survey are used to inform or raise questions about the research problem, rather than simply being used in a descriptive way (Creswell, 2014).

As further support for this design, Morse (2015) explains that a mixed-methods strategy of the kind used in this study can broaden the scope, increase the depth and possibly increase the dimensions of a project. The two types of data are brought together with a view to providing a broader picture of the research question. The survey was intended to be completed by therapists of any age and of any religious and professional orientations. The only criterion stipulated was that respondents should be accredited. This wide net was cast in order to target a specific population of interest, which would otherwise have been more difficult to locate (Hesse-Biber, S. 2010b). From this population, I went on to identify the people for the interviews.

The two parts of this study were nested: the qualitative part was nested in the quantitative survey, but the research ran simultaneously. During the time that the survey was open, I was conducting interviews with the people who offered themselves as participants and matched the participation criteria for the interviews.

3.6. Stage 1: the survey

The survey was designed to provide a context within which the semi-structured interviews could be developed. Participants in the survey were anonymous, the only criterion was that they be accredited by the UKCP

(the United Kingdom Counselling for Psychotherapy) or the BACP (the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) as the recruitment information was disseminated through their online presence. The demographic information was helpful as a framework of reference for the interviews and the free text comments were useful in the synthesis developed in chapter 8.

The survey itself was composed of two parts: one part offered multiple-choice questions and was designed to elicit demographic information about the participants, such as age, sex, spiritual orientation and professional orientation, as well as yes/no/don't know questions associated with their beliefs on post-mortem consciousness. The second part was composed of three open ended-questions. These were analysed using thematic analysis.

The data collected in the multiple-choice part of the survey enabled me to gather descriptive statistics on how the counsellors and therapists who engaged with this survey, thought about the issue of death and post-mortem existence. Some of the survey data could have been statistically analysed, but this was not viewed as being within the remit of this study.

It is clear that a sample of 103 respondents is by no means statistically representative of the wider population of professionals in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, but given the exploratory nature of the study, it may be taken as a valuable indication of how practitioners may

think about this issue. The criteria for participation included no limitation in terms of age, belief or modality of approach. The only requirement was that the participants should be accredited members of either of the UK's two relevant professional bodies: the UKCP (the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) and the BACP (the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy).

Thematic analysis is described by Willig (2013) as a 'method for recognising and organising patterns in content and meaning in qualitative data' (p.57). It is in keeping with Creswell's pragmatic approach in that it is simply a method for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It allows for a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks, rather than prescribing only one. Its flexibility makes it one of the most popular analytical tools in qualitative analyses, underpinning all other qualitative methods of analysing data. It was suitable for this part of the research as I was interested in the themes I could identify in the comments about beliefs in post-mortem consciousness made by anonymous practitioners who engaged in this short survey.

In thematic analysis, the data can be analysed inductively (from the raw information), or deductively (based on theory or prior research) (Boyatzis, 1998). I analysed the data from the three open-ended questions in two stages. In the first stage I did so inductively, allowing the voices of the participants to speak for themselves. Sticking closely to the raw information helps to lessen the contamination from the researcher's

views (Walker et al., 2008). In the second stage, I went deeper into the data and coded the themes in relation to one particular question in the survey – whether participants responded 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know' to the question 'Do you believe in some kind of conscious experience after death?'. As this question is at the core of this research, it seemed cogent that replies to other questions be analysed against this particular belief.

Themes were identified within the context of the questions asked in the survey and the meaning they had for me, the researcher. Boyatzis (1998) defines a theme as 'a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomena' (p.4). Themes in thematic analysis do not emerge but are constructed, and it is incorrect to assume that they reside in the data. If they exist anywhere, they exist in the head of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My intention with the themes I constructed was to provide a rich thematic description of the text reflecting the contents of the entire data set of the comments made by participants in the survey.

3.6.1. Survey participant recruitment

The promotion of the survey was not an easy task. I approached the two accrediting professional bodies I belong to, UKCP (the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) and BACP (the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy), to ask whether they might be willing to circulate an invitation to the survey to their members, but they were unable to help. I was reticent about contacting training establishments

as my aim was to reach experienced accredited professionals rather than trainees. Following an exploration of various avenues, I found the organiser of a psychotherapists' forum who allowed me to email around 200 practitioners. This resulted in a disappointing 13 replies in the first week. I then placed an invitation to the survey on the UKCP closed LinkedIn group and the online Notice Board of the BACP. In addition, I invited participants of the 2017 BACP Research Conference, where I presented a poster. I also wrote three articles about my research inviting participation. These were published in *Thresholds (*Nielsen, 2015a*)*, the spiritual journal of the BACP, *Network Review (*Nielsen, 2015b), the journal of the Scientific and Medical Network and *The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy (*Nielsen, 2017*).* Eventually a total of 103 participants completed the survey.

I am aware that, as is the case with most research, this study's participants were a self-selected group of people with an interest in the subject, possibly indicating that people may have excluded themselves for a variety of reasons, including potentially not having worked on themselves with regards to their own mortality. There is also an outside chance that people may have done the survey more than once, but I find that unlikely.

Out of the 103 people who completed the survey, 37 expressed a desire to participate in the interviews.

3.6.2. Survey data collection and analysis

For this survey, I used a tool provided by the University of Chester which at the time was called Bristol Online Surveys and is now called Jisc. It is an easy-to-use system, with good facilities for cross-tabulation.

The first step was to run a pilot, which allowed me to refine the questions for the final version. The questions were mainly demographic with three free-text fields for people to leave their comments. The pilot was circulated to colleagues and yielded 10 responses. These allowed me to tweak some of the questions based on the feedback in the comments. The final version of the survey comprised 13 questions, which included three free-text fields. My intention was that it could be answered in as little as five minutes in order to attract as many respondents as possible, bearing in mind Selm and Jankowski'si (2006) admonitions that the longer the questionnaire, the fewer people will be inclined to engage with it. The free-text sections would allow people who so chose to expand freely on their thoughts.

The survey was designed to be purposively selective of accredited practitioners of psychotherapy and was accessed by means of a password which was given at the recruitment points. The introduction explained the context of the survey and invited honest replies, explaining that the questionnaire was completely anonymous. It also mentioned that those who would like to be invited to interviews could email me at the address given at the end.

Because I wanted to have as large a sample as possible, the survey was left open from March 2016 to July 2018, but no replies were entered during the last three months.

3.6.3. Survey questions

The aim of the survey was to collect data from anonymous professional accredited counsellors and psychotherapists. The questions asked were:

1. Age
    a. Divided into three 10-years periods flanked by 'under 40' and 'over 70' sections.
2. Sex
    a. Male /female
3. Professional orientation
    a. Psychoanalytical/psychodynamic
    b. Person-centred
    c. Humanistic/integrative
    d. Transpersonal/Jungian
    e. Cognitive-behavioural
    f. Other
4. Religious affiliation
    a. Christian
    b. Jewish
    c. Moslem
    d. Eastern (Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, other)

e. Spiritual but not religious (SBNR)

f. None

g. Rather not say

h. Other

5. Do you believe in some kind of conscious experience after death? (options: 'yes', 'no', 'don't know')
6. If you replied yes to the question above, do you believe your identity (who you know yourself to be) survives? (options: 'yes', 'no', 'don't know')
7. If you could have a choice, would you like there to be life or some kind of conscious experience after death? (options: 'yes', 'no', 'don't know')
8. Do these questions have an influence in the way you live your life? (options: 'yes', 'no')
9. If you answered yes to the question above, can you briefly say how? (free text)
10. Do these questions have an influence in the way you work with clients? (options: 'yes', 'no')
11. If you answered yes to the question above, can you briefly say how? (free text)
12. Do you find it difficult to discuss the possibility of life after death with people whose views you don't know? (options: 'yes', 'no')
13. Final comments and observations. (free text)

3.6.3.1. Cross-tabulation

The central point of interest for this survey, was question 5: 'Do you believe in some kind of conscious experience after death?'. With the cross-tabulation tool, I could explore whether there was a correlation between age and a positive answer to question 5, or whether a particular therapeutic orientation was more like to reply 'yes', or whether there was a gender bias in relation to that.

3.6.4. Open-ended questions

A number of participants left comments in the three free-text fields:

- Question 9 – in response to the question 'Do these questions have an influence in the way you live your life?' – had 73 responses
- Question 11 – in response to the question 'Do these questions have an influence in the way you work with clients?' had 67 responses
- Question 13 – 'final comments and observations' – had 50 responses.

3.6.4.1. Survey analysis of the open-ended questions

The first two questions were analysed singly with a view to understanding whether and how the views expressed in response to question 5 affect the personal life of the respondents, and separately, how they impact on their work with clients. The last question, 'Final comments and observations', included some comments which were pertinent to one of the first two questions, and in those cases they were included in their analysis of those questions.

Once the survey was closed, I copied all the responses into a Word document and started the analysis by immersing myself in the text. I read and re-read it in order to familiarise myself with the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The next step was to import them into NVivo, the software I chose to help with the analysis. Although the data to be analysed were not enormous, I felt NVivo could be a useful tool (Palys & Atchison, 2012) because it would allow me to have a good overview of the data as I manipulated them on the screen.

The sets of the data relating to the two questions were imported into the 'files' section of NVivo and from there transferred into 'nodes'. Nodes are 'containers' of source material. In the case of this research, each of the three nodes contained the total comments of each of the three free-text fields.

Based on Ricoeur's (1974) hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion, Willig (2013) identifies an 'empathic' and a 'suspicious' approach to data analysis as well as an 'inductive' and a 'deductive' approach. The empathic approach accepts the meaning as expressed by the participant whereas the suspicious approach includes an interpretation by the researcher. The inductive approach allows the data to speak for itself, the analysis being bottom up whereas the deductive approach reflects a researcher's theoretical commitment. In analysing the content of the three free-text fields, in the first iteration, I used an empathic approach

and allowed the themes to form inductively. In the second iteration I used a deductive approach, explained below.

My next step was to read and re-read the comments until I was ready to construct the themes. Once the themes had been constructed, I inserted them as 'child-nodes' to each node (one of the three open-ended questions), into the allocated left-hand side of the screen. Child-nodes are what are traditionally known as 'codes'. On the right-hand side was the transcript of the text. I then went down the text highlighting particular passages which related to the first code and pasted them into the first child-node. Once I had gone through the whole transcript, I went back to the start and did the same for all the child-nodes or codes identified. Once this process was complete, I looked at all the codes and addressed what I thought needed to be re-arranged. I noticed that some codes lent themselves to be incorporated into others and found that the descriptions of some of the codes could be amended to better represent the themes. I am aware that the coding of the texts is particular to my analysis and someone else might have analysed the texts differently. In this respect, Willig (2013) states that the inductive approach can involve a degree of interpretation.

In this way, I found the following codes for the two main questions:

	a. Meaning/Hope

Do these questions influence the way you live your life?	b. Accountability/responsibility
	c. Life as learning opportunity
	d. Existence as a mystery
	e. Anxiety
	f. Miscellaneous
Do these questions influence the way you work with clients?	a. Client awareness
	b. Practitioners' transparency
	c. Spiritual awareness
	d. Karmic awareness
	e. Secular awareness
	f. Interesting reflections

Figure 2 – Survey codes

A significant percentage of the respondents confirmed that the question about what happens after death influenced the way they lived their lives (76.70%) and the way they worked with clients (69.90%), irrespective of whether they did or did not believe in post-mortem consciousness. As this is the central focus of this study, I decided to use a deductive approach (Willig, 2013) and examine the answers given in the survey by people who replied 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know' to question 5 – 'Do you believe in some kind of consciousness after death?'.

The survey tool allowed me to fix the answers of people who replied 'yes' to question 5 and examine the replies to all other questions against this parameter. The same was possible for 'no' and 'don't know'. The following codes were identified:

- 'believers' - living in the bigger picture;
- 'non-believers' - making most of the here and now;
- death anxiety;
- ethical considerations.

The analysis of the deductively created codes followed the same steps as the analysis of the first set.

3.7. Validity in thematic analysis

Research needs to be trustworthy, and for this to be the case, researchers need to demonstrate that data analysis was conducted in a precise and consistent manner and they need to disclose the methods of analysis in enough detail to enable the reader to determine its credibility. Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) propose the following criteria to establish the trustworthiness of thematic analysis, as based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) parameters, which could be considered the standard within qualitative research.

3.7.1. Credibility

This addresses the 'fit' (p.3) between the respondents' views as expressed, and the researchers' representations of them. To achieve this, researchers are advised to use the techniques of prolonged engagement, persistent observation and data collection triangulation.

3.7.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the inquiry. For this the researcher should provide 'thick' descriptions so those who wish to transfer the findings can judge transferability. Thick description refers to a detailed, step-by-step report of the analytical process.

3.7.3. Dependability

This relates to the idea that the process must be logical, traceable and clearly documented.

3.7.4. Confirmability

This aspect requires that the interpretation and findings of the research are clearly derived from the data. It requires the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached.

To these four requirements, Nowell et al. (2017) added the audit trail.

3.7.5. Audit Trail

For an audit trail Nowell et al. (2017) suggest keeping records of the raw data, field notes, transcripts and a reflexive journal. This is intended to provide readers with the evidence of the decisions and choices made by the researcher. A reflexive journal is central to the audit trail. It helps the researcher to understand his/her own experiences and how those plus his/her worldview affect the research process (Morrow, 2005). All those records were kept for this study, including the reflexive journal.

Bergman and Coxon (2005) are clear that rather than strict criteria in qualitative research, it is the accountability of the process, through explicit description of the steps in the research, that allows readers to trust that a study and its findings are credible. Criteria must exist but the choice of criteria needs to be congruent with the nature of the research in question (Finlay, 2006).

Morrow (2005) identifies certain indispensable qualities that render research valid: sufficiency of the data, adequacy of the data, immersion in the data, attention to subjectivity and reflexivity, and issues related to interpretation and presentation (p.250).

3.8. Stage 2: the semi-structured interviews

3.8.1. Interview recruitment

The second stage of the data collection was achieved by means of individual semi-structured interviews. The aim of these interviews was to explore in depth the beliefs of participants regarding post-mortem consciousness and whether they influenced their work with clients.

In the survey, 37 people requested to be involved further in the research. Having corresponded with those people, I identified 12 who satisfied the participation criteria, and with whom I easily and successfully made arrangements for the interviews. Apart from one interview I conducted in Norfolk and one in Chester, all of the interviews were conducted in London. I offered participants the choice of where they would like to meet and four opted to come to my house. I met four in their homes and two in quiet corners of coffee shops. Two participants were interviewed on Skype, replacing two people who dropped out late in the process.

3.8.2. Interview participation criteria

The criteria for participating in the interviews were as follows:

- seeing themselves as spiritual;
- aged 50 or over;
- professionally qualified and accredited;
- with at least 10 years of experience working with clients;
- fluent in English;
- sufficiently grounded to participate safely.

In the second part of this research, I wanted to explore the impact that believing in some kind of post-mortem consciousness has on the life of practitioners and their work with clients. For this reason, I established spirituality (as developed in section 2.4) as an ontological orientation as one of the criteria for being interviewed.

The age limit was chosen because in the second half of life, thoughts are more likely to be directed towards death and consequently what may come after.

Being qualified and accredited and having a reasonable number of years of experience meant that the participants were professionals with adequate training and were likely to have worked with mortality issues in their years of experience.

Being fluent in English and sufficiently grounded to participate were required to minimise potential problems relating to misunderstandings and psychological distress.

3.8.3. Participants' profiles

Below I offer brief descriptions of the interviewees. All participants' names have been changed to protect their anonymity. Ages are as in 2018.

3.8.3.1. Fred

Age 64, practising for 15 years and accredited by the UKCP. Has training in psychosynthesis and works privately and in an agency. Describes his current spiritual context as Taoism. Worked with HIV patients in the past. Was keen to participate and came to my house in London for the interview.

3.8.3.2. Claire

Age 59, practising for 10 years accredited by the UKCP. Works in private practice within a transpersonal and energy psychology approach. Describes herself as SBNR. Came to my house in London for the interview.

3.8.3.3. Paul

Age 65, practising for 22 years and accredited by the UKCP. Works in private practice as a hypnotherapist. Describes his spirituality as Pagan. Interviewed by Skype.

3.8.3.4. Daniel

Age 73, practising for 43 years, accredited by the British Psychological Society, the UKCP and the BACP. Works in private practice, describes himself as Christian with 'no adherence to a credo of much merit'. Confirms he is an ordained priest. Interviewed in his house in London.

3.8.3.5. Laura

Age 63, practising for over 10 years and is accredited by the UKCP. Works as a systemic psychotherapist in the NHS, with Relate and privately. Describes her spirituality as SBNR. Interviewed in her house in London.

3.8.3.6. Joan

Age 56, practising for 16 years and accredited by the BACP. Works in private practice, within a person-centred framework with an existential outlook. Had a Christian upbringing and describes herself as a practising Christian. Interviewed in Norfolk in a public location.

3.8.3.7. Sally

Age 73, practising for 25 years, and is accredited by the BACP. Works in private practice within an integrative model. Was born into a Jewish family but describes herself as SBNR. Interviewed in her house in London.

3.8.3.8. Rachel

Age 50, practising for 11 years and accredited by the BACP. Works in private practice and in the past worked in a hospice as an NHS volunteer. Was born into a strict religious (fundamentalist) Christian family. Experienced a medical emergency in her mid-20s which tested her fear-based beliefs. Left the community and today calls herself SBNR.

Came from the North of England on a day-return train ticket to be interviewed in my house in London.

3.8.3.9. Carol

Age 57, practising for 11 years and accredited by the BACP. Works in a hospice setting within an Integrative framework. Describes herself as SBNR influenced by Buddhism. Interviewed at the BACP conference in Chester.

3.8.3.10. Kim

Age 58, practising for 17 years and accredited by the BACP. Trained in psychosynthesis and works in a private setting. Had recently done two years of training as an end-of-life doula[18], and planned to devote her energies to this work in the future. Had a Christian upbringing but describes herself now as SBNR. Interviewed by Skype.

3.8.3.11. Dianna

Age 71, practising for 20 years and is accredited by the BACP. Has an MSc in transpersonal psychology and works in private practice. Trained in existential phenomenological therapy and also as a shamanic practitioner. Sees herself as SBNR. Interviewed in my house in London.

[18] A doula is a practitioner who supports a woman and her family through pregnancy and the birth of her baby. A death doula is a practitioner who helps a dying person before and during the death process.

3.8.3.12.Sylvia

Age 70, practising for 32 years and is accredited by the UKCP. Works within a psychoanalytical orientation. Lifelong interest in consciousness and in spiritual and mystical experiences. Describes herself as SBNR. Interviewed in her house in London.

3.8.4. Interviews

Since the subject – death – could be considered sensitive, I was keen to conduct the interviews face to face in order to observe closely the participants' reactions. I discussed with my supervisor the possibility of sending participants the interview schedule ahead of the interview so they could prepare, but upon reflection I decided not to do this, opting for the richness of the spontaneous response.

When I met participants for the interviews, I spent a few minutes in friendly conversation in order to bring ease to both the interviewee and myself. I then explained again the nature of the research, which they had read about first in the Participants' Information Sheet. I was aware that the interviews were interpersonal situations where the knowledge and information would result from of our reciprocal influence (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), so I mostly allowed the conversation to take its own course. On some occasions, however, I felt the need to redirect it back to the central topic. Talking about post-mortem consciousness necessarily involves talking about death, and although this can be a potentially

sensitive topic for some people, it did not seem to bring about an emotional reaction in any of the participants interviewed.

Of note were three interviewees: one came to London to my house on a day-return ticket from the North of England. This conveyed to me an eagerness to participate, which became clear during the interview. One other participant was quite hesitant about participating. There was a withdrawing silence from her for some time plus repeated uncertain emails before the final commitment. A third person confessed at the start of the interview, that he had not realised the research was about views on death and post-mortem consciousness. He had thought it was about spirituality in therapy. Yet this same person had at the start of the email dialogue recommended to me a book on death and the afterlife. These examples revealed to me the sensitivity and range of understandings of the meaning of the topic of death and post-mortem existence, and indicated that the exploration of this topic can put some people in touch with personal sources of anxiety.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded using a portable recording device. I made the transcriptions myself and they were member-checked.

3.8.4.1. Interview schedule

The interview schedule was designed to help me explore the subject of this research within the semi-structured interviews in which participants were encouraged to develop their own thoughts on the subject of post-mortem existence. The following were the topics I wanted to cover:

Introduction

Why you are interested in this research?

How do you see your role as therapist?

Self disclosure? – is it easy to share your beliefs with client?
Does this issue have a place in the way you promote your services?

1. What does life after death looks like to you?
    a. What do you understand death to be
    b. What might a post death experience be – what do you imagine it to be?
    c. Why do you think so?

2. Effects on how you live?
    a. Example of situation in which this issue has become important
    b. What is the meaning in everyday life to have these beliefs
    c. What is it like to talk about these issues in wider society

3. What impact on the work with clients?
    a. What are the things that clients talk about in which this issue becomes important
        i. Trauma in past generations? (from survey)
        ii. Paranormal experiences?
    b. What is the place of this belief when people bring issues around death
    c. How easy is it to talk about this in the therapy room
        i. How to work with people who don't have this belief
4. Any experience of death or dying people?
5. What are your ideas of how life after death can be explained metaphysically?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

3.8.4.1.1 Why are you interested in this research?

This question sought to explore the motivation of participants to be interviewed given that the theme of post-mortem consciousness is not part of the list of regular subjects discussed within the profession.

3.8.4.1.2 How do you see your role as therapist?

With this question I wanted to find out the attitude participants had towards their work with clients with regards to topics of spirituality, personal mortality and what may come after death.

3.8.4.1.3 What does life after death looks like to you?

This question was designed to enable participants to reflect on their beliefs regarding post-mortem existence, for example whether they thought they would recognise themselves after death, whether they believe in reincarnation, or whether they think after their death they will re-join Cosmic Consciousness or God.

3.8.4.1.4 Effects on how you live.

This question sought to help me understand in what way participants' beliefs in post-mortem existence shape their lives, for instance, the framework used for understanding events in their lives within the context of meaning in which they experience their existence.

3.8.4.1.5 What impact on the work with clients?

This question addressed the core of this research and sought to understand how participants work with clients who have a belief in a transcendent reality which they experience as playing a role in their lives. This could be experiences of the paranormal as well as for example, the meaning they make of their lives within a greater whole.

3.8.4.1.6 Generic questions about mortality (Q.4 &5)

These questions were introduced to allow participants to talk about their own encounters with other people's death, as well as their beliefs about what post-mortem existence may entail.

3.8.4.1.7 Is there anything else you'd like to tell me.

This question opened up space for participants to talk about anything else that may have emerged for them, which they may have thought of interest for the study.

3.8.5. Interviews data analysis

3.8.5.1. Alternative methods considered

My original intention was to use thematic analysis to identify the themes encountered in the transcripts of the interviews with the participants. This would have been congruent with the analysis of the survey free texts. My decision to reject this modality was made in order to find a richer, more phenomenological way of exploring the data collected in the

face-to-face interviews, which gave me the opportunity to ask questions and achieve a deeper understanding of what was being communicated. I also considered *narrative analysis* on the basis that exploring the views of therapists on what happens after death would reveal the story they told themselves, which is the philosophical orientation of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) . It would have been an interesting perspective: however, on reflection, I decided against it because the principles of the narrative approach is to 'bring organisation to a disorganised personal story, and give it meaning' (Smith, 2015 p.114), often in order to learn more about how individuals construct their identities through the stories and their telling. This, I did not consider applicable to this study because I was interested in personal beliefs and their role in therapy. *Grounded theory* would also not have been a suitable method for this research since it aims to enable new theories to emerge from the data (Willig, 2013). Grounded theory relies on comparisons and checks of the data to shape theoretical ideas which form in the researcher's mind, as the analysis progresses. Tentative interpretations are made, and these are then checked against further data collection and analysis until a plausible theoretical explanation is achieved (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). This study did not look to make generic assertions which may be incorporated into a theory; rather, it aimed to comprehend personal understandings and lived experiences of holding beliefs about post-mortem consciousness and for this reason grounded theory was rejected as a method.

3.8.5.2. The chosen method

I employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse the data from the semi-structured interviews as I considered a phenomenological approach the most appropriate to understand the practitioners' experiences of their beliefs and their impact on their work with clients. According to its founder Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is a 'return to the things themselves' (Langridge, 2007, p.4). Phenomenology is furthermore an approach with which I feel well acquainted, as seeking to understand the lived reality of my clients is a primary stance in my work as a psychotherapist. The phenomenological approach proposes an attitude of reflexivity aimed at an understanding of our perception of an object or event. Husserl suggested that in order to have a clear perception of the subject under investigation, an attitude of 'epoché' [19] needs to be adopted. This means suspending one's own bias and belief and encountering the phenomenon from a totally neutral position (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Heidegger, however, maintained that total epoché is humanly impossible. For him phenomenology means:

> That analysis by which the meaning of the various ways in which we exist can be translated from the vague language of everyday existence into the understandable and explicit language of ontology *without destroying the way in which these meanings manifest themselves to us in our everyday* lives (quoted in Gelven, 1989, p.42 - italics by author).

[19] Epoché or bracketing, refers to an attitude of awareness that aims to suspend the lens of assumptions through which we experience the world.

This means that bracketing one's bias as proposed by Husserl can only ever be partially achieved. I therefore endeavoured to be as aware as possible of suspending my own assumptions so as to be as open as possible to the meanings of my participants as expressed in the interviews. Nevertheless, I am aware that phenomena cannot just be described, but must be interpreted (Langridge, 2007).

IPA involves hermeneutics[20], an approach in modern times developed by a number of philosophers of the 19th and 20th century. Amongst the thinkers who defined the field of hermeneutics is Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who defined hermeneutics as 'the art of avoiding misunderstandings' (quoted in Gadamer, 2012, p.185), Heidegger, a major figure in the field of hermeneutics, explored the meaning encapsulated in the question 'What does it mean to be?' (Gelven, 1989), and Gadamer (2012) introduced the concept of 'horizons of understanding', which he explains as expressing 'the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have' (p.304). This 'superior breadth of vision' not only provides a wider context for understanding but also enables the 'hermeneutic circle' which refers to the movement back and forth between the overall interpretation of a text and significant aspects of its parts, in the process of interpretation

[20] Hermeneutics refers to the endeavour of interpretation developed in the Middle Ages by Church scholars aiming to reveal the original meaning of sacred texts, specifically the Bible.

(Dreyfuss, 1991). Addressing the hermeneutic circle, I looked to analyse the individual comments of interviewees in the light of the whole of their stance, which they communicated in response to the questions I was asking – how they viewed themselves and their work with clients against their beliefs about what happens after death.

IPA is a constructivist–interpretive method; it recognises that the researcher's values and lived experiences cannot be divorced from the research process. The researcher needs to be aware of his/her beliefs and values but not eliminate them (Ponterotto, 2005). I am aware that my ontology, epistemology and worldview were influential in my interaction with participants as they developed their thoughts in the interviews.

IPA seeks to explore participants' understanding of their own experience and in addition, the researcher explicates his/her own understanding of that understanding, thus establishing a double hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Although the participant is central, the researcher (as instrument) plays a significant part in the process and his/her thoughts and feelings are legitimate components of this particular method (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). For this purpose, reflexivity is an integral aspect of IPA, and journaling is a way of recording those reflections throughout the process.

IPA is an idiographic method which focuses on detailed characteristics of individual participants and seeks to understand what the experience of

the particular participant is like. Sample numbers are typically small and as homogeneous as possible (Smith et al., 2009). In this case, because the choice of IPA as a method was an afterthought, I had a larger sample (12) than would have been usual in this kind of design. Nevertheless, the homogeneity of the sample was guaranteed as the participants adhered strictly to the criteria for participation.

Although I used NVivo to analyse the thematic aspect of this research, for the IPA the analysis was carried out by hand, which I found allowed me to get a better 'feel' for the themes I identified. I kept the idiographic aspect of the method very much in mind as I analysed each interview separately.

3.8.5.3. Listening to and transcribing the interviews

The transcriptions of the interviews were done by me and carried out as soon after the interviews as I could. I listened to the individual interviews a couple of times to emerge myself in the atmosphere as I remembered it and then conducted the transcription immediately after. I recorded the nuances of the communications (such as hesitations, laughter and silences) as accurately as possible in the transcriptions. It was only when I had completed all 12 transcriptions and had them member-checked, that I started the analysis.

3.9. Analysis

3.9.1. Procedure

I printed the transcripts with 1.5 line spacing and with large margins on both sides of the page. I then read the first transcript several times. I found that it was when I stopped looking for pointers I expected to find and read the transcripts with an open mind that I was able to register the significant passages. When I felt ready to start making notes, I underlined texts that I felt were of interest and wrote comments in the right-hand margin. These were sometimes words or phrases that helped me to capture the participant's world or reaction to the thought or idea s/he was addressing at the time. At this stage I was not engaging in deep interpretation, as described by Smith et al. (2009). I wanted to keep an open mind and remain as close as possible to the phenomenological aspect of the approach.

3.9.1.1. Higher level note-making

After the first phase of the procedure, I went back to the same transcript and started making more in-depth notes. These would sometimes be associated with the comments I had made, and sometimes something in the text would feel more deeply important and I would add to the comments. I was engaging more closely with the data and focusing on different aspects of the text – the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual parts of the IPA approach.

3.9.1.1.1 Descriptive

These were notes simply descriptive of words or phrases used by the participant. Sometimes they were summaries, using my words to describe theirs.

3.9.1.1.2 Linguistic

These notes identified what I felt may have been significant in the way a participant articulated something in the interview. Particularly due to the nature of the subject being explored, I noted particular words which felt strange or alien to the topic, and particular expressions and emphases used.

3.9.1.1.3 Conceptual

In this category fall those comments which involve a deeper level of interpretation. These at times involve a questioning stance towards the text and there is an element of personal reflection included (Smith et al., 2009, p.89). This level of coding frequently led me to focus in and out of the data, reflecting on the interview as a whole in the light of the particular passage, and the particular passage in the light of the interview as a whole; the hermeneutic circle. I was also aware in my analysis of making sense of the way particular participants made sense of the topic in question; the double hermeneutic.

3.9.1.2. Developing emergent themes

Still working on the first transcript, once I had completed the notation stage I shifted to working analytically with the notes, rather than with the transcript itself, whilst still keeping the participant's stance in the interview in mind. Smith et al. (2009) point out that as the analyst becomes closely involved with the lived experience of the participants, so this stage of the analysis involved more of me, in the way that I chose what for me felt relevant in the participant's perspectives and articulations. The emergent themes usually take the form of a succinct statement which captures or reflects an understanding. They represent the psychological essence of the passage, being both abstract enough to be conceptual and particular enough to be representative. The emergent themes were placed in the left-hand margin of the transcript.

3.9.1.3. Developing subordinate themes

The first transcript I analysed was of the last interview, by which time I felt that what I had learned from all the previous interviews gave me a standard against which to look at the transcripts. Once the first transcript had been analysed, I moved on to the next participant; keeping the idiographic principle of IPA in mind, I had an open mind, looking for new themes with each new transcript I analysed. For each transcript I repeated the same steps as for the first analysis and noted the emergent themes in the same way. At all stages I evaluated the statements in the text in an in–out movement between the whole and parts of the

transcript, aware of the hermeneutic circle and bearing in mind the double hermeneutic of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Once this was complete, I printed all the emergent themes out with plenty of space between them and cut them out. I then looked for the 'magnetic effect' existing between the themes as suggested by Smith et al (2009, p.96) in order to create the subordinate themes. I went through the emergent themes I had cut out one by one and grouped all those which I felt 'belonged' together. This was a time-consuming task as, with a lot of patience, I arranged and rearranged the themes until I was happy that they did indeed belong together, thus creating a subordinate theme. Some subordinate themes had many comments, others less. However, once I had finished this exercise, I was happy that the subordinate themes represented well my analysis of the emergent themes that I had constructed from the interviews.

The exercise yielded a total of 11 subordinate themes which I could then easily group into three superordinate themes.

3.9.1.4. Developing superordinate themes

Three superordinate themes were developed. The first has three subordinate themes, the second also has three and the third has five. They are shown in Chapter 4.

3.10. Validity in IPA

Validity is an important aspect of qualitative research and subjectivity is, according to Morrow (2005), a critical guide for researchers. With this in mind, I have made my implicit bias clear in my introduction to this thesis. I also kept a self-reflective journal throughout the study, which I consulted at various stages during the analytical stage of the process. Reflexivity, according to Rennie (2004 in Morrow, 2005), is 'self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness' (p.254). Thoughts I had as the process evolved were helpful when I engaged in the double hermeneutic, and they also helped to keep my own biases as clear as possible.

Aware of the importance of quality control in transcriptions (Poland, 1995), I transcribed the interviews myself, making sure I recorded them verbatim, and included all non-verbal communication, which was helpful in the interpretation of the data.

Participant checking is an aspect of credibility (Morrow, 2005) that is part of the guidelines for quality standards in qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 2010), so I sent the transcripts to each participant for their verification and endorsement. All participants duly replied confirming the transcripts to have been congruent with what had been expressed in the interviews.

3.11. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was given by the Ethics Committee of the University of Chester. I was aware, as Haverkamp (2005) points out, that researchers' and therapists' roles can be similar: Haverkamp refers to the codes of ethics of the professional associations (in her case the American Psychological Association) as sources of guidance in the field of ethics. Following her example, I looked at the UKCP (United Kingdom for Counselling and Psychotherapy) and BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) codes of ethics to reassure myself that I would be covering all the ethical pitfalls in my research. Furthermore, Haverkamp also points to trustworthiness as 'important for navigating the expanded scope of researcher and participant roles in qualitative research as well as the greater level and depth of interaction that characterizes these research relationships' (p.151). Such a fiduciary relationship is also at the heart of the profession of psychotherapy, which alerted me to the potential danger of the blurring of boundaries between my role as researcher and my role as therapist (Wertz, 2005). In the event, such blurring did not occur as, on the one hand, during the interviews I remained mindful of my role as a researcher by keeping the focus closely on topics related to the research question, and, on the other hand, the participants – therapists themselves – did not open themselves up to the role of clients.

Before committing to participate, the participants were given an information sheet in which the study was explained in as much detail as

possible and the participation criteria were listed. They were told that their names and identities would remain anonymous and that they could withdraw at any time up to the beginning of the analysis. Although I felt it was unlikely to happen, they were also told that should the interview bring up emotional or negative issues, I would provide a list of practitioners in their area. They signed a consent form on the day of the interview.

3.12. Reflections

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of the work (Aponte & Winter, 2013, Frost, 2016, Lum, 2002, Rowan & Jacobs, 2002) in the same way that, in therapy, the therapist is the instrument of that process. Furthermore, I was also aware of the importance of the subject to me, in terms of the years it has been incubating and the thinking I have put into it.

In my own work, I have had experiences of clients bringing issues of personal mortality to therapy. Sometimes the question emerges fully-formed and freely articulated, leading to an exploration of their beliefs and the fears associated with them. On other occasions, the exploration leads to the identification of fears lurking behind panic attacks, phobias and other anxieties, and this identification is met with surprise by the clients; although they acknowledge the fears, clients are not always consciously aware that they may be at the root of those issues. Another set of experiences has also led to the exploration of

clients' post-mortem ideas – that of paranormal experiences. One client told me of objects which moved in her flat, which she attributed to actions by her dead mother's spirit. She did not find it easy to tell me this, and only did so when she became convinced that I had an open mind. With another client who was newly pregnant, I had the distinct feeling that her dead mother-in-law was present in the room, and I sensed profound gratitude for this new baby. I felt able to tell the client and could observe how touched she was.

Aware that my own experiences and my interests might influence the research, I was careful to bracket off my pre-existing knowledge and have an open mind during the interviews by being fully attentive and present in the moment. During the data analysis stages, I was also careful to maintain as open a mind as possible as I familiarised myself with the transcripts and constructed the themes.

Post-mortem consciousness is not a topic that is currently widely discussed in the profession. For this reason I felt impelled to explore it by means of a PhD in order that my contribution might have an impact.

My original intention was to restrict the study to exploring the views of spiritually informed psychotherapists and how their views of what happens after death impact their work with clients. In the early process of thinking about undertaking this research, however, I became aware that the topic of post-mortem consciousness was often met with covert

cynical dismissal, or even disbelief, by people with whom I shared my ideas and who did not know my worldview. Because of my experiences with clients in my own work as a therapist, as explained in Chapter 1, I found it useful to investigate the views of anonymous colleagues in a survey to discover their views, as background information to the semi-structured, in-depth interviews with spiritual therapists. I hoped to have a healthy number of replies to the online survey and was disappointed with the initial low level of responses. My disappointment was many times multiplied by the fact that I found it so difficult to get the survey disseminated. This led me to leave the survey open for over two years. I feel the lack of replies was connected in some way with those difficulties. The 103 replies achieved, however, provided some interesting results.

I have reflected on the nature of the people who answered the survey and have questions to which, alas, there are no answers, such as what motivated therapists who do not have a belief in life after death to complete a survey on this particular question? Even though I am grateful that they did, I am aware that further research would be useful to understand the profile of the profession in relation to this question. How many people looked at the research and passed it by? What reflections might people who came across the research (whether they did or not complete it) have been left with?

With regard to the interviews, I found that the participants were deeply engaged in the subject, which I found interesting and pleasing. I identified almost a need to talk about it on their part, which had the feel

of a confession. It was as if being free to talk about their spirituality, their beliefs in life after death and their paranormal experiences expressed a limitation which for them felt constraining. I was also interested to note the varying degrees of certainty or uncertainty regarding life after death expressed by the participants. This felt congruent with their approach to the mystery of existence.

Reflecting back on the interviews, I can see that I could, at times, have probed certain comments further or asked more questions to achieve richer data. However, despite these shortcomings, the data achieved make an interesting start to the investigation of whether beliefs in post-mortem consciousness held by therapists, influence their work with clients.

Aware that qualitative research stands or falls on the strength of its validity, I made sure to meticulously observe the parametres of trustworthiness both in the thematic analysis of the survey and the IPA analysis of the interviews data. I immersed myself in the data to make sure I understood the meaning conveyed in both sets. In describing the thematic analysis step by step I ensured conformity with the parametres of transferability, dependability and also of confirmability, so as to enable the reader to clearly follow the process and confirm it as valid. I have also kept the records of the raw data, my notes and developed a reflexive journal to which I referred to regularly.

For the IPA part of the analysis immersion in the data from the interviews was particularly interesting as making sense of participants' understanding of their experience was especially informative. Validity was further ensured as I transcribed the interviews myself and sought confirmation from each participant that the transcription was true to their memory of the interview.

Some of the comments on the survey were gratifyingly relevant to, and supportive of, the study and many of the interviewees expressed their appreciation for the rare opportunity to think and talk about their views on the subject of post-mortem consciousness. Both these responses strengthened my sense that I am making an important contribution to the profession of counselling and psychotherapy.

3.13. Conclusion

This chapter described the methodology used in this study and how it was chosen on the basis of my worldview. It provided a rationale for the methodology's employment in relation to the research focus. It described the mixed-methods research design and all the stages of data gathering and analysis of both the survey and the semi-structured interviews. It provided thick description of the process to demonstrate the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

The next chapter will set out the findings of the survey.

Chapter 4 - Survey Findings

4.1. Overview

This chapter will describe the findings from the online survey, in which 103 people took part. Some of these data were analysed quantitatively, and the three open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively. The qualitative part was analysed thematically in two stages: first inductively to allow the raw data to 'speak', and secondly deductively to identify the views of a particular section of the sample.

4.2. Demographics

The demographic information showed that almost 72.8% of the respondents were over 50 years old (Figure 6).

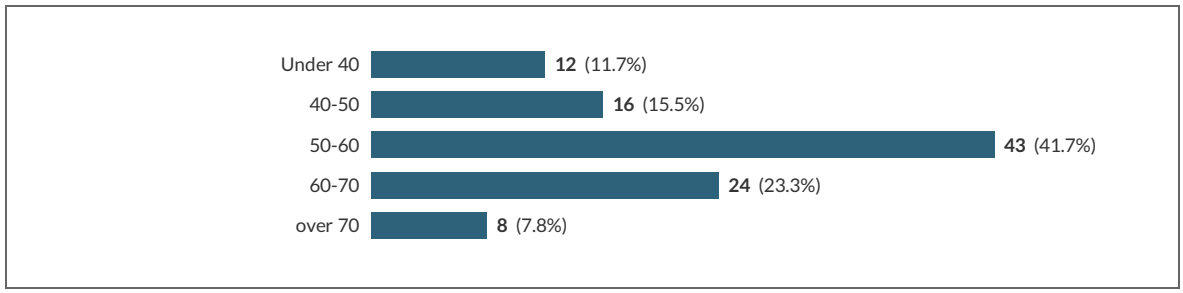

Figure 3 – Age distribution of participants

Almost 80% were women (Figure 7).

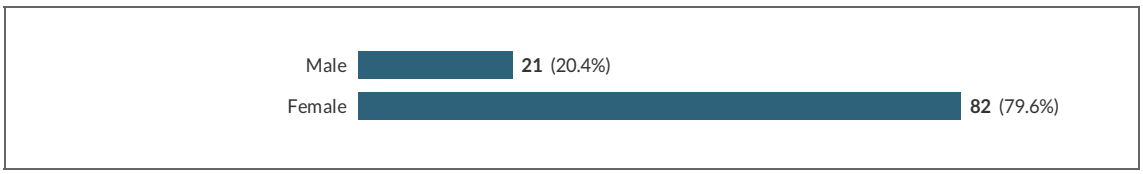

Figure 4 – Sex distribution of participants

In terms of their professional orientation, almost 15% described this as psychoanalytic or psychodynamic, and none were cognitive-behavioural therapists. The main orientation was humanistic/integrative at 35%, and 30% described themselves as 'other', to include systemic, hypnotherapy and existential approaches (Figure 8).

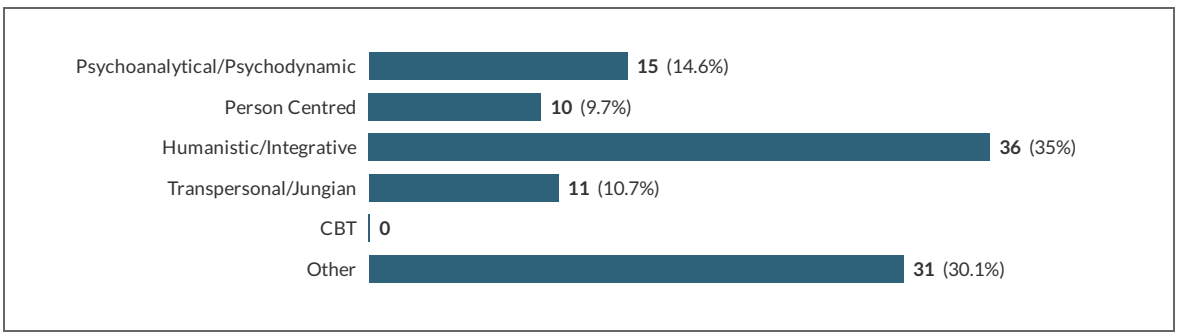

Figure 5 – Professional distribution of all participants.

The religious affiliation of the sample shows that just over 22% described themselves as Christian, 30% as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), and 30% as having no religion (Figure 9).

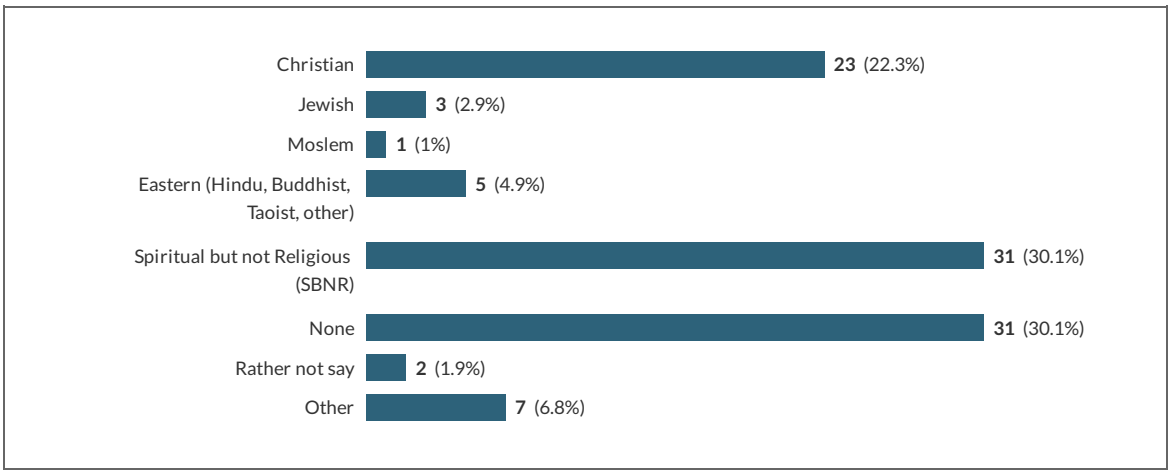

Figure 6 – Religious affiliation of all participants

In response to question 5, 'Do you believe in life or some kind of conscious experience after death?', 52.4% said 'yes', 28.2 % said 'no' and 19.4%, 'don't know (Figure 10). For practical reasons, I shall call 'believers', people who replied 'yes, 'non-believers', people who replied 'no', and 'don't knows', people who replied 'don't know' to question 5 (Figure 10).

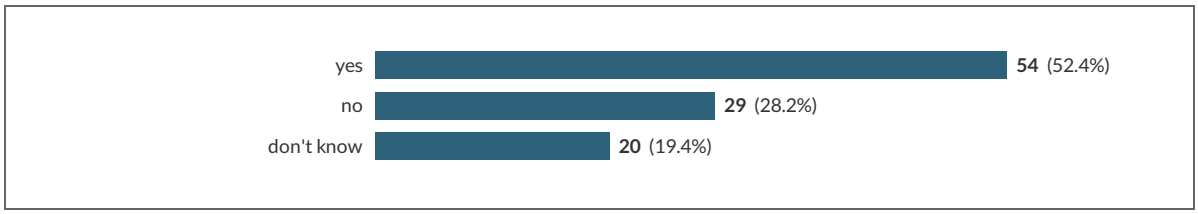

Figure 7 – Belief in post-mortem consciousness

Of the people who believe in some kind of life after death, only 26.2% had a firm belief that identity does *not* survive death. (Figure 11)

Figure 8 – Belief in survival of identity (self-recognition)

These statistics paint an interesting picture indicating that the participants who believe that identity survives may consequently be guided in their actions by the belief that these will influence their afterlife in some way. They may also have beliefs in life before birth, although this question was not asked. This perspective is of potential interest to the work of psychotherapy, because of the possibility of karmic ideas as context for people's patterns and challenges, in terms of both pre-birth and post-death existences.

Out of the total 103 participants, almost 77% confirmed that these questions influence the way they live their lives (Figure 12).

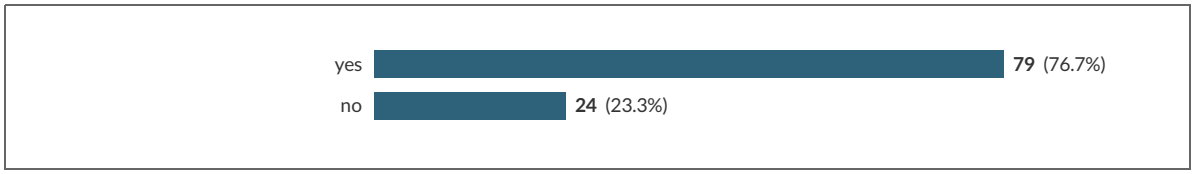

Figure 9 – Responses on post-mortem consciousness influencing life

Furthermore almost 70% confirmed that these questions influence their work with clients (Figure 13).

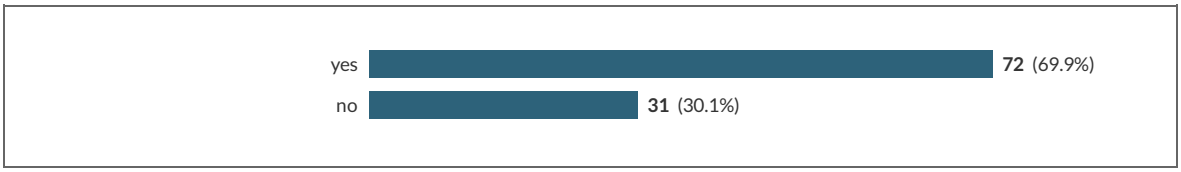

Figure 10 – Responses on post-mortem consciousness influencing work with clients

Question 5, 'Do you believe in some kind of conscious experience after death?' was the pivotal question in this survey.

4.3. Free-text fields

As mentioned in Section 3.6.2. above, the survey allowed for people to expand on their views and offer comments on three questions. The first question asked was 'Do these questions have an influence in the way you live your life?'. The second asked 'Do these questions have an influence in the way you work with clients?'. The third question invited final comments and observations.

4.4. Do these questions have an influence in the way you live your life?

Using thematic analysis inductively, a number of comments were identified which were then grouped into the following themes:

- meaning/hope;
- accountability/responsibility;
- life as a learning opportunity;
- existence as a mystery;
- anxiety;
- miscellaneous.

4.4.1. Meaning/hope

The most frequently identified concept was that of meaning/hope. Out of the 73 comments registered, 47% were on this concept.

This person spelt it out:

> *I believe in life after death without question. It fills my life with hope and I know after my death my consciousness will continue.*

Some participants trivialised problems of life in comparison to the notion of eternity, such as in the following quote:

> *Most temporary problems seem trivial when considered in the context of eternity.*

Another linked the concept of post-mortem consciousness to bringing meaning to life as lived:

> *It gives life meaning. Knowing that life is eternal and that the material world is only a small fraction of the Universe, puts things in perspective.*

For some it was comforting to have hope for consciousness after death:

> *I find comfort in the fact that I know consciousness continues after death, it helps me relax in this life and relax about death as the final curtain because I do not believe it is.*

Another participant made the connection between consciousness as an underlying reality and religious practice. S/he said:

> *I do think my belief that consciousness transcends the individual self and knowing that in some way, we participate in the eternal, increases my enthusiasm for religious practices such as meditation. I want to understand what the mystics of many faiths – the Buddha, Meister Eckhart, Rumi – have understood.*

These comments convey an understanding of life within a bigger picture and the fact that some people, the mystics of many faiths, have achieved a particular understanding about it.

The questions about what happens after death were also understood as meaningful by people who do not believe in such survival. This person said:

> *By living an ethical and truthful life NOW, appreciating the beauty and complexity of the world. Having an end makes it sad but sweeter.*

The world is appreciated as complex and beautiful and our response must be living authentically and ethically in order to enjoy the wonders of life at every moment. His/her comment that it makes the end sad but sweeter reflects a coming to terms with the idea of finality.

Another participant sees each day as a gift:

> *My belief that this life 'is it' – and my awareness of how finite (and precious) life is, supports me to try and live each day meaningfully with humbleness and to 'make every day count'.*

For this participant facing the finality of death is foregrounded, and it is intimated that the preciousness in life lies with living meaningfully with humbleness, focusing on what we can know (i.e., the here and now).

4.4.2. Accountability/responsibility

The next most frequently mentioned concept was accountability/responsibility. These replies reflect an awareness that we are responsible in life for our choices and their consequences. One person said:

> *I think there is something about accountability – to ourselves and to our fellow humans – in the way we live our lives, in the collective unconscious. Or maybe I would like there to be …*

The last sentence, 'or maybe I would like there to be', betrays a doubt as to whether fundamental moral and ethical principles exist according to which life ought to be lived within the bigger context.

Referring to such a framework of principles, another person said:

> *I feel I will be held accountable for the choices I make at the end of my life as well as throughout it.*

And, in a concise way, this comment conveys the same thing:

> *You reap what you sow!*

Reflecting the judgement of an inner compass, this participant said:

> *I think it's important to make the best we can of ourselves and to assist others, respect the world we live in and try to learn to experience and share creative love as much as we are able in this life, whatever may lie beyond.*

Reflecting the maturity of adults who have worked on themselves as part of the process of becoming a counsellor or psychotherapist, these participants stressed that responsibility and accountability are part of the 'package' of being a grown-up human being. Other respondents voiced the idea that the purpose of life is to learn lessons.

4.4.3. Life as a learning opportunity

Exploring what might be the purpose of life, some people reflected in different ways on how they had tried to gain knowledge in order to improve themselves. For example, this person said:

> *They* [beliefs in life after death] *inform my decision in trying to live a life of good value, and trying to be the best version of who I can be, learn lessons to evolve.*

The context of the evolution that this person alluded to, is not clear. It may be through his/her life or it could involve future lives. Most of the other comments involved the idea of lessons learned with a view to future lives. For instance, this person said:

> *I believe Life is for learning and that we take that learning on with us when our physical bodies are no longer here.*

One other comment was:

> *I believe that there is somehow a bigger design for each individual perhaps to be carried out through more than one life, we may call it Karma.*

Reincarnation as a model for existence is used to bring meaning to an understanding and perhaps even acceptance of the vicissitudes of life, as this person explained:

> *My belief that my life is just the current manifestation of many other incarnations, shapes my attitude towards obstacles and challenges. It helps me understand life as an ongoing spiritual learning process.*

The belief in reincarnation expressed here calls upon the individual to face up to negative patterns which show up as obstacles and challenges, in order to master them as part of an ongoing spiritual progression.

Some people expressed an attitude of awe and unknowing in relation to questions about what happens after death.

4.4.4. Existence as a mystery

The mystery of existence was expressed as respect and humility. One person said:

> *I cannot say I have certainty of consciousness surviving death. It is a mystery I am open to. Whether this life or the next, I feel there is much more than we can know and measure and I am open to that. I do live with the notion that what we do in this life has meaning and consequence and affects not only our present time and future but also that of others.*

A sense of awe in the face of the unknown was expressed almost with delight by someone who conveyed a degree of excitement in his/her comment:

> *I love the mystery of not knowing for sure ... how can I? Nothing is certain in life or in death.*

Whereas this next person expresses his/her deeply felt interest in the human condition and addresses the mystery with deference, s/he talks

of having *experience* of different worlds and dimensions, indicating the possibility of having visited them in some way:

> *I experience life/death as mystery and have a profound curiosity and respect. My experience is of many dimensions and worlds in reality. That we die and are born again and again in everyday life as well as in lifespans and cycles.*

Living in and with the mystery of existence requires a degree of trust and surrender which these participants seem to show. However, not knowing can also be a source of great anxiety.

4.4.5. Anxiety

A few people talked about the anxiety that these issues cause. One person said:

> *It's something I worry about a lot, it's with me every day – does death mean the end of everything and if so, how can one live with that knowledge because it's a terrible thought!*

For some people the idea of the finality of life is difficult to accept and is a source of stress. How prevalent these fears are is an open question, but it is a relevant issue in the profession of psychotherapy. This person expressed the kind of anxiety which may well also be present, even if covertly, in the clients we see:

> *I hope there is life after death but not knowing for sure is stressful!*

From this other person, there was a comment about the inner tension between belief and desire:

> *I think if I believed I still had some consciousness after I die I would feel differently about now, about myself and other people, especially in context of feeling about present v future.*

These responses betraying anxiety underlie the importance of the topic of death and what may come after for us in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy.

4.4.6. Miscellaneous

A few comments not included in the categories above flagged some interesting points. This following comment for example underlines the inhibitions around the topic of death:

> *People are happy to talk about birth but find death difficult, yet it is in the same life cycle.*

That insight is at a rational level easy to understand, but at an emotional level perhaps not so easy to process.

Another person said:

> *I am not aware yet how they influence me, but I am aware that these beliefs are in my thoughts* [*and*] *have some kind of impact of who I am and how I act.*

The use of the word 'yet' is interesting, as it points to some future when the impact of these questions will be better understood. Yet, there is an intuition that they are important.

The following was a somewhat cryptic comment:

Liberating on one hand, uncontainable on the other.

Speculating on the meaning of this comment, I would say that 'liberating' may refer to these questions being meaningful, and 'uncontainable' may indicate the potential for exploration in the context of the mystery of existence.

4.5. Do these questions have an influence in the way you work with clients?

This question was the second free-text field in the survey and 67 out of the total of 103 respondents left comments. As mentioned above, 69.9% percent of the people who participated in the survey confirmed that these questions do indeed influence the way they work with clients. This is a high percentage considering that 52,4% believe in life after death, 28.2% do not and the 'don't knows' make up 19.4%.

The themes identified in the responses left to this question were:

- client awareness;
- practitioner's awareness
- spiritual awareness;

- karmic awareness;
- secular awareness;
- interesting reflections.

4.5.1. Client awareness

By client awareness, I mean being 'client-centred'. An example of client awareness is this comment:

> *I respect whatever faith or none that a client may have and will work with and within their personal belief system.*

Another comment stated:

> *I am available to the totality of clients' experience, including dreams, the irrational. I pick up on embedded images and hints as well as overt beliefs, look at how beliefs and experience can open or close. I give space for psyche/ soul to be seen and heard.*

This person conveys an openness and readiness to engage with clients' issues at any level. However, I wonder whether the participant really meant 'irrational' or whether what was meant was 'non-rational', as expressions of the psyche and soul are non-rational but not irrational. This slight difference in terminology represents, however, a very big difference in interpretation in the work.

There was also this comment from someone who said:

Death anxiety and what happens after death is something I'm conscious many clients struggle with too. I try to stay open to them and their struggle as I stay open to my own.

This is a truly beautiful way of expressing an awareness of how difficult a subject this is in the context of the cooperative nature of the dyadic work in therapy.

Hearing the client without judgement was the most popular topic which participants mentioned in their responses. Associated with this attitude is awareness of how our beliefs as practitioners shine through in our work.

4.5.2. Practitioners' transparency

A number of participants voiced awareness that their transparency as an authentic practitioner automatically informs their work with clients. One person said:

As I believe that everything I believe, say or do influences how I work, I imagine this does too.

Another person said:

Even though I strongly believe that my 'truth' is one of many. It is bound to express itself in what I respond to, and how.

And there was this reflective comment:

I cannot help but bracket my belief system. I am sure though that non-verbally I communicate something of this however much I try to work to overcome the bias and never to self-disclose.

This person communicated their effort to be as neutral as possible but also showed an awareness that his/her tendencies and beliefs will necessarily shine through the work.

Peeling the onion of beliefs relevant to this research and how they affect the work with clients, some respondents mentioned spirituality.

4.5.3. Spiritual awareness

Awareness of spirituality in the work was pointed to as important by this person, who said:

It's easy to ignore the religious and spiritual dimension of people's lives. It reminds me how important and fundamental they are.

Another person was more specific in how the spiritual framework can influence a person. S/he said:

I primarily see clients who describe themselves as Christian. I have had clients who had suicidal thoughts but felt God wouldn't approve of them committing suicide. They saw their faith as a protective factor. They may be more willing to commit suicide if they believe that is the end.

A couple of people left comments indicating their intimate connection with the transcendental. One of them said:

> *I am guided by Spirit.*

And the other said:

> *I often ask for Spirit help (mentally).*

Spiritual awareness expresses itself through a spiritual narrative and one of these includes the idea of this life being part of a bigger journey of spiritual development which takes place in sequential lives. The organising principle of such a journey is 'karma'.

4.5.4. Karmic awareness

A karmic perspective in the work brings focus to an existence prior to birth and one after death. A few people pointed to this awareness and one person said:

> *I hold in mind that the origins of their presenting issues and interpersonal dynamics may lie outside this current life. It pushes me towards encouraging clients to see challenges as opportunities to learn lessons and grow spiritually.*

Another comment was:

> *Being authentically open to those clients who feel they are working out karmic issues.*

This perspective entails working with clients in a way which is very different from the way therapists who are informed by secular beliefs will approach clients' issues around death.

4.5.5. Secular awareness

Amongst the more secular comments, the following were found:

> *These questions impact on how we work towards endings; challenging clients to think of an ending that is final.*

This response indicates certainty about the finality of life which requires the work to be aimed at an acceptance of mortality as final.

Another person took a more philosophical stance:

> *Accepting that living with and in uncertainty is unsettling for all of us. There is no 'cure' for existential anxiety and no cure for stress. Stress=Life, No stress=Death.*

What at face value could be seen as a fairly simplistic observation, this comment reflects the existential truism that stress is part of life.

Because of the nature of the questions, some people left some interesting observations.

4.5.6. Interesting reflections

One person showed his/her interest in what it means to be human by saying:

It helps me to value the depth of patterns in human behaviour and confirms the belief that self-understanding is a fundamental part of life.

Another person left a comment which, although probably well meaning, betrays a view which may translate negatively in the work with clients. S/he said:

I try to be sensitive to the needs of committed believers who are vulnerable and dependent on their beliefs.

Other interesting comments included the following:

Well, I would find psychotherapy pretty pointless if this ephemeral life was all there was, especially as rejection of the concept of life after death generally goes along with a materialistic, reductionist view of the mind being the brain and the brain being a machine.

This next participant's strong feelings may be an example of a point of view regarding the larger context in which human life is seen:

All therapists have a moral and ethical obligation to consider this subject in relation to their clinical practice and the clients' views on spirituality.

'Obligation' is an interesting choice of word to point to our moral and ethical responsibilities. This participant admonishes us to be morally

open to clients for whom the questions and the answers reside more within a spiritual rather than a psychological domain.
Another person conveyed in the following statement his/her distress in relation to the finality of his/her life and the expectation that this is shared with the client. S/he said:

It helps me cope with our mutual despair.

This next statement transmits a quiet sense of waiting for clarity:

I can't articulate that yet. Maybe later.

Sections 4.4 and 4.5 looked at the data as analysed inductively, allowing the themes to be constructed from all the comments in the three open-ended questions. It did not separate 'believers' from 'non-believers' and thus gave an overview of the comments.

4.6. Another way of cutting this cake

Because of the nature of this research and my interest in finding out how beliefs in what happens after death impact the participants' lives and their work with clients, I found it relevant to look specifically at comments respondents left in the free-text fields, according to their beliefs in life after death.

This is the deductive part of the analysis of this survey. I fixed or prioritised question 5, ('Do you believe in some kind of conscious

experience after death?') and analysed the respondents' comments left in the three free-text fields, in relation to whether they answered 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know' to this question. In other words, I analysed the replies to the three open-ended fields – 'Do these questions influence the way you live your life?' – 'Do these questions influence the way you work with clients?' and 'final comments and observations' – according to the classification of participants into 'believers', non-believers' and 'don't knows'. Some of the quotes below have already been mentioned in the section above but are used here within the emphasis on this particular context.

As a reminder, out of the total number of 103 respondents, 52.4% are 'believers', 28.2% are 'non-believers', and 19.4% are 'don't knows' in relation to post-mortem consciousness.

The age distribution of the people who believe in life after death in this survey shows that just over 72% were aged over 50 (Figure 14).

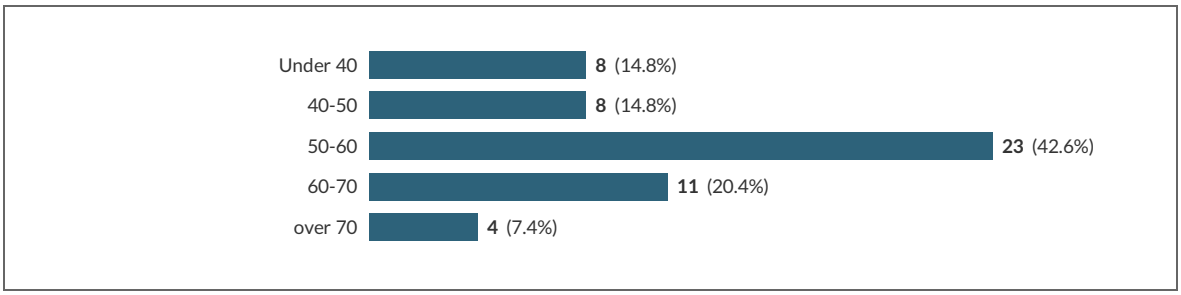

Figure 11 – Distribution of 'believers' by their age

This conforms with the interview participation criteria, where the lowest age required was 50. It also points to the fact that what happens after death is a subject to which people probably turn to more seriously towards their later years. One person who does not believe in life after death left the following comment:

> *Claudia this is a really interesting piece of research. I am very aware that my answers would have been very different at different periods of my life and times in my career. Many thanks.*

Just over 83% of 'believers' said these beliefs influence the way they live their lives (Figure 15).

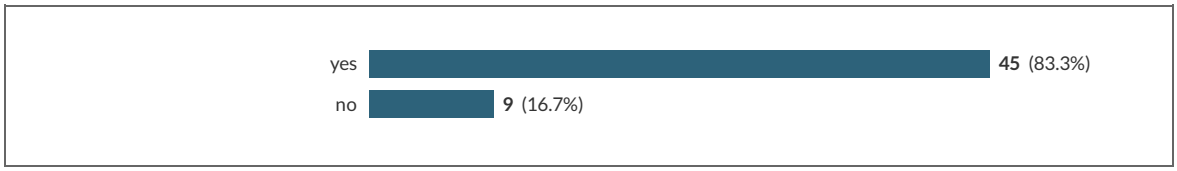

Figure 12 – Do questions on post-mortem consciousness influence the lives of 'believers'?

Furthermore, 63% confirmed these beliefs also influence the way they work with clients (Figure 16).

Figure 13 – Do questions on post-mortem consciousness influence the work of 'believers'?

With regard to professional orientation, Figure 17 shows the distribution of people who replied 'yes' to whether they believe in life after death (52.4%).

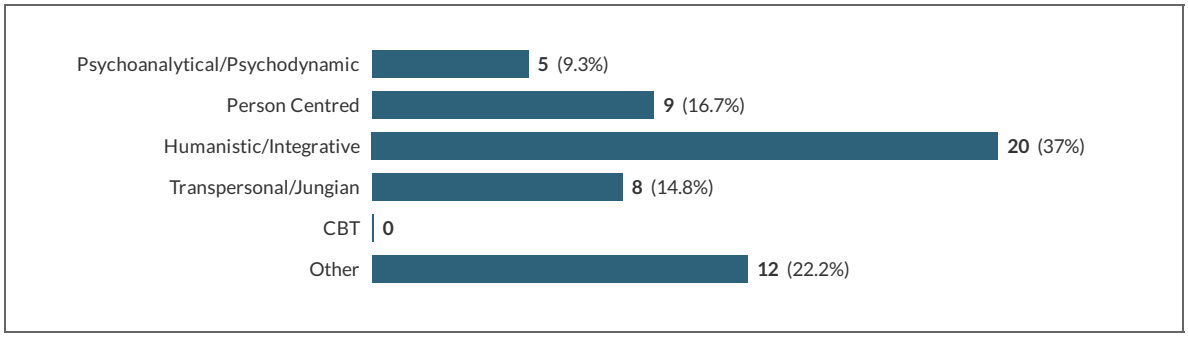

Figure 14 – Professional distribution of 'believers'

Compared with the total responses (see Figure 8 in section 4.2.), the analysis shows that 5 out of 15 of the psychoanalytical/psychodynamic respondents, 9 out of the 10 person-centred, 20 out of 36 of the humanistic/integrative respondents and 8 out of 10 of the Jungian/transpersonal respondents believe in life after death.

With regards to religious affiliation, the distribution of 'believers' is as shown in Figure 18:

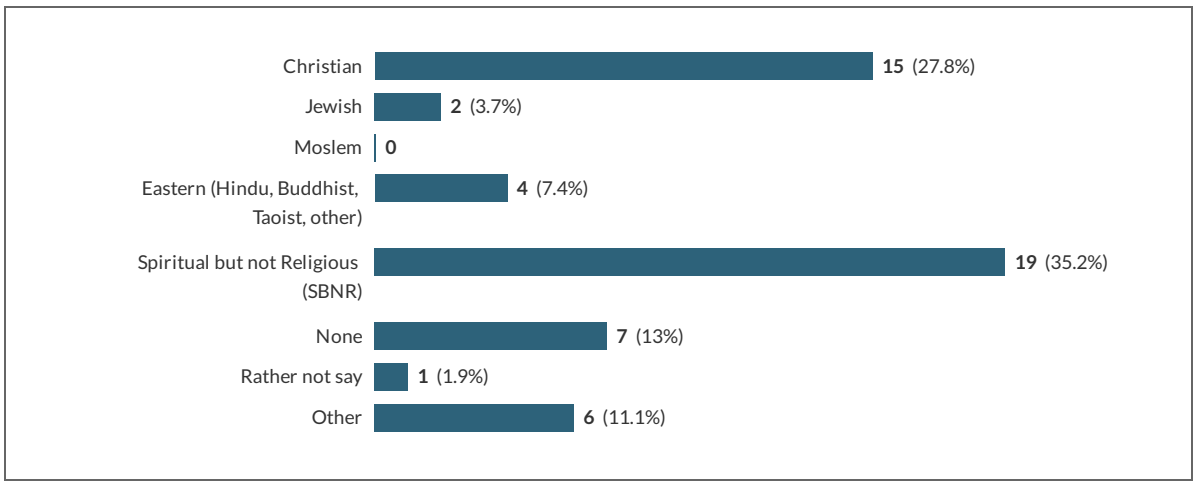

Figure 15 – Religious affiliation of 'believers'

This can be compared to the distribution of the total respondents (see Figure 9 in section 4.2.).

This shows that 15 out of 23 Christian respondents, 19 out of 30 SBNRs, 7 out of 30 participants who responded 'none' (to religion affiliation), and 6 out of 7 participants who responded 'other' (to religious affiliation) believe in life after death.

With regard to the belief in survival of identity – defined as self-recognition for the purpose of this study – out of the people who believe in some kind of conscious experience after death, just over 24% are negatively convinced (Figure 19).

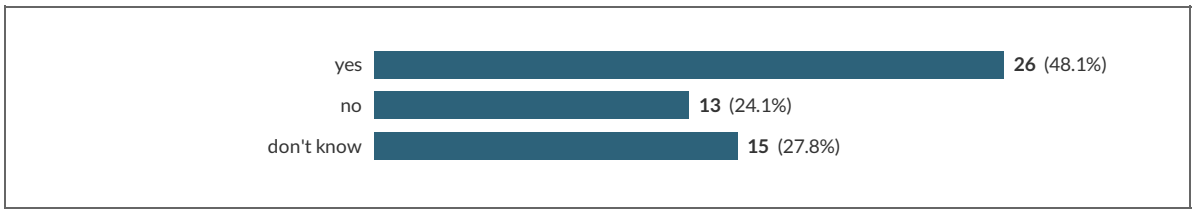

Figure 16 –- Belief in post-mortem survival of identity of 'believers'

For them, survival is not understood to mean self-recognition in terms of a future life and is likely to mean joining Cosmic Consciousness or God.

With respect to 'non-believers', their religious distribution in this study is shown in Figure 20.

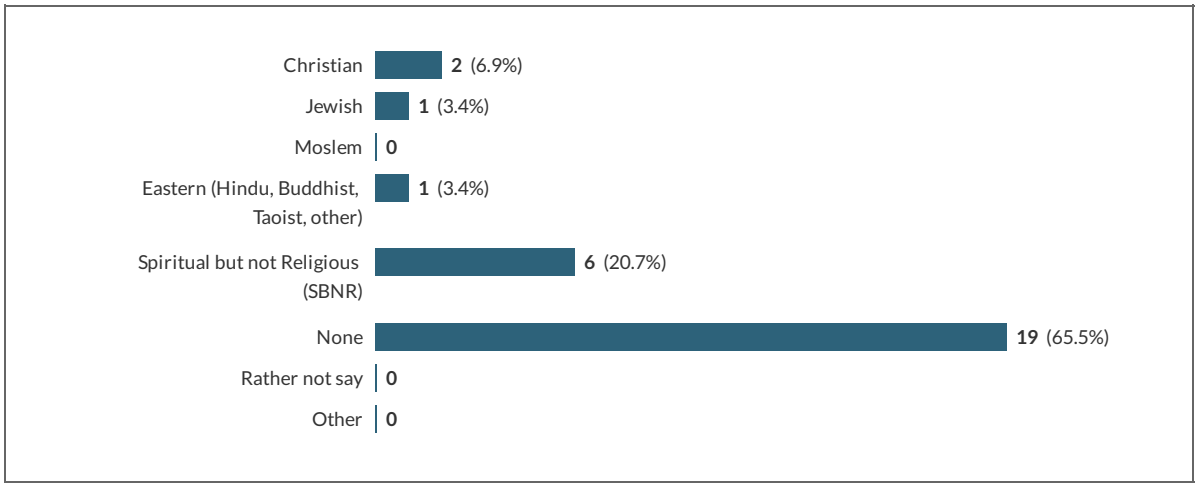

Figure 17 – Religious affiliation of 'non-believers'

The professional orientation of the same group is shown in Figure 21.

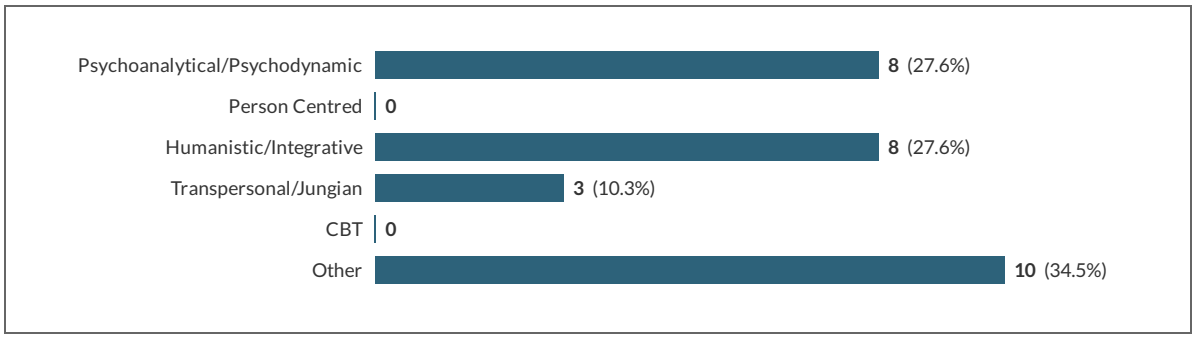

Figure 18 – Professional distribution of 'non-believers'

Of the people who *do not* believe in life after death, just over 62% confirmed that these questions about what happens after life influence the way they live their lives (Figure 22).

Figure 19 – Do questions on post-mortem consciousness influence the lives of 'non-believers'?

Furthermore, over 72% confirmed that these questions influence the way they work with clients (Figure 23).

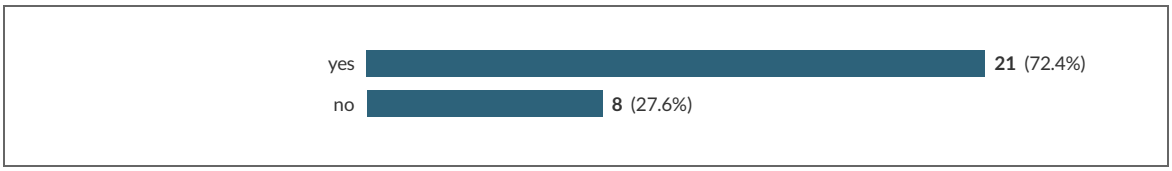

Figure 20 – Do questions on post-mortem consciousness influence the work with clients of 'non-believers'?

The thematic analysis of the free-text fields in the survey in relation to the participants' replies to question 5 – concerning their belief in post-mortem consciousness – revealed the following themes:

- living in the bigger picture;
- making most of the here and now;
- death anxiety;
- ethical considerations.

4.6.1. Living in the bigger picture

The 'believers' in this survey, expressed their belief of living in a reality bigger than what can be perceived by the physical senses.

One person said:

Knowing that life is eternal and that the material world is only a small fraction of the Universe, puts things in perspective.

Although a short sentence, this statement has many levels when unpacked: what does 'eternal' mean? Does it mean horizontal ongoing time or the vertical eternal moment? Is it within or outside time? And what does 'fraction' mean? Is it in space? Or some other ontological reality? And what of 'perspective'? Does it mean personal or collective? Does it mean that 'things are not necessarily what they appear to be'?

Another participant who replied 'no' to question 5, expresses an inconsistent attitude in his/her comment. Embracing the mystery of existence with enthusiasm. S/he said:

I love the mystery of not knowing for sure ... how can I? Nothing is certain in life or in death.

This next person expressed his/her thoughts as coming out of lived experience. S/he said:

I experience life/death as mystery and have a profound curiosity and respect. My experience is of many dimensions and worlds in reality. That we die and are born again and again in everyday life as well as in lifespans and cycles.

This is an intriguing statement, and an exploration with the person in an interview might have produced interesting data.

This person expressed one way of managing personal obstacles and difficulties within the context of the bigger picture:

> *It makes me aware that there's more to life than what we can see which makes the hardships of life more bearable.*

The question of life after death prompted a number of comments referring to reincarnation. The idea of living sequential temporal lives is one way of understanding the bigger picture in which life unfolds. Giving meaning to the narrative of reincarnation is the idea that actions in one life will affect subsequent lives. This would also work retrospectively, and issues encountered in this life may be a result of previous existences. The purpose of life, consequently, is to learn lessons within the context of spiritual evolution leading towards a betterment of the person. A number of people referred to this belief. For instance, this person said:

> *My belief that my life is just the current manifestation of many other incarnations shapes my attitude towards obstacles and challenges. It helps me understand life as an ongoing spiritual learning process.*

Another comment referred to the belief that the aim of life is positive evolution:

> *They* [beliefs in life after death] *inform my decision in trying to live a life of good value, and trying to be the best version of who I can be, learn lessons to evolve.*

This person mentioned the context in which s/he sees this life. Other people mentioned their concerns for future lives. This person, for instance, said:

> *They* [beliefs in life after death] *make me consider that I must take care with Karma or I will come back to relive that immaturity/failure to love.*

One other person mentioned the idea that our current life and its obstacles are a result of conscious choices made before incarnation. S/he said:

> *I believe in contracts made between souls before each incarnation, in which they agree to teach each other what each needs to learn in that lifetime.*

Within the profession of psychotherapy, the belief in karma and reincarnation can determine a context for the understanding of clients' issues, and the attitude of the practitioner. This person has this in mind in his/her work:

> *I hold in mind that the origins of their presenting issues and interpersonal dynamics may lie outside this current life. It pushes me towards encouraging clients to see challenges as opportunities to learn lessons and grow spiritually.*

Not many people left comments referring to their beliefs within the Christian framework of understanding. One comment was from a person

who, in a different way, also sees actions in this life affecting what comes next. S/he said:

> *As a Christian, I believe that my choices in life determine where I spend eternity after death. They also determine other aspects of the afterlife. 'Store up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt' and the idea that our thoughts and actions will be judged and those done for the right reasons will come out as gold.*

The subject of responsibility for actions in life also found its voice in the comments from the respondents. The idea of an afterlife finds its anchor easily in the concept of accountability. This person said:

> *I think there is something about accountability – to ourselves and to our fellow humans – in the way we live our lives, in the collective unconscious. Or maybe I would like there to be.*

His/her last comment – 'or maybe I would like there to be' – seems to point to a desire for judgement of life to be rooted in a moral/ethical perspective.

The other aspect of living in the bigger picture, came from some respondents who talked about their active interaction with the transcendental. One person said:

> *I firmly believe in the spiritual world and angels/spirits and that influences and guides my decisions, way of living and being.*

Another person just said:

> *I'm guided by Spirit.*

Another example came from this person, who said:

> *I'm clairaudient and 'hear' guidance/direction for myself and others.*

This active relationship with the transcendental also reveals itself in the work practitioners do with clients. This was articulated by this person:

> *I often ask for spirit help (mentally) Frequently clients share the same beliefs.*

Generally, spirituality – as a shorthand for considering existence within a picture which includes the transcendental – was seen as important for the work with clients by some participants. This person said:

> *I feel that spirituality of any kind is often an aspect of client work that is not discussed or disclosed but can be a significant part of what is happening for that client.*

4.6.2. Making the most of the here and now

Comments relating to this theme came mostly from 'non-believers'. The sense that having a focus on the present rather than the future, helps with finding meaning in the 'here' and 'now'. The expression used was 'making the most of it', which is colloquially much used and understood

but still, in this context, begs the question: what is 'it' and what is meant by 'most'? One person said:

> *Only have one short life. Helps me to make the most of it.*

Here the 'it' is clearly the one short life, but 'making the most of it' is not clear. It could mean 'being the best person you could be' or it could mean selfishly fulfilling personal desires. Could that be meant by this comment?

> *As I believe there is nothing after death I try to make the most of every day and not put pleasurable stuff off …*

Another person expanded on the same idea and said:

> *My belief that this life 'is it' – and my awareness of how finite (and precious) life is supports me to try and live each day meaningfully, with humbleness and to 'make every day count'.*

Here it is clear that the person had moral and ethical principles in mind.

Another comment encapsulates the idea, in a truly beautiful way:

> *By living an ethical and truthful life NOW, appreciating the beauty and complexity of the world. Having an end makes it sad but sweeter.*

An epistemological perspective, possibly tinged with a degree of irritation, was expressed with this comment:

> *Anchored in the here and now ... letting go of the desire for perfection, or some spiritual completion, letting go of divine retribution, spiritual mountain climbing, manifest in many spiritual systems ...*

The way respondents who do not believe in an afterlife expressed their ideas about working with clients shows their commitment to the here and now. This person said:

> [My beliefs] *impact on how we work towards endings: challenging clients to think of an ending that is final.*

Another aspect identified by the word 'anxiety' was recognised by some participants in relation to the question being asked in this study.

4.6.3. Death anxiety

Anxiety generated by the uncertainty of what death means, and what may come after death was expressed by some contributors to this survey. This person said:

> *It's something I worry about a lot, it's with me every day – does death mean the end of everything, and if so, how can one live with that knowledge, because it's a terrible thought.*

I found out that this person replied 'don't know' to question 5, and his/her anxiety is clear to see in this statement. Thinking about the subject every day, points to a heavy burden to carry.

This other person expressed a similar feeling:

I hope there is life after death, but not knowing for sure is stressful

On the other hand, this therapist, a 'believer', said in commenting on his/her work with clients that:

> *It* [belief in post-mortem consciousness] *helps me cope with our mutual despair.*

Even though this person is a 'believer', there is a covert acknowledgement of uncertainty which leads him/her to use the word 'despair'.

Another comment expanding on this topic was made by someone who acknowledges the struggle clients may have with what happens after death:

> *Death anxiety and what happens after death is something I'm conscious many clients struggle with too. I try to stay open to them and their struggle as I stay open to my own …*

This comment is unique in all the responses, acknowledging death anxiety and specifically anxiety about what may happen after death in the therapy room.

4.6.4. Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations which came through in almost all the comments in the open-ended question concerned the awareness of respondents that they work with what clients bring rather than through the lens of their own beliefs.

An example of this is this comment:

> *I hope to help all clients deal with their ideas of death through their own framework. Therefore, I do not push my views on anyone, whether they believe in an afterlife or not.*

This next comment goes further; the respondent states that their approach is to work with a client's issue at its face value, rather than using a 'suspicious'[21] lens of interpretation:

> *It involves me being open to whatever narrative a client may present linked to this in an 'as is' or phenomenological way, rather than explaining certain accounts away or rationalising these, for instance by interpreting them as defences.*

On the other hand, participants also pointed out that it is impossible to suspend one's beliefs completely in the therapy room. This participant said:

[21] Suspicious as in Ricoeur's 'empathic' or 'suspicious' framework of reference.

I cannot help but bracket my belief system. I am sure that non-verbally, I communicate something of this however much I try to work to overcome the bias and never to self-disclose.

This awareness was reported by another therapist in a reflective way:

I do not talk about my personal beliefs. They are expressed more in how I pay attention to my patients and how I respond to them, their and my struggle to being 'alive and connected' or not, and all that this entails.

This sensitive comment suggests this person has an expanded understanding of his/her role in the process of therapy.

4.7. Comments and observations

Because the survey was designed to be as short as possible, the free-text spaces were included to give participants the option to expand on their thoughts and replies. The last space was an open question and invited people to leave their comments and observations. Out of the 103 participants, 50 people left comments.

One of the most interesting (for me) comments left was the following:

My views have slowly evolved over time, both as a result of experience and through study. I have been struck by how much bona fide material is available suggestive of consciousness surviving in some form.

Traditionally psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis in particular, has tended to be dismissive of what Freud termed 'the occult'. In my original training there was no reference to 'anomalous

experience', not even as an area of apparently valid human experience. Similarly when being inducted as a Cruse volunteer and later as a supervisor there was no reference to this. I found this astonishing for regardless of their own point of view I would have thought that practitioners should be prepared for clients to bring anomalous or so-called paranormal experiences since these are by no means uncommon round bereavement.

Pointing out the existence of bona fide material suggestive of the survival of consciousness and, in this context, noting the shortcomings of the profession in not including this important aspect of human experience feels very relevant to this research.

Another comment which goes to the core of this research was this:

I agree this should be researched further, as the underlying feelings are there, whether we talk about it or not …

The recognition that the underlying feelings are there, whether we talk about them or not is an important insight into its importance for the profession of counselling and psychotherapy, as is the acknowledgement of the need for research in this area.

Someone else pointed to one of the potential reasons why clients may not bring their anxiety about death and what may come after into therapy. S/he said:

I believe that many of the difficulties that clients bring to counselling are exacerbated by the limitations of a contemporary materialistic world view in Western culture.

I see this as an important insight, which identifies the contemporary materialistic worldview in the Western culture as significant for leaving little room for the exploration of spiritual realities, including the possibility of life after death or paranormal experiences. This may indeed create difficulties for clients who have personal experiences that validate their beliefs.

4.8. Miscellaneous comments

A number of comments pointed out some shortcomings of the survey. This person said:

> *It is disappointing that the survey questions have eurocentric cisgender assumptions and exclude transgender and non-binary people from taking part, especially given that transgender people are researched as being more inclined towards consideration of life after death and their spiritual identity. Also that Eastern religions are lumped into one and no mention of interfaith and combinations.*

It was indeed an oversight on my part not to include non-binary people in the gender section, which would have given the survey extra richness.

Someone else also pointed out the flaw in grouping Eastern religions into one. S/he said:

Just FYI – I am slightly uncomfortable with your 'Eastern' category for religion, I would prefer a generic 'other' and then have a chance to say which religion in a box below. I realise there are too many religions for you to name each one. However, Hindus are quite busy trying to stamp out Buddhist religious practice in India as it threatens the oppressive caste system there, so I didn't like feeling 'lumped in' with them – and frankly, a generic category of 'Eastern' seems to fall in to the Western myth Edward Said called 'Orientalism'. Christianity is an Eastern religion too, you know – at least in origin.

I acknowledge a lack of sensitivity that occurred here.

Positive remarks were also left about the research. One person said simply:

I'm glad you are doing this research.

Someone else said:

Fascinating research. I would love to participate further. I find it hard to articulate my ideas about spirituality and consciousness.

This comment may have come from someone I later interviewed.

There was also this endorsement from someone else, who said:

I'm glad you are undertaking this research. I think that death and what happens after it isn't talked about enough.

4.9. Conclusion

This survey asked questions which go to the core of our compass in life, addressing the ultimate questions of existence. We do not know what motivated people to answer the survey; the only thing we know is that the respondents were accredited psychotherapists and counsellors. Their work involves dealing with the most intimate fears of clients, of which death anxiety may be one. It is interesting to note that just over half of the respondents do believe in post-mortem existence and about one fifth are not sure. This leaves the 'non-believers' numbering about one third of the people who participated. Almost three quarters of the respondents, including people in the 'non-believers' group rated these questions about post-mortem existence as important to the way they live and stated that they influence their work with clients. Of the people who believe in post-mortem existence, almost half (48.1%) believe in self-recognition, indicating survival of a sense of self, with attending implications in relation to actions, decisions and attitudes in life. The 24.1% who believe that their 'self' does not survive, may partake in the belief in a post-mortem conscious experience of re-joining the Cosmic Consciousness, or God.

Although looking at the comments as a block highlights some interesting themes, the analysis based on whether people do, or do not believe in post-mortem consciousness gave a more detailed understanding of their attitudes in life and in their work with clients. It showed that the concept of reincarnation is seriously considered by many of the participants,

which may colour their worldview and ontological understanding as professionals.

It is interesting to note that many respondents pointed out their ethical awareness of being client-centred and not imposing their views. Even more relevant is the awareness of participants that their views are likely to show through in the way they attend to their patients/clients. It was also gratifying to read some of the supporting comments made, pointing to the importance and relevance of this research.

The next chapter will set out the findings of the semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 5 - Interviews Findings

5.1. Overview

This chapter will describe the findings from the interviews with participants who, as per one of the participation criteria, see themselves as spiritual. It will explain the themes (subordinate and superordinate) as per the interpretative phenomenological analysis and illustrates them with quotes from participants.

5.2. The themes

The subordinate themes that best addressed the research question were constructed following my immersion in each individual transcript and a deep reflection on the data as I engaged with them across all the records. The superordinate themes were created as a result of my perception that different subordinate themes could naturally be grouped within an 'overarching' theme.

Table 2 contains the summary of the superordinate and the subordinate themes.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate themes
5.3. Personal beliefs	5.3.1. The mystery of the nature of reality and the limitations of the human mind
	5.3.2. Tacit knowing
	5.3.3. Experiential validation of beliefs
5.4. Being a spiritual person	5.4.1. Ontology
	5.4.2. Life experience of spirituality

	5.4.3. Personal approach to mortality
5.5. The subject of death in the work with clients	5.5.1. Noticing the presence or absence of the subject in the work with clients
	5.5.2. Attitudes in the work with clients
	5.5.3. Self-reflection
	5.5.4. Ethics and credibility
	5.5.5. Interest in and benefits of participating in this research

Table 2 – Superordinate and subordinate themes of IPA analysis

5.3. Superordinate theme: personal beliefs

This superordinate theme illustrates the beliefs which support participants' spirituality and the impact it has on their lives and their work. The theme is composed of three subordinate themes:

5.3.1. The mystery of the nature of reality and the limitations of the human mind

5.3.2. Tacit knowing

5.3.3. Experiential validation of beliefs

Participants explained how their spirituality helps them to make sense of the world in which they live, in particular addressing my interest in their views on post-mortem consciousness. The subordinate themes below illustrate the elements which support and explain their beliefs.

5.3.1. Subordinate theme: the mystery of the nature of reality and the limitations of the human mind

The idea that the nature of reality is fundamentally mysterious came through loud and clear in the interviews. Participants feel a connection with something beyond themselves, which I will call the 'transcendental', which they experience in various ways. Some used the conventional language of God, angels and spiritual beings whereas others used words such as 'guides', 'spirits' and 'entities'. These denote different orientations, the first being more devotional and the second arguably more matter of fact. All of these terms, however, express participants' understanding of an interaction between them and those transcendental realms and beings.

In their views on the nature of reality, which they generally agreed is a mystery, a few participants felt the need to rely on the credibility of science for validation. That this mystery may lie beyond the powers of our minds to unravel was also acknowledged by some of the participants.

Daniel is a priest as well as a therapist. He spoke of an early interest in mortality encouraged by a professor he had during his degree studies in theology. He has been a lifelong member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), an organisation which uses academic rigour to study paranormal phenomena. He has been involved in the SPR since adolescence and is distinctly interested in psychic phenomena. He told me that, for him, the most convincing phenomenon is what he called the 'drop-in communicator', which is when a spirit 'drops in' on a séance and gives information which is later verified. Daniel frequents mediums and séances and confirmed his interest in metaphysics. After devoting his adult life to learning about the nature of reality, he has come to no satisfactory conclusion. Answering my question about his views, he said:

865 yes, I've no idea .. I take, I take quite an interest in cosmology,
866 erm, that just seems so utterly vast, and … incomprehensible ..
you 867 could only have sort of one of two responses, one is that you
let your 868 jaw drop a bit, or that you say humbug …

He talked about discoveries in physics, concluding that their magnitude and incomprehensibility can elicit two reactions: on the one hand a jaw-dropping experience implying a reaction of awe in the light of the depth of the mystery that confronts us, or on the other hand the feeling that it is all humbug, a word synonymous with drivel and babble – not worthy of consideration. He also used the pronoun 'you', indicating that this might be a universal rather than a personal reaction. His response points to the limitations of the human mind, a theme mentioned by other participants.

Claire is a therapist whose training was energy based. She started her journey into the profession of psychotherapy as a Reiki practitioner and then did her MA in psychology and healing, following this with an advanced diploma in transpersonal psychology and various other courses and workshops. Her view of the universe is that everything is energy, including consciousness. For her, reality includes a realm that is different from ours which she calls the Unseen Realm. This is a populated dimension which interacts with ours, an idea put forward in different ways by two other participants, Paul and Carol. Claire said:

The Unseen Realm … where beings … consciousnesses… of different hierarchical sophistication, some energies that are malevolent … unhealthy … don't have very good intentions … and other energies which carry a lot of beauty … a lot of love … a lot of guidance, healing …

She expanded on the dangers of the malevolent energies which can attach themselves to people and cause havoc. Regrettably, I did not explore further her views on how these energies, good and evil, come to attach to people. She acknowledged, however, that there is much she cannot understand due to the limitations of her own mind:

5 The more that I experience of the metaphysical world, the more I
6 become aware of … First of all, how little I know, you know and how 7 limited I am, what I was told was the real world, and it kind of leaves 8 me with all these questions … you know … what is and what isn't … 9 you know, what is my imagination, what is … you know …. What
10 happens in the unseen world, what happens in … through me ….
11 yeah, all of it …

Claire acknowledges that some of her experiences with those transcendental energies may be a product of her imagination, which is not surprising since she acknowledges dealing with a mystery. She talks of imagination in the sense of fantasy; she may be making some of it up, but it is also possible that the use of imagination as creativity is an active constituent of this mysterious world.

5.3.2. Subordinate theme: tacit knowing

This theme shows that the participants, almost without noticing, referred to their intuition to explain their spiritual beliefs, especially those about post-mortem consciousness. Although most of them had followed Christian teachings at one time, except for Joan, who is a dedicated Christian, all the other participants saw themselves as spiritual but not religious. There was something in the way participants spoke about their intuitive beliefs which indicated the need to make sense of experiences beyond logical explanation.

Laura trained as a bereavement counsellor early in her life, after she saw what her mother-in-law's death did to her husband. She came across as

a sensitive person who felt comfortable in her skin and with where she was in her life. She talked about some paranormal experiences she had had in her youth which sparked her interest in what happens after death and generally in the nature of reality. In her answer to my question on what she thought happens after death, I detected a clear tension between the materialist belief that the demise of the physical body determines the demise of consciousness, and something which came from deep inside:

Sometimes I think nothing happens, that we die and that's it, but I can't believe that, I just can't believe that, because I believe there is so much more that we don't understand and I just think it is our inability as human beings and our brain power that we can't link in, and … why don't I believe that? Well, I mean, I suppose the concrete part of me would say, I don't want to believe it, I don't want to believe that we're just here and we live and die, … but then … it's just this feeling I have and it is really hard to articulate, that there is so much more …

She struggles with her opposing beliefs, acknowledging the limitations of our minds, in exasperation asking of herself. 'Why don't I believe that?' She identifies a concrete part of herself, which sounds hard, impenetrable and authoritarian, which tells her she is weak and feeble for not wanting to acknowledge an obvious reality. But then she mentions a feeling which is difficult to articulate, an intuition which feels convincing.

Sylvia told me in the first few minutes of our interview that she wanted to participate in this study not so much because of what she found in her work with clients, but more because of her interest in the subject. She

has had an interest in consciousness from an early age and has devoted much time and effort over the years to learning about consciousness and spirituality through reading as well as going to workshops, talks and seminars. She mentioned learning from some people who lecture on the spiritual circuit, such as Deepak Chopra, Mooji and Anita Moorjani. She said she wants to see the 'burning bush', referring to the passage in the Bible where God speaks to Moses through a burning bush. Just as Moses trusted the reality of his interlocutor, Sylvia wants to trust her intuition by finding validation of her inner dialogue when she encounters something which resonates. Talking about the mystics of the literature she reads, she said:

479 People who have experienced something big … cos I think well, they 480 have experienced that, and they are talking from their own 481 experience, maybe I could have that too or … is it … or maybe that it 482 resonates somewhere with something inside me, maybe that's what 483 it is … oh yeah, somewhere it's … oh yeah, I know that

It is this 'oh yeah, I know that …' – this tacit knowledge – which powerfully resonates with someone else's experience, eliciting trust and understanding. However, regarding her beliefs in the immortality of the soul within this bigger reality, Sylvia mentioned another perspective, which originates in her professional orientation:

252 Maybe psychoanalytically it would mean I don't have a good enough 253 internal object and I am fearing death, so I'm always trying to believe 254 in some kind of immortality.

Whereas such a theoretical, rational interpretation can easily invalidate a tacit knowledge which pulls in a different direction, for Sylvia, it is left hanging in the air.

Kim expressed a similar intuitive knowledge. She had recently trained as a death doula and felt like being someone who was at this time in a comfortable place within her life. At the time the experience related below happened, she was moving away from her Christian beliefs, which she inherited from her family. Up to then she had not had any interest in esoteric subjects so when she heard the story related by a client who had had a near-death experience after 'smashing into the ground at great speed' because his parachute did not open properly, she could well have responded with scepticism or perhaps an open mind. But her response was different. She told me:

126 I wasn't quite sure what my beliefs were but meeting him and 127 listening to him … funny thing isn't it … you talk to people about all 128 sorts of things, but some people you just believe them … and I 129 utterly, utterly believed him …

In this comment, I heard her inner struggle regarding her beliefs. The question this particular story posed was: could people possibly experience meeting beings in another realm who tell them that it is not their time yet and that they have to go back to their bodies? Is that credible? But she

found that ‘some people you just believe them’. She did not mention persuasion from outside; the believability was inside her, equivalent to a *recognition*. She said: ‘I utterly, utterly believed him’. That repetition is meaningful; it seems to reveal a complete lack of doubt inside her.

5.3.3. Subordinate theme: experiential validation of beliefs

This theme illustrates the experiences participants had had which they relied on to validate their beliefs. Although some participants mentioned second- and third-hand accounts of experiences which they found reliable and supported their beliefs, because of the limitation of space, I will focus here on those experiences which participants had had themselves.

Some participants had had experiences which are conventionally qualified as anomalous or paranormal. These included seeing apparitions, hearing voices and being in touch with beings from other dimensions which they called ‘guides’. Some of the participants embraced the experiences as ‘normal’ within their worldview, whereas others found the need to put them under the lens of rationality and developed doubts about their own experience.

Laura had a number of anomalous experiences of ghostly activities in her youth, in a friend’s house in an area where battles took place at the time

of the Wars of the Roses[22]. Rather than her dismissing them, they stayed with her as real albeit unexplained. Later on, at the death of her father, she had an experience which challenged the conventional beliefs she still held. She said:

406 I think this is one of the dilemmas I have had, is it … is it my
407 imagination, have I imagined these things, you know, after my father 408 died, I saw him, really clearly, really clearly, the morning after he
409 died, or a couple of mornings later, we were in his house, and he
410 walked into the kitchen and I saw him walk into the kitchen, but did 411 I? Did I really see him??

Her communication was tentative and at times she avoided eye contact almost as if indicating that I might think her mad. I myself was intrigued by her non-verbal communication because I had imagined that at this point in the interview she would feel comfortable with me. It seemed, however, that although she admitted that she saw her father really clearly, her own experience fell short of acceptable evidence in the light of the paradigm in which she lives. As we went on talking, however, she admitted being convinced her vision was real.

Carol had an early interest in mortality. She trained as a counsellor and felt 'guided' to work around death and dying. At one point she intuited that someone emotionally close would be dying soon, which was

[22] The series of English civil wars, called the Wars of the Roses (1455-1487) between the House of York and the House of Lancaster.

confirmed as a good friend was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Carol was able to be with her friend to the end, something she sees as a privilege. She was 'thrown' (her word) into work in a hospice and said that over the years, she had done a lot of exploration around the subject of death and dying. For example, whilst participating in a 'circle' with a leader who worked with spiritual energies, she heard the voice of her uncle who had died some years before. He had a very distinctive voice, which she instantly recognised. Rather than being surprised, she was in awe when it happened:

Now my aunt was dying, and I was very fond of her … and I heard my uncle … he had a very distinctive voice … and I just heard … now I've never heard it since, it was my one and only, but it just said CAROL … tell [name of her aunt] it will be ok … and it was like, oh wow … and I knew instantly who it was! I told her whilst she was dying and it gave [her] quite a lot … of comfort actually … my uncle came to me, he told me this … you know, but it was … so very CAROL (the way he used to call me)… and it was just so him you know … why would I make this up? … You know, it was just … yeah, so …

She ended with the interesting statement 'why would I make this up?', which seemed to be directed at me, rather than at some sceptical aspect of herself. Although the subject of my research could imply that I would rate her experience as believable, she did not know me well enough to make this assumption.

5.4. Superordinate theme: being a spiritual person

This superordinate theme illustrates the experience of participants of their spirituality. Some were or had been affiliated with organised religion and others had found their path outside of such a framework, often informed by the teachings of more than one creed or faith. The theme comprises three subordinate themes:

5.4.1 Ontology

5.4.2. Life experience of spirituality

5.4.3. Personal approach to mortality

This theme reflects the way participants experience their spirituality and how they experience themselves as spiritual beings. It illustrates how being spiritual influences the way they live their lives and how they interpret death within their framework of understanding. It describes their views of what happens after death.

5.4.1. Subordinate theme: ontology

Participants varied in their ontology as spiritual beings. Paul, Fred and Sylvia for instance saw themselves as embodied consciousness whereas Joan understood that she was created and 'held' by God. Claire and Dianna work with energies and see themselves as energetic beings interacting with energetic beings from other dimensions. Daniel, a priest and therapist, describes himself as a chartered scientist, Kim as a death doula. Where they are similar within this study of post-mortem

consciousness is that they experience themselves living within a greater reality, one that incorporates other dimensions with which in some way they acknowledge an interaction.

Rather than suggesting meeting at a place of his choice, Fred chose to come to my house for the interview, which I read as indicating his interest in the subject. Curiously, he told me early on in the interview, that he thought the study was about spirituality; he had not realised there was a specific angle on post-mortem consciousness. Nevertheless, he was happy to participate, and I detected that he was keen to tell me his story. His spiritual journey had taken him through the Christian narrative, which he was first devoted to but then rejected together with all religious spirituality. He called this rejection a 'breakthrough' and the forceful use of the word made me realise the frustration it hid. He said:

I believe that spirituality is a projection, so there is no external spirituality, … there is no Heaven, there is no Hell, … we created it all …

And then

I cottoned on to the idea that consciousness is not just individual, but we are part of consciousness [that] is bigger than the individual. How one works with that how one thinks about that, I'm not quite sure, but I'm not just this little pea of consciousness. …

It enables me, when I am aware to move from sort of, little mind into bigger mind … most of my life is dealing with buses and trains, tax and little mind but I can move into that sense of bigger consciousness … I get that sense of the big picture, of the higher consciousness, whatever you want to call it … so that informs me as a path to maybe not get so caught in the little mind, to be able to spend more time in the bigger picture …

To 'cotton on' implies a realisation, almost a revelation. Although he first mentions not being sure about 'how one works with that how one thinks about that' he then answered his own question. There is a sense of liberation in the way he described the move from 'little mind' to 'bigger mind' (or consciousness), there is a sense of completion when he mentioned 'moving into that sense of bigger consciousness' and a hierarchical move from below to above when he mentioned 'higher consciousness'.

Joan came to spirituality by birth, having been born into a Christian family, and had an early experience of religion which was formative. She said:

64 Every night we would have a Bible study at the dinner table the
65 children … you know us four children and my two parents … and I
66 got the feeling that he [father] *was passing on what he believed to*
67 be a sacred heritage to his children which was incredibly important.

Regarding a question from me about her devotion to God within her Christian spirituality, she said:

156 It gives me a foundation of security because I believe I have been
157 created by a loving Creator and that my life has meaning and
158 purpose, I am here for a reason, I have something to do and I have
159 that support, whether you look upon it as God directly, or angels, or
160 whatever, supernatural support of some kind is available to me, …
161 it is kind of holding, if you like … I feel held by a loving presence if
162 you like …

That sense of feeling held creates a feeling of living within safety parameters which seemed apparent to me throughout the interview. Joan imparted confidence of being looked after by a higher-order consciousness.

5.4.2. Subordinate theme: life experience of spirituality

This theme highlights the participants' experiences of their spirituality and how their spirituality impacts the way they live their lives. The variety of ways personal spirituality is experienced reveals the variety of spiritual frameworks encountered in the interviews. Some early life experiences were shown to have had a profound effect on life. Two of the more powerful examples are featured here.

Rachel is a therapist and also a trainer in the profession. She is interested in spirituality and mortality as both have played major roles in her life. She has had a challenging journey. Born into a strict religious Christian family, the overpowering fear of Hell informed her life in all ways. In her mid-20s, she had a serious medical episode in which she almost died. The distress she experienced was at the thought that if she died, she might go to Hell. She plunged into deep depression, from which she emerged only years after:

I was very frightened for quite a long time, when I was actually in hospital … it wasn't so much being frightened that I nearly died when I was in hospital … my fear was around the sort of rigidity of what I'd grown up with which was very much the Heaven and Hell belief system. My greatest fear was that I would have died and that I would have gone to Hell, I didn't have any particular reason for that but I think the fear that I had grown up surrounded by within my network, was this constant 'are you sure you've been saved' was the language that was used so … what guarantee did I have that had I died I would have actually been in Heaven as far as my perception was then, rather than in Hell? And that then became really the catalyst to quite a period of depression for a number of years … finding it very difficult to find words to articulate it really, so it was more the existential recovery, rather than the physical …

Sitting with Rachel in the interview, I felt the deep sense of helplessness she had experienced. Those Christian teachings were the framework for living for all of her life up to the health emergency and their dismantling left her bereft of the meaning, albeit imbued with terror, it had provided. During the years this dismantling took, she felt lost and confused. She did not reject her spirituality but had to find some other way of

understanding it. I felt this process had not yet been completed. What she had been left with were questions.

Whereas I felt that Rachel expressed relief in her account of moving away from that fundamentalist mindset, another participant, Paul, communicated disbelief. He had also experienced living in a fundamentalist Christian environment, to which he gravitated as a young person, under the influence of a friend. This was an Evangelical Chapel founded by the Plymouth Brethren a particularly strict and secret organisation. During his affiliation, Paul devoted all his free time to Bible studies as part of his commitment to Christ, which he was convinced would save him from eternal damnation:

126 I used to be a Born Again Christian myself … I used to be a
127 fundamentalist Christian … so at that time, I was myself very
128 preoccupied with what I thought was the reality of Hell … of eternal
129 judgement …

I asked:

259 And can you tell me what the motivating factor was at that time, was
260 it the hope to be saved, was it the fear of Hell?

He replied:

I thought I was saved … what we believed was that if you commit your life to the Lord Jesus Christ you are saved, that's that basically, if you weren't a Born Again Christian, when you die you are going to go to Hell and you will be tormented there for ever and ever …

And then added:

I wish I could remember why on earth I came to believe this nonsense … which I now see as being pernicious and evil nonsense …

This remark sounded as if Paul was speaking about someone else. It was as if he did not recognise himself, which is understandable, given the dramatic changes he underwent. He told me that when he finally left the Church, he had to experience great courage as for some time he was haunted by the thought that he was making the wrong choice, and the fundamentalist teachings might be true. Some of what he had learned had repercussions well into his professional life. An example was the 'sinking hollow feeling of real horror and fear' he had about the idea of working with homosexuals. Once he finally let go of that, he found he got a surprising number of gay clients both men and women.

As the interviews unfolded, it became clear that the personal beliefs of the participants mentioned, including those which were later discarded, had a deep effect on their lives and also work.

5.4.3. Subordinate theme: personal approach to mortality

This theme goes to the core of this research and explores the participants' personal orientation with regard to mortality in general and their own mortality in particular. As mentioned in Chapter 3, one of the criteria for participating in the interviews was an ontological spiritual orientation, which is likely to include a belief in post-mortem consciousness.

The ideas that emerged from some of the interviews indicated a belief in the individual consciousness re-joining God or Cosmic Consciousness from whence it came. Other participants mentioned reincarnation, some with more and some with less conviction. The thoughts about reincarnation involving sequential lives included the idea of this life being compared to a school in which we are destined to learn lessons. The thoughts about future lives can be logically extended to previous lives too, opening up the topic of whether our current lives are influenced by actions in previous lives. These ideas resonate with the concept of karma and the word was used by various interviewees. Interestingly, however, all the interviewees except for Rachel and Joan have talked about reincarnation as a possibility, but only Carol, Claire and Paul touched on the idea of previous lives.

Associated with the principle of post-mortem consciousness is the question of whether identity survives. A number of participants pointed out that it is not the ego, meaning the personality or character, but the

self that survives, the sense of 'I' or me'. In this light, I determined the concept of self-recognition to be what I meant in my question about survival. Do we recognise ourselves in the afterlife? With this in mind, what was the basis of the participants' ideas of post-mortem consciousness?

Joan's strong Christian belief provides her with clear ideas about being created by a loving God and living in a world in which God and angels actively interact with humans. She has a deeply felt sense of the realness of the world in which she lives but with respect to the afterlife she said:

30 I certainly believe there is another dimension. …

103 After death I believe that the soul, the spirit of the person lives on …
104 and depending on your level of understanding when you die, you will
105 be in one dimension or another …

By stressing that the 'level of understanding' at death determines the destination of the soul, Joan was alluding to a hierarchical order. The level of understanding seems to be something we can work on in life. She used the pronoun 'you', indicating her view that this is a universal, rather than just personal, proposition. In response to my question, she went on to say:

I don't believe in Hell in the traditional sense. I don't believe in ever-lasting torment for anybody. If you really believed that every single person who is not saved is suffering eternal torment, how would you ever smile again … how would you ever enjoy a meal again, how would you ever sleep at night?

Her comments reveal a profound empathy in her orientation towards other people. Hell is not just an intellectual concept for Joan; she can identify with people who might be considered or consider themselves 'not saved'.

The question of whether identity survives was addressed by many of the participants, some of whom were convinced that we will be able to recognise ourselves, and others that we will not. Whether self-recognition is to be experienced in the afterlife has an impact on the idea of 'lessons to be learned' as this concept only makes sense if the integration of lessons learned can be attached to a self that recognises itself. Furthermore, those ideas also lead to questions about pre-birth existence and whether this life is affected by actions in previous lives.

This point was taken up by Carol, who believes in reincarnation. She works in a hospice with people facing great challenges at the end of their lives. I asked her:

CN – Tell me how those beliefs impact on your life and then how they impact on your work.

Carol - I suppose I look at people's lives and sometimes am in awe … I think wow, that was such a big challenge you set yourself this lifetime, and gosh, I'm not sure I could have coped or had the resources to … to manage all that you have thrown in your way … or I try and think, … is someone evil … I think not … I think, you know, they came down with the best of intentions to learn something and actually got … I don't know, they thought they were stronger than perhaps they actually were, I don't know, so I suppose it gives me a bit of a philosophical bent on looking at people, and their lives …

The message is that Carol sees us as responsible for the way our lives turn out. The idea of learning lessons in life fits well within a karmic narrative, provided the sense of 'I' or 'me' is carried through from one life to the next. It gives Carol a context in which to make sense of some of the profound suffering she encounters in the people she works with.

Another model was put forward by Fred, who does not believe in reincarnation. Fred did not disclose much about himself but told me he rejected Christianity when he realised that he is embodied consciousness, part of a Cosmic Consciousness. He was forceful in saying he does not want reincarnation to be true as it involves judgement which is what he rejected in Christianity. His idea is that after death we will re-join the Cosmic Consciousness, without self-recognition:

61 CN – Ok, so within that context of your beliefs, what do you think
62 happens after death?

64 Fred – I don't believe that I as an individual will survive death. Maybe
65 there is that pool of consciousness, the idea the drops get back into
66 the sea … that is an image I like, it the image I used at my mother's
67 funeral this drop of water going back into the ocean.

69 CN – So that your identity will end at death and you will re-join the
70 bigger consciousness?

72 Fred – Yeah … the Cosmic Consciousness … the end of life, I think I
73 find comforting … I'm looking forward to that absolute passivity that
74 absolute nothingness.

Two things struck me in this interaction: first, that Fred was associating his belief with having a choice in the matter and, second, that he thought he would be experiencing a sense of absolute passivity, which I think improbable, given that he does not believe he will carry a sense of self through the portal of death.

5.5. Superordinate theme: the subject of death in the work with clients

This theme reveals the experience of participants of the presence or absence of the subject of death and in particular of what may happen after death, in their work and how they deal with it. It includes their reflections in the light of their participation in this research. This theme has five subordinate themes:

5.5.1. Noticing the presence or absence of the subject in the work with clients

5.5.2. Attitudes in the work with clients

5.5.3. Self-reflection

5.5.4 Ethics and credibility

5.5.5. Interest in and benefits of participating in this research

5.5.1. Subordinate theme: noticing the presence or absence of the subject in the work with clients

This theme highlights the awareness or lack thereof, of the topic of death and what may come after in what clients present. Because death was acknowledged to be a difficult topic for the therapists themselves, as some of the themes above demonstrate, it stands to reason that it may also be a challenging subject for clients to bring. It is well known that during therapy exploration, subjects can emerge which clients may have kept consciously or unconsciously covert. This topic did not come up spontaneously in the interviews; I had to ask specific questions in order to get specific answers. Except for Kim and Paul, all of the participants reported unawareness of the subject in their work. The comments from the two participants below are illustrative:

I had the following exchange with Joan, the Christian therapist who had been keen to participate in the research:

183 CN: … And you mentioned that death is not very present in the
184 work, … did I get that right?

185 Joan: Yes, you are right, yes … it's not present explicitly, but
186 implicitly it is! … In the longer term it comes up with regards to
187 issues of loss, issues of anxiety, phobias … they often have
188 something to do with death underneath it when you look at it!

Joan recognised that the subject can be present in a covert way, manifesting as anxiety, phobias and so on. That is an important realisation although critically Joan did not expand on whether she actively pursues the subject, leaving me to believe she does not, which may leave clients' issues unresolved. Unfortunately, I failed to pick this up at the time, which meant a potentially interesting exploration was not conducted.

The subject of suicide is of particular interest as it is highly likely that someone thinking of ending their life will think about it in terms of personal consequences. No interviewee, however, spoke about clients having had had suicidal ideation.

I felt that Laura understood well the remit of this study and that she felt at ease with unpicking and examining her own experience with and

attitude to the subject of death in her work with clients. She encapsulated in her comments a view which goes beyond our profession and embraces us all in the human condition. I asked:

283 CN: … And do you ever have people who actually bring issues
284 around what may happen after death?

285 Laura: Very rarely and it's so interesting because I think it sits with
286 all of us as a concern, as a worry, as a, wonder, … I mean I often, I
287 think about it a lot, but no, I don't … I don't address it very often,
288 and I don't bring it into the room very often, and that's why I was so
289 interested in participating in this research because I really think it

The last phrase in her comment – 'it is underneath for all of us' … goes to the core of this study.

5.5.2. Subordinate theme: attitudes in the work with clients

This theme illustrates how the participants told me they do or not deal with the subject of death in their work with clients. As mentioned in Section 5.5.1. above, the interviews showed that the subject of death is rarely overtly present in the work of the therapists who participated in this research. Nevertheless, as the topic of this study is the views of practitioners on what happens after death and its influence on the work with clients, I asked the participants to focus their minds and reflect on their attitudes in general and on the topic in particular.

Claire, who trained in psychotherapy and healing, has, during the whole of her professional life as a practitioner, worked with energies. She feels she is a channel, being used as an instrument by transpersonal forces:

161 The information comes through me, and I feel very much … I am used
162 as an instrument rather than … I work very … very much from a
163 place where it's not me, I get out of the way, I receive the information
164 and … I speak it or I deliver it in whatever way … and that's the
165 way I work with everybody…

She used the word 'instrument' a noun used to convey mediation, as in musical instruments, which mediate particular qualities of sounds. As an instrument in this context, she communicated that she has no agency; she is a conduit.

This lack of agency, which implies lack of reflection, can potentially be problematic. Acknowledging the absence of the subject of death in her work, Claire told me about a client she had been seeing for many years, where she had identified the fear of death presented covertly in the work. She told me:

746 I thought that was really very interesting you know, it's taken her
747 this long [to bring up the fear of ageing]… and right at the very
748 beginning of working with her I was aware of her fear of ageing,
749 which equals to me, fear of death, but which has never been
750 brought into the room …

My sense of this observation implies that Claire was either not aware in the moment of what was underneath the client's comment, or alternatively, the words 'it was never brought into the room' suggest it to be the client's responsibility to flag up the subject overtly. This second option was a deduction I also made from the words of a number of other participants.

A very different attitude was that of Kim. She had started her career as a nurse and then trained as a psychosynthesis therapist. This training involves a transpersonal perspective and spirituality is an integral part of this modality. She had an experience that propelled her into a training programme which changed her life. She had an elderly client who was dying and she felt she could not help him in their work. She did not have the tools and it left her troubled for a long time afterwards. Although it is curious that someone who had been a nurse and had been used to seeing people dying had this reaction, she told me that as a nurse her focus was different and how people were facing their death did not come into her awareness. Her helplessness on this occasion led to a two-year training programme as a death doula. In reply to my question about how she deals with the subject of death, this is what she said:

355 I don't feel it is difficult any more. It is as natural to me as saying
356 'would you like a cup of tea' … I think that is what … maybe
357 counsellors, or anybody, don't understand … they are so scared of it
358 …. the more you talk about it, the less scared you get, and I have
359 seen that time and time again.

And when I asked her how she works, she said:

377 I ask them relevant questions and we tease it out with good
378 questioning, because I am interested in, not in what I believe, in fact I
379 would never tell them what I believe in the session, it is not relevant, I
380 would be wanting to know what is their belief. What gets in the way
381 of you talking about it, what is it about the word 'death' that makes
382 you feel really scared? When you think of your mother dying, what do
383 you imagine is going to happen? It will be those sorts of things, so it
384 doesn't really matter what I believe! I mean I am sitting there in my
385 head, maybe in a parallel process thinking, what a shame you think
386 that, because I think this … but I think it … you know, … even as a
387 doula, we are not imposing our views on anybody, we are just going to
388 find out what they think and we are going to work with that.

Kim was aware that the experience with the elderly gentleman had flagged up something that was lacking *in her* and this awareness propelled her to look for ways to address it. She would also have had to have the courage to face her own issues around her mortality to become a death doula.

One other participant, Paul, also a former nurse, is someone who moved from fundamentalist Christianity to Paganism. He is comfortable with post-mortem ideas and works as a hypnotherapist. Paul came across as someone who has internally fought the shackles of a strict ideology to arrive at freedom of belief and now has an open mind. Because past lives regression therapy uses hypnosis, I was curious as to whether he engaged in this modality. This is what he said:

138 No absolutely not, I don't believe in it … I believe in past lives, I believe
139 in reincarnation, but I don't believe in past lives regression … I think
140 that … I've never seen sufficient evidence that the people who
141 remember past lives are actually remembering a real life … that
142 somebody lived … I think that most of it, if not all of it, can be
143 explained simply [by the idea] that hypnosis enhances the capacity of
fantasy …

He told me that his stance is to encourage clients to look at their current actions and take responsibility for their life as they are living now.

I then asked him a question, which I also asked other participants who did not volunteer the information, as to whether he had clients who spoke about having paranormal experiences. He was the only one who confirmed it and he said:

465 They often say, 'I've never told anyone … I've never told this to anyone
466 before' because they can sense … and this interests me … and again,
467 it suggests to me something beyond what academic psychology
468 accepts … that … the way that clients … people very quickly, sense
469 that it is ok to tell me about paranormal experiences and I'm not going
470 to think that they are nuts …

He also voiced his ideas about academic psychology in the interview; he is critical of the discipline for not incorporating more spirituality. Importantly, in his statement is the insight that clients know when it is safe to discuss something in therapy. Paul's statement also highlights the phenomenon of therapists closing down from the client's perspective, which Rachel flagged from the practitioner's point of view (see Section 5.5.3.).

5.5.3. Subordinate theme: self-reflection

This theme illuminates the effect that practitioners' reflections on the subject of this study – their views on the afterlife and their influence on their work with clients – had on them. Because the majority of the participants acknowledged that the subject of death does not emerge, or very rarely emerges, in their work with clients, I heard their reflections on why this may be with interest. Except for Kim (the death doula), Paul (the hypnotherapist) and Daniel (the priest and therapist), all of the other participants wondered whether it may be something in them which is blocking the presence of the subject in the work.

For instance, Rachel, who was born into a strict religious family, was very reflective on this point. Her struggle to release herself from the clutches of the fear she grew up with lasted for about a decade, until her mid-30s. She did her training in her late 30s, by which time although she had a spirituality, it was very different from what it had been. Nevertheless, she found it helped her understand the language and the feelings behind the language of the dying clients she was seeing in the hospice where she worked. For instance, she told me:

232 I'm thinking about a client I worked with, and this was a client who I
233 had worked with until she died and she had a very strong sense of
234 spirituality and feeling held, so we had a number of sessions where
235 she would reflect on that and she was aware enough of my own
236 sense of spirituality at that point in a way that I think … I believe …
236 enabled her to perhaps use language that felt right for her without
237 having to censure it out, and it was an understanding I think,
238 between us … so something about her belief in a beyond … I think at
239 that point it felt really important that I had an understanding of that.

Although she had left the Church at that time, her familiarity with the language and the teachings made it easy for the client to feel heard and understood, and for Rachel it seemed to be gratifying that she was able to help this person in her last days. There was a resonance between her and the client, but in the light of that resonance, she reflected on what happens when the opposite is the case, when there is an inner closing

down on the part of the therapist. I asked her whether she had ever had a client who had told her of a paranormal experience they have had, and she told me that had never happened. But then she added:

671 If my clients were reflecting on their own experiences, if they were
672 using language of spirituality very familiar with me, then I quite
673 probably was quite open to that at quite a subconscious level and if
674 they were using language under the paranormal umbrella, I imagine
675 … although not consciously, … but I imagine that something more
676 fundamental in me would have reacted against that … and that really
677 frustrates me, but I also know that it is probably inevitable, when
678 something has been so hard wired as very dangerous, so that … I
679 find quite interesting, so I suspect that I haven't heard it because that
680 part of me wasn't allowing … and that I guess, is an inevitability, but
681 it does frustrate me …

The use of the word 'inevitability' demonstrates the strength of Rachel's frustration that she has no control over not being able to hear when clients may have used what she called 'language under the paranormal umbrella' because it is so deeply buried in her unconscious. It is however to her credit that she was able to articulate this shortcoming.

Daniel did not look towards himself as an explanation for the absence of the topic in the work with his clients. In spite of his openness to the field of post-mortem existence, which he regularly explores in lectures, workshops and so on, and through his membership of the SPR, he does not acknowledge the presence of the subject of death overtly or covertly

in the work. In response to my question about whether his beliefs influence the work with clients, he said:

495 Daniel – I would say I'm open to discussion, I think that would be the
496 way I put it, and demonstrate the openness a little bit.

504 CN – But this openness, … what effect does that have on people, this
506 openness?

507 Daniel – I'm rather careful of it because not everyone is open, they
508 have differing levels of it, for some people may be disgusted even by
509 this, I'm very sensitive to it …

610 sometimes people are interested, but I don't speak generally about
611 these things … they'd run a mile …

There is no self-reflection here but an assumption about the people he is working with, to which he declares himself to be sensitive.

613 CN – They'd run a mile … why do you think they do that?

615 Daniel – Fear … is … I'm sure is one of the motivations at a
616 psychological level it engages them in disgust.

618 CN – Disgust …

620 Daniel – Disgust yes …

622 CN – Disgust …

624 Daniel – It is deeply rooted, we have a quite deep-rooted response, I
625 suppose is a better word even than feelings, thoughts about mortality
626 and body and that sort of thing … people can be really alarmed by

He mentions fear, which I understand as being an existential fear on the part of the client. But on a psychological level he talks of disgust, referring to the idea of the decomposition of the physical body. These are deeply rooted responses he says, which may be alarming to people. I found it curious, given his interest in psychic reality, that he did not mention, perhaps consider, that his clients may have a similar disposition.

5.5.4. Subordinate theme: ethics and credibility

This theme brought to light an external element which had an influence on participants' reluctance to engage with clients on their views about what may happen after death. The ethical aspect comes from what was learned in their training and the credibility aspect has to do with their own desire to maintain a high standard in the profession, which they feel may be affected if they allow themselves to fall short by virtue of their views.

On the subject of ethics, every participant mentioned their awareness of not imposing their views on clients.

Paul, a hypnotherapist who is now a Pagan, is comfortable with his views on reincarnation but does not work with past lives. He made an

observation that encapsulated what many of the other participants said. He confirmed:

93 I've got very specific beliefs myself, but you know, it is not my job to
94 impose my beliefs on other people … obviously … so, I have to work
95 within the context of what the client thinks ….

Joan had an interesting response. She has strong views, which she communicates in an assertive way. Her Christian beliefs give her a helpful frame in which she lives comfortably; I feel she inhabits a good existential place in the world. However, she had a strong reaction with regards to her inability to discuss death and what may come after with clients. She referred to her training as the source of her constraint. She mentioned being 'fettered', so I asked her to tell me more. She acknowledged that the fear of judgement and punishment is prevalent in the Christian population with whom she works but confirmed that these issues are not part of her work. Talking about her clients, she said:

372 Joan – I think that underneath they have residues of Christianity yes,
373 most of them … which includes fear of punishment and so on …

375 CN: – But these things don't get explored in therapy …

376 Joan– No, no, well it's very important … it's very important … and I
377 give you a reason why it is not explored is because we have this
378 injunction upon us that we are not allowed to impose our beliefs on other people …

I suggested:

379 We are not allowed to impose but we are allowed to explore …

Joan replied:

380 Yes but they would say that … the tutors would say to you as a pupil
381 that … if you have strong feelings you are not able to explore these
382 things in a neutral enough way … that you would potentially
383 influence your client therefore it's best not to talk about it … that's
384 what they would say … they wouldn't necessarily say that in black
385 and white but they would imply it, it would be hidden, it would be
386 kind of felt throughout the entire course that if you have a strong
387 belief, you better not say it …

She sees herself not as a student but as a pupil, an infantilised version of her ethos. And within that framework, she feels frustrated but also submissive to what she has absorbed from her course. I got a sense of helplessness from her.

Some of the participants feel that what keeps them back from dealing with the issues around what may happen after death is the question of credibility. I explored how they might feel in an ideal world, where there was more acceptance of a spiritual reality, to include some kind of life after death. Laura told me that:

I would be braver, more confident, going to these areas, and perhaps there is a bit of me, you know, trying to look into myself, being sort of reflexive here, perhaps there is a bit of me that thinks if I introduce that they'll poh poh it, or they'll … or it won't fit with them and then I lose some credibility as a therapist perhaps, so perhaps yeah, perhaps there is some of that ….

I admired her candid response and imagine she may have spoken for many other participants. Nevertheless, there is an aspect which left me uncomfortable, and that is the lack of courage to embolden or allow the client to address a fear which may be sitting and festering inside.

5.5.5. Subordinate theme: interest in and benefits of participating in this research

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the subject of this research – the views of therapists on post-mortem existence and their influence on the work with clients – is not given much oxygen in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy and some participants acknowledged that this study had made them consider a topic which had lain unacknowledged by them. This theme illustrates some of what was said about the realisation participants had, which may lead to significant changes in their work.

Sally was a hippie in her younger years, spent time in India and had important psychedelic experiences which opened up for her the understanding that we live in a larger reality to which our limited mind has no access. She is comfortable with ideas about an afterlife, tending to believe in reincarnation. Yet, the subject is totally absent in her work. During the interview she had many reflective moments and was interested in exploring what it was in her that may be creating difficulties for clients in respect of the topic. She said:

497 It's really spurred me to think about what I am bringing in as a
498 therapist about those beliefs or lack of them, or the way of being with
499 it, it challenges me to look at how much of it is something that I don't
500 want to deal with which is why I may be not giving it enough space
501 for the client to bring it in … so on that level, on the level of my
502 professional life … looking at things, it is very useful for me …

She used the word 'spurred', which refers to the spiked device used to make a horse go forward when dug into its flank by a rider's heel. It gives the clear message 'go now'. By using this term, Sally recognised that she must 'go now' and do something about it. The fact that this happened as a result of this study feels gratifying.

A few participants conflated the subject of post-mortem existence with wider notions of spirituality. This is not surprising because, as

mentioned above, death and what may happen after is perhaps the most important element in the validation of the human spiritual narrative. Dianna, a shamanic practitioner, is comfortable with other dimensions and interacts with them energetically. She does not use the word 'spiritual' very much, preferring its other version, the 'transcendental'. Yet she used it here when giving me feedback. She said:

15 I think it is a subject that should be researched more, and I think it is
16 important for different reasons. One, because spirituality, as opposed
17 to religion, is an important thing for people to sometimes understand if
18 they have feelings or thoughts that they can't put words to. Spirituality
19 can help them do that. But secondly, I think it is also important that
20 we research other therapists to help therapists understand if they are
21 not terribly spiritual themselves, but to understand perhaps someone
22 who's bringing them something transpersonal because … I think it can
23 be confusing for a psychotherapist to understand somebody else's
24 concepts and hopefully your research will be available and people will
25 learn from it …

This is an ambitious wish, in effect to 'educate' colleagues who do not have a spiritual disposition. It is, however, unlikely to be successful given that the principles of spirituality are generated internally, predicated on a felt sense or a tacit knowing.

For Rachel, who still struggles with the remnants of the teachings of the strict Christian Church she was born into, the interview seemed to have been important. She said:

810 What this afternoon reminded me of, is that real challenge I guess …
811 around, … essentially what you are exploring, what our individual
812 belief systems are, what our concepts are, and how our own rigidity
813 perhaps, or our own ability to hear can hold so much power within that
814 therapeutic relationship, not in telling our clients not to speak, but in
815 not being able to hear them when they do … at a more fundamental
816 level … that's what's come back to me … most …

The subtlety of her observation struck me as important: the therapist's power within the therapeutic relationship can block clients through the therapist's inability to hear. I also felt a rush of compassion hearing this from someone who had had such a hard journey to freedom and had the courage and humility to observe this frailty.

Joan, the Christian therapist who has such strong feelings about being 'fettered' by her training, wrote to me a few weeks after our interviews. She said:

451 I wanted to tell you that talking with you has inspired and encouraged
452 me to be more open on faith matters with clients, and I have been able
453 to assist two older people recently by encouraging a simple trust in
454 God that can help lift the weight of their anxieties. They are both
455 church-goers anyway so it was lovely to feel comfortable working in
456 this way.

5.6. Conclusion

The interviews yielded some interesting results overall. Participants had long histories of spiritual beliefs. Two had had powerful experiences of living in a fundamentalist community and were able to look back and evaluate their journeys. Participants were also able to reflect on their metaphysical views and how they had informed their views on life and reality. For some the relationship was with the Divine and for others it was with Cosmic Consciousness, and other interviewees spoke about living in a world of energies and working with them. The mystery of the reality in which they find themselves was accepted by all. The word 'consciousness' was not familiar as a concept to all participants, but through their uses of the language of God, the Divine and Cosmic Consciousness it became clear that they were referring to what I understand as consciousness. Participants spoke of the paranormal, of their intuitive understanding of their experiences as real, and of their views on what happens after death. The idea of death as a door to some other dimension found its voice, as did the principle of reincarnation. Surprise emerged from exploring what happens in their work with clients

as far as the subject of death and what happens after is concerned. Although accepting that the subject is of fundamental importance, all of the participants, except for Kim and Paul, acknowledged that the subject was not very present in their work. Participants showed awareness that the subject can surface covertly, but it was clear they did not generally explore the topic when it did arise. On the whole, the subject does not seem to be noticed and a question arose: was it something in them personally or as professionals, that was preventing them from hearing it within the issues clients were bringing? This will form part of the discussion in the next chapter.

The next two chapters discuss the findings of this study.

Chapter 6 – Survey Discussion

6.1. Overview

The two parts of this study aimed to gather different forms of data. The survey elicited demographic information as well as statements about beliefs and attitudes. The free-text component allowed for elaboration on respondents' views. The interviews aimed to elicit richer, more in-depth data about what participants understood by the research topic of death and post-mortem consciousness, and how these understandings intersected with their work as therapists. Together these two forms of data allowed for a detailed analysis of beliefs as expressed, and how the meanings that these therapists ascribe to their beliefs are brought to

their practice. The survey, as mentioned above, was meant to attract as many people as possible by being short and to the point, but also offered space for elaboration of respondents' comments.

It is understood that certainty is not possible regarding what happens after death, and as discussed above, this study has considered that arguments exist for both possibilities: oblivion and survival. The survey was intended to gather an overview of participating therapists' beliefs and what follows is a discussion of the findings obtained.

6.2. Survey findings

The data from this online survey enabled me to get an idea of what the counsellors and therapists who agreed to engage with this survey think about the issue of death and post-mortem existence. The statistical analysis was interesting in what it conveyed, especially coupled with the descriptive insight from the comments that participants registered in the free-text fields. The participation criteria specified no limitations in terms of age, belief or modality of approach, only that participants be accredited professionals.

The demographic information points to women making up the majority of the respondents (82%), and almost 79% were aged over 50. Kastenbaum (2003) observes that from a critical review of the literature, interesting patterns emerge which indicate that women tend to report somewhat higher levels of death-related anxiety and – relevant to the findings of the

present research – that there seems to be no consistent increase in death anxiety with advancing adult age. If anything, older people in general seem to have less death anxiety (p.31). It could be speculated that the people who responded to the survey may have attended more closely to this topic.

The majority of the 'believers' confirmed that they would like there to be life or some kind of conscious experience after death, if they had a choice. And of 'non-believers' in this survey, just over half confirmed that they would not want to live after they died. This opens up an interesting question as to whether fear or desire drives belief, or whether it is the other way around. In his essay *The Will to Believe*, James (2012) says

> When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say. (p.9)

As explained by Ward (2014a), believing is a complex process. It is rooted in evolutionary development, neurological substrate, and somatic and affective conditions. Believing, he says, 'concerns our hopes, dreams and desires, present and future' (p.19).

The beliefs as expressed by the participants of this study may therefore be what they are for a variety of reasons. They may be a result of fears or desires, of rational deductions or of tacit knowing. Although interesting

to note, the origins of the beliefs of the participants do not constitute part of this research; merely the implication is of interest. It is with this in mind, that the discussion of the findings of the three free-text fields of the survey will be undertaken

6.2.1. Do these questions have an influence in the way you live your life?

This question was designed to ascertain whether the subject of what may happen after death is of importance to the participants and whether they have an impact on the way they live their lives. The 103 people who responded to this survey were diverse in terms of their beliefs about life after death; nevertheless 76.7% of these respondents said 'yes' to this question. The implication is that whatever their beliefs, these participants feel that questions around death and what happens after are important and influence the way they live their lives. Out of the affirmative responses (79 people), 73 left comments explaining how these beliefs influence the way they live their lives.

6.2.1.1. Meaning and hope

The concept of meaning found a voice in the responses both of 'believers' and of 'non-believers'. 'Non-believers' found meaning in focusing on the here and now whereas 'believers' expressed their sense of meaning as being associated with the learning aspect of life and its effect on the afterlife. The idea of an afterlife has been shown to have a wide acceptance across the population in the West (Fontana, 2010, Heflick et

al., 2015, Walker, 2000). Hope plays a major part in this attitude, by expectations being infused with the idea that 'if it is not to be in this life, it may happen in another'. Within this perspective, the comments convey an understanding of life within a bigger picture, expressing an attitude of serenity and acceptance. Such an attitude may permeate other areas of life and living, potentially enabling a meaningful existence of non-attachment to what one respondent described as 'trivial problems' in this life.

Meaning was also expressed in the hope of meeting loved ones in the afterlife. In this way, the blow of the loss of loved people is softened and such ideas help to manage grief (Carr & Sharp, 2014). In this connection, some respondents mentioned visits to mediums as providing evidence for their beliefs in such soul connections.

Considering the responses of 'non-believers', a number of respondents found meaning in the finality of death by highlighting the preciousness of the only life they have. The responses indicated the need to make the best of life, making every day count. This is consistent with the existentialist approach in psychotherapy (e.g. Becker, 1973, Proulx & Heine, 2006, Yalom, 2008b), which sees coming to terms with endings as the correct way of addressing the issue. Facing the finality of death is foregrounded and it is intimated that the focus must be on what we can know. The world is appreciated as complex and beautiful and our response must be to live authentically and ethically in order to enjoy the

wonders of life at every moment, even if life unfolds within a context of sadness due to an awareness of its finality. This approach embraces the attitude of being involved in the moment, in the flow, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). The tool of this approach is attention, which, if directed intentionally to the task in hand, suffuses the moment with meaning (Needleman, 2003).

From the perspective of meaning therefore, the idea of death as a 'door' provides meaning to this life as a step into a future reality, and the idea of death as a 'wall' brings special value and meaning to a life that is finite.

6.2.1.2. Accountability/responsibility

The questions in the survey have led respondents to think about responsibility and accountability. This was the case across the board. Both sets of respondents, 'believers' and 'non-believers' mentioned an ethical dimension encompassing responsibility and accountability as part of their thoughts about death and beliefs in what may come after. People who believe in some kind of conscious experience following their physical death, mentioned accountability as determining their spiritual evolution. This may be within this life or beyond. The responses suggest that for people who believe in spiritual evolution through reincarnation in sequential lives, the effect of such actions is amplified and has a greater, karmic reverberation, affecting future lives in the same way that this life may have been affected by previous ones (Sumegi, 2014). However, those

who believe death is the end, referred to the need for responsibility and accountability to themselves and their fellow humans during their lives in an effort to manifest their ethical and moral values (Mannix, 2018).

The idea of being accountable to oneself and others at the end of life is a value that was expressed by many of the respondents. However, it is curious that as part of such values, nobody mentioned responsibility towards the earth which, as is well known, is facing real challenges as a result of human activity (BBC, "Blue Planet," 2017).

6.2.1.3. Life as a learning opportunity

The idea of appreciating life as a learning opportunity also appealed to both 'believers' and 'non-believers'. Learning, as pointed out by Schuller and Watson (2009), is a fundamental human attribute. It can be said to be an attitude of mind, a propensity or curiosity. It is about developing the judgement to put knowledge and skills together towards a meaningful end. 'Some learning', say the authors, 'is instrumental or routine while other learning is liberating or transformative' (p.8). Life as a learning opportunity may well involve both types but may be primarily motivated by the desire for liberation and/or transformation. What learning, as a fundamental human impulse, also facilitates is what Jung (1959a) called 'individuation' – that is, 'the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual" that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole"' (para 490, p.275), which is an understandable aspiration for many of the participants.

Speaking about life as a learning opportunity, 'believers' expressed their ideas in terms of spiritual development aimed at progression in a future existence. These ideas are mainly connected with theories of karma and reincarnation (White, Norenzayan, & Schaller, 2018).

6.2.1.4. Anxiety

The idea that death is not the end was also expressed as a powerful way of combating the anxiety of finality (Furer, Walker, & Stein, 2007, Heflick et al., 2015, McClain-Jacobson, Rosenfeld, Kosinski, Pessin, Cimino, & Breitbart, 2004). Death anxiety has been widely researched since the latter part of the 20th century, influenced by Becker's book *The Denial of Death* (1973) and the theory that followed, 'terror management theory' (TMT) (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). The idea of post-mortem consciousness is, however, not part of TMT, which has an existential approach seeing death as leading to non-existence (Cozzolino, 2006).

Although most people who completed this survey had a certain clarity on their beliefs regarding what happens after death, a few expressed the kind of anxiety which may well also be present, perhaps covertly, in clients whom psychotherapists see. The comments made were quite candid and it could be inferred that because the survey was anonymous, people may have felt free to express their fears without concerns about judgement.

We live in a death-denying culture, yet death anxiety is pervasive in Western society (Becker, 1973, Furer et al., 2007, Scioli & Biller, 2009). The knowledge of the inevitability of death can bring about crippling terror and dysfunctional coping strategies such as obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), panic attacks and phobias. Menzies and Dar-Nimrod (2017) have done novel research in this area by specifically targeting participants seeking treatment for OCD and introducing a mortality salience variable in their study. They found that under tightly controlled experimental conditions, people whose OCD manifests in washing hands showed a substantial increase in hand-washing behaviour when the authors used a mortality activation design, although there was no apparent increase in fear or perception of threat. They argue that this study 'provides an important step forward in highlighting the potential of death fears in psychopathology' (p.375). Panic attacks and hypochondria have also been correlated with fear of death (Gazarian et al., 2016, Starcevic, 1989), as have eating disorders (Marne & Harris, 2016) and other anxiety disorders (Milosevic & McCabe, 2015). Phobic and compulsive behaviours have been shown to increase in studies in which mortality salience is introduced (Strachan, Schimel, Arndt, Williams, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2007).

In my experience, anxiety disorders of various types are frequently presenting issues in the therapy room, and it is important for practitioners to realise that death anxiety may lurk behind what may

present as something quite different (Furer et al., 2007, Marne & Harris, 2016, Menzies & Dar-Nimrod, 2017, Routledge & Juhl, 2010).

Generally, the people who answered the survey were positively engaged with the questions and a high proportion expanded on how these questions about death and what may happen after, impact their lives. The next question involved their work.

6.2.2. Do these questions have an influence in the way you work with clients?

Almost 70% of all participants in this survey (both 'believers' and 'non-believers') confirmed that the questions regarding what may happen after death, influence their work with clients, which indicates that these questions are important for them.

For many people, what happens after death is accepted as unknown. In her PhD research into a methodology for exploring the unknown, Cayne (2005) holds that the unknown permeates our lives in various ways and death is *the* fundamental unknown. For some people, letting go of the known catapults them into an un-locatable void. She says:

> The unknown as non-existence cannot be defined but has to be borne. Coping can mean avoidance or struggle, or learning to endure the unknown, … located in experience, rather than intellectual knowing where change occurs at an ontological level. (p.191) [23]

[23] The idea that the unknown has to be borne can be considered an acceptable principle. However Cayne equates the unknown as non-

The experience of the anxieties (OCD, panic attacks, phobias, eating disorders, etc.) mentioned above may be the unconscious result – as Cayne suggests – of bearing the fear of non-existence.

Reflecting on what happens in therapy, Cayne stresses the importance of 'a relationship where the unspeakable can be spoken, where something terrible can be allowed to live' (p.192).

The survey revealed that in this connection, participants were reminded of the beliefs they have and expressed that they also found them important in their work with clients, even though they did not elaborate specifically in which way.

6.2.2.1. Client awareness

A number of participants pointed out that they are open to whatever the client brings and work with that accordingly. This therapeutic approach follows the principles developed by Rogers (1902-1987), the architect of client-centred therapy (Rogers, 1942, 1951, 1961). This theory emerged in the mid 20th century in opposition to, on the one hand Freud's approach, which is based on the analyst's interpretation of patients' dreams and behaviour in general, and on the other, behaviourism

existence, an assumption which cannot be demonstrated (Telfener, 2017).

developed by John Watson (1878-1958). The fundamental tool of Freud's approach was interpretation, which carried authority because, according to Welsh (1994), Freud's theory had 'pretension to science', an approach consistent with the times (p.ix). Behaviourism, which declared behaviour, rather than mental life, to be the relevant matter for psychology, also had those pretensions for the same reasons (Watson, 1930).

In contrast with those two approaches, Rogers' method puts the client and his/her phenomenological experience at the centre of the therapeutic work. The therapist's attitude is one of 'unconditional positive regard' which according to Wilkins (2000) 'is a major curative factor in any approach to therapy' (p.23). It is therefore not surprising that many of the respondents alluded to this approach in response to the question.

What this approach may, at least superficially, fail to pursue are signals of death anxiety which clients may present covertly by means of symptoms such as phobias, panic attacks and other anxieties (Strachan et al., 2007). It will be the sensitivity and perhaps experience of the practitioner that will allow the issue to be addressed. S/he needs not only to be aware of this possibility but also to be open to exploring underlying aspects of these signs and symptoms. That sensitivity will be directly related to the degree to which the subject of personal mortality has been internally resolved by the therapist him/herself.

6.2.2.2. Practitioners' transparency

The next insight mentioned by respondents was their awareness that whatever their beliefs, they would be communicated in some way to clients in their work. The awareness that our authenticity as practitioners will be apparent to clients is explored by Schmid (2001), who, based on the need for 'congruence' as stressed by Rogers (1961), recognises that trust will only develop in the therapeutic relationship if the client is convinced of the authenticity of the therapist.

The success of the psychotherapeutic process stands or falls on the quality of the relationship between practitioner and client, sometimes called the 'therapeutic alliance' (Cochran & Cochran, 2015). This alliance depends on the integrity of the practitioner, who also models this integrity to the client. Therefore, even when trying to 'bracket'[24] his/her beliefs, one respondent was clear that s/he would communicate something of it, however much s/he would try not to do so. A client may therefore be inhibited from discussing his or her fears regarding death and what may happen after, if s/he picks up consciously or unconsciously what is and what is not 'allowed' or 'possible' to be brought into the therapeutic work.

[24] Bracketing or 'epoché' is a concept in phenomenology developed by Edmond Husserl meaning suspending the judgement which may come from personal bias in order to assess the pure essence of a psychological phenomenon.

6.2.2.3. Interesting reflections

A few comments drew attention because they did not belong to any of the categories above. The ideas they elicited pointed to psychotherapy as a major resource for the exploration of these fundamental questions about what happens after death. The idea that, as practitioners, it is our 'moral and ethical obligation' (words used in one of the comments) to consider this subject as intrinsic to the work was explored by Bennett-Carpenter (2014). As a therapist himself, the author suggests that facing up to our own mortality is 'as basic to the psychotherapeutic practice … as the injunction "know thyself" is to philosophy or "do no harm" is for medicine' (p.362). As a patient he found he 'needed' his therapist to talk about her own mortality, not abstractly and certainly not deflecting back to him. He needed to hear how she would deal with it personally, which then helped him to face up to his. As a practitioner, he recognises that the notion of death is the proverbial elephant in the room, although he points out that it is unlikely to be an explicit issue brought in by patients/clients.

6.2.3. Final comments

Most of the comments left in this third and last free-text field related to support or criticisms of the study or the survey itself.

6.2.3.1. Supportive

The supportive comments welcomed the fact that this study was being undertaken, pointing out that the subject is not sufficiently aired. This

discloses a recognition that this difficult subject, death and what may come after, is not currently sufficiently attended to by the profession of counselling and psychotherapy. The psychotherapeutic space is, in theory, a safe space where the deepest fears and feelings can be articulated or teased out. Yet what might be described as the deepest fear of all finds no easy room as an issue.

The difficulty in articulating spiritual ideas was also mentioned, which brings up a question: how can therapists who have no understanding or experience of personal spirituality offer understanding of clients' issues in this area? Pargament (2011) observes that spirituality is part of people's make-up and although clients may not present religious or spiritual problems when they come to therapy, those issues may be at the root of the presenting issues.

6.2.3.2. Critical

My inclusion of Hindus and Buddhists in the same category whilst they are fighting each other in some countries touched the nerve of one participant. Another person was aggrieved because of their view of the Abrahamic religions as 'Asiatic' and there was also criticism that I failed to include non-binary people. I acknowledge the flaws in this study, introduced by such neglect.

6.2.3.3. Miscellaneous

One person left a long comment voicing surprise that in the various studies s/he had undertaken in his/her journey to professional accreditation, which included a psychoanalytical training and training as a Cruse volunteer, there had been no mention of what may happen after death, the intimation being that the answer is 'nothing'. Yet, s/he said, there is ample 'bona fide' literature suggestive of survival of consciousness after death. This reference to this lack in training programmes, indicates that this gap leaves practitioners inadequately equipped to work effectively with clients who have had paranormal experiences, or who generally believe in life after death.

6.2.4. Examining the core question

As mentioned above, given the high proportion of respondents who stated that they believe in post-mortem consciousness in this survey (52.4%), and considering that this belief runs counter to the framework of materialistic science in which we live, I found it relevant to analyse the data of the survey based on whether participants answered 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know' to question 5 'Do you believe in some kind of conscious experience after death?'. What I sought to explore, was how these beliefs impact the participants' lives and the way they work with clients, if at all.

6.2.4.1. Believers

This section looks at the people who responded 'yes' to the core question.

6.2.4.1.1. Influence on life

Do these questions have an influence in the way you live your life?	Do you believe in life or some kind of conscious experience after death?			Totals
	Yes	No	Don't know	
Yes	43.69%	17.48%	15.53%	76.70%
No	8.74%	10.68%	3.88%	23.30%
Totals	52.43%	28.16%	19.41%	100.00%

Table 3 – Cross tabulation of belief in post-mortem consciousness and its influence on living life

Table 3 shows that out of the 103 respondents, almost 77% stated that these questions do influence the way they live their lives, irrespective of whether they are or not 'believers'.

Out of the 'believers', 80% left comments on how their views influence their lives in general. These included:

- a sense of accountability and responsibility in life;
- seeing life as a learning opportunity;
- finding meaning and hope in the belief of an afterlife;
- seeing the beauty in the mystery of existence.

A question arises as to what the reason might be for the 20% of 'believers' who chose not to leave comments. These people have engaged in the survey, which indicates interest, so could it have been lack of time? Or lack of reflection?

Of the 80% who did leave comments, most found their beliefs to impact their lives positively, giving meaning and hope to their lives but also challenging them to act responsibly with a view to future accountability.

6.2.4.1.1.1 The positive influence

The responses gave an overwhelming sense of the belief that this life is not self-contained and unconnected with what comes after, and possibly what came before. The implication is that actions may have consequences beyond what we can know or imagine, which engenders a sense of accountability for the life lived and for its consequences.

6.2.4.1.1.2 Conjectures on the afterlife

Relevant to the idea of an afterlife is whether identity, understood as self-recognition, survives. The belief that identity survives, which in this

survey was shared by just over 48% of 'believers', may imply the responsibility a person feels for their actions in life. Those actions' possible consequences may more clearly be taken into consideration and determine potential behaviour.

The Abrahamic idea of a post-mortem plane of existence was mentioned by a few respondents who expressed positive expectations of existing in this place. Nobody in this survey left a comment relating to fear of being punished in Hell or finding themselves in Purgatory. My exploration of the research literature at this time (2018) uncovered no recent studies of adherence to beliefs in Heaven and Hell. The website British Religion in Numbers surveyed the beliefs in Heaven over the period 1968 to 2010 and found positive beliefs to have fluctuated around 55% and negative around 45% (McAndrew, 2017).

Singleton (2012) researched the beliefs in an afterlife of Australian young people (aged 13 to 29 years). Although his study did not include European subjects, he makes frequent references to the West, and in particular Europe, when discussing his results. This may indicate that he feels his findings can be extrapolated on the grounds that Australia is considered a Western country. The author mentions a general decrease in the belief in the Christian Heaven and Hell afterlife, which is a legacy of the West, and an increase in the belief in reincarnation, as a result of the increase in the popularity of Buddhism. Interestingly, however, the findings of Singleton's study show that only a minority of the people

surveyed had genuine knowledge of the sacred texts or teachings of their own religion. In his conclusion, the author states that 'perhaps the most interesting findings to emerge from this investigation are the widespread acceptance of reincarnation belief – evidence of the prevalence of eclectic and self-directed ideas about spiritual matters' (p.466). This view is supported by Campbell (2010) who explains the incorporation of Eastern ideas in the West during the 20th century, and also by Walter and Waterhouse (1999), who analysed a number of surveys conducted in that century, indicating that a substantial minority in the West, which included church-going Christians, found no difficulty in adopting ideas of reincarnation into their beliefs. 'Reincarnation', the authors say, 'may be prototypical of a kind of new religious belief which requires no church, sect or cult for its sustenance' (p.196). Similarly, investigating secular eschatology, Walker (2000) researched 270 healthcare workers and 414 university students in Western New York, and found that 85.1% hoped for or believed in some form of afterlife. Belief in a specific religious type of afterlife was confirmed by 70.5%, with 29.5% believing in reincarnation.

Looking for evidence of reincarnation, Stevenson (2001) conducted research with children who remembered past lives; the research was conducted in cultures where past lives are an embedded spiritual belief. In 1967, Stevenson founded the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia School of Medicine to study phenomena which challenge the current materialist brain-mind orthodoxy, which includes

phenomena suggestive of post-mortem survival of consciousness. These studies are ongoing (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2017) and have revealed children remembering a past life to be a worldwide phenomenon (University of Virginia, 2018).

Some respondents in this survey expressed their beliefs that this life is related to a previous one and a following one, in some way. The idea of karma, a word used in replies, is part of the reincarnation narrative (e.g. Barua, 2015, Burley, 2014, Cho, 2014) and comments indicated that some practitioners hold a belief that clients' current difficulties may be a consequence of actions in a previous life. Nobody, however, made any reference in the survey to working with clients within this framework.

6.2.4.1.1.3 The mystery of existence

Many 'believers' used the word 'mystery' to qualify the reality in which they live. The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Hill, 2004) states that the Aramaic word *rāz* in the Book of Daniel is translated in the Septuagint, as *mystērion,* a Greek word meaning 'that which God has decreed shall take place in the future, the eschatological secret to be made known'. It indicates the long history of the preoccupation with the mystery of what comes after death.

The word 'mystery' was also used in the responses to indicate that there is more to the nature of the reality in which we live than what we can perceive and evaluate with our physical senses. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this view runs counter to the mainstream materialist perspective of

science (e.g. Bates, 2009, Crick, 1994, Dawkins, 2006b) but has a number of supporters in the fields of both philosophy (e.g. Chalmers, 1996, Nagel, 2012, Popper & Eccles, 2003) and science (e.g. Baruss, 2010, Goswami, 1993, Radin, 1997). Scientists exploring the limits of current scientific knowledge in the quantum field acknowledge that there is much we do not understand (and may never know) about the universe in which we live (Bohm & Hiley, 1993, Oppenheim & Wehner, 2010, Rovelli, 2017).

Consciousness can also be qualified as mysterious. In his TED Talk[25], Chalmers (2014) says, 'there is nothing we know about more directly. …. But at the same time, it's the most mysterious phenomenon in the universe'.

The mysterious nature of consciousness may also explain anomalous experiences, and, although there was no mention of those, comments were made regarding working with spiritual guides and energies and also ongoing connection with dead loved ones (see Section 7.2.3.).

The next question that 'believers' answered was whether these questions concerning what happens after death, influence their work with clients.

[25] TED Talks are video talks given by experts in their fields who have 'ideas worth spreading'.

6.2.4.1.2 Influence on the work with clients

Do these questions have an influence in the way you work with clients?	Do you believe in life or some kind of conscious experience after death?			Totals
	Yes	No	Don't know	
Yes	33.01%	20.39%	16.50%	69.90%
No	19.42%	7.77%	2.91%	30.10%
Totals	52.43%	28.16%	19.41%	100.00%

Table 4– Cross tabulation of beliefs in post-mortem consciousness and its influence on work with clients

Table 4 shows that out of the 103 people who responded to this survey, almost 70% confirmed that these questions do influence the way they work with clients, whether they do or not believe in some kind of conscious experience after death. Of the 54 'believers', 63% said the questions do and 37% said they do not influence the way they work with clients (see Figure 16).

Amongst the comments left by 'believers' who feel these questions do influence the way they work with clients was the importance of spirituality in the work.

6.2.4.1.2.1. Spirituality

'Believers' see themselves as spiritual – that is, part of a bigger picture and connected to and sometimes feeling guided by something bigger than themselves. Telfener (2017) describes spirituality as:

> A drive that emerges from the questions that concern the living and can become an everyday practice that brings an expansion to our awareness, creating a virtuous cycle that self-enhances itself. It is a dimension that connects us to the universal being. An attitude embodied in inter-subjectivity that forces us to abandon our certainties and our thirst for strength that pushes us to venture into unknown lands; an attitude that makes us fragile and prevents us from mistaking the unknown with the non-existent. (p.156)

One particular comment in this quote jumps out of the background for me. It has been noted that the unknown and the non-existent are often conflated in the materialistic paradigm (Sheldrake, 2012, p.297) and yet the unknown, even if beyond understanding, is central to spirituality and a spiritual reality.

Spirituality is a mindset which involves awareness of the connection between oneself and other people, with the planet, and the transcendental, even if it is beyond logical understanding. It is a desire to

explore the mysteries of life and living, and the significance of being human. It is a capacity to open oneself to love towards existence itself. It is a particular stance in therapeutic work. Within this framework is the acceptance of clients' unusual experiences, including paranormal ones, taking these experiences at face value, rather than interpreting them as defences (Sperry, 2016), as mentioned by a survey respondent. This validates the client in their authenticity and allows for a door to be opened for the exploration of themes which, within certain psychological approaches, may be seen as pathologies. Hearing voices (internally or externally) and seeing visions are experiences that are ubiquitous in the population (Rankin, 2008). Yet auditory and visual 'hallucinations' are emphasised in the DSM-V[26] as being of clinical significance, and even a single presented symptom can be classified by the medical profession as 'other specified schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorder' (Waters & Fernyhough, 2017). Although research by Waters et al. (2018) shows that these hallucinatory experiences may be a result of spiritual or religious experiences, not many medical or psychiatric articles on the subject were found in the literature search conducted for this study.

Some respondents mentioned seeking guidance from 'spirit', both in their private life and in their work with clients. In their interesting paper 'Psychotherapy and the Spirit-in-Process: An Integration of Process

[26] The DSM-V – the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is published by the American Psychiatric Association and is relied on by many professionals worldwide for guidance.

Theology, Pneumatology, and Systems Psychology', Rennebohm and Thoburn (2017), explain the Holy Spirit as both transcendent and immanent[27] and its presence as Spirit-in-Process, an active force in the therapeutic work towards client transformation. Although this transformation is part of the 'divine ebb and flow of the universe in process' (p.137), a personal connection with this force cannot be ruled out.

Some respondents also mentioned speaking with spirits of deceased relatives and loved ones (as they speak to saints). However, nobody mentioned inviting clients to 'speak' to dead loved ones. Yet, in their research, Beischel et al. Beischel, Mosher, and Boccuzzi (2014) reveal the benefits of after-death communications in the resolution of unresolved issues and grief by the experience of continuity of bonds. The authors' work focuses mainly on therapeutic work with bereaved clients, but a wider use of this strategy should not be dismissed. DeGroot (2018) describes her research into transcorporeal communication, in which she found that her participants actively communicated with dead friends and relatives, sending messages and getting replies in the form of feelings or spoken words. From a different perspective, Mitchell (2007) validates communication with a diseased person, not within a context of an afterlife but from a pragmatic and secular perspective of communicating with the *internalised* version of the loved person – their feelings, emotions

[27] Based on the work of Whitehead (1978) and Moltmann (1979)

and desires, as we knew them. In other words, a *construction* of immortality.

Supporting the idea of such communication in either framework are Bartolini et al. (2018), who point out that the power of talking with the dead resides in the quality of the affect which emerges, which renders the communication fundamentally believable to the experiencer.

6.2.4.1.2.1 Transgenerational trauma

The concept of transgenerational trauma is the idea that traumas experienced personally or collectively may affect subsequent generations in identifiable ways. The concept was developed following the manifestation of anxiety and depression symptoms in children of Holocaust survivors in the 1960s. Although the mechanism of this transmission remains unclear (Fossion, Leys, Vandeleur, Kempenaers, Braun, Verbanck, & Linkowski, 2015), transgenerational trauma has been explored by counsellors and psychotherapists, especially within systemic family therapy, to understand issues presented by clients in contexts other than Holocaust survivors. More recently, a tool called the Transgenerational Trauma and Resilience Genogram was developed by Goodman (2013); it offers the practitioner ways of situating the client within a generational context which may lead to a better understanding of the aetiology of his/her issues.

6.2.4.1.2.2 Reincarnation

Some 'believers' mentioned their belief in reincarnation as influencing their work with clients. Whereas traditionally therapists will look to early life experiences as a way to understand the origin of particular issues, the idea that karma may play a role in a client's issues shines a particular light on their interpretation. The idea that clients may experience challenges as a consequence of actions or behaviours in a previous life has encouraged some people to seek the help of past lives or regression therapies. This type of therapy is controversial: articles exist dismissing its effectiveness (e.g. Woods & Baruss, 2004), whilst others claim it is unethical (e.g. Andrade, 2017). The basis of this latter claim is that this modality uses hypnosis and that suggestion is used to induce the experience of a past life. Andrade identified dangers, claiming that 'the greatest risk in past life regressions is that the hypnotist may implant false memories in the subject, and due to suggestibility, the subject may come to feel to them as quite real' (p.21). Suggestion, as a powerful operative, plays an important role in people's beliefs; this is particularly the case in hypnosis, an approach which uses suggestion as its basic tool (Lynn & Kirsch, 2006). However, the role of suggestion can be minimised by using active imagination in which the content of a 'past-life' experience is generated freely by the client. Woolger (1987) suggests that, irrespective of whether these 'memories' are genuine expressions of a past life or not, they carry dynamic structural elements which are intrinsic to a client's healing process contributing to a beneficial outcome.

Echoing Singleton's (2012) conclusion that beliefs in the afterlife in the contemporary West have become a self-authenticated, individualised phenomenon, Lee (2017) points out that reincarnation theory has been moving away from doctrinal accounts towards a more individually informed area, in which paranormal experiences play an important role in the reformulation of theory. Because, as the author asserts, reincarnation beliefs have become intrinsic to a variety of afterlife theories independent of a religious framework, they have also become subject to attention from various academic disciplines, enabling the modality of past-life regression therapy to become widely known, albeit not recognised by the main professional accrediting bodies in the UK.

6.2.4.2. Non-believers

Out of 103 respondents, 28.2% are 'non-believers'. The fact that these people agreed to engage with the survey is interesting, since they were taking seriously something they do not believe in – that is, the idea of an afterlife. This low number may also indicate that other non-believers who came across the survey may have decided not to engage with it.

6.2.4.2.1Influence on life

Out of the 29 'non-believers', 62% confirmed that these questions about post-mortem consciousness influence the way they live their lives (see Figure 22).

The comments reflected their awareness that living in the moment is the most important way of living a good life. In their replies was embedded the concept of meaning. Reflecting Heidegger's (1962) idea that death makes life meaningful, the replies pointed to living mindfully, truthfully and authentically as a way of confronting the inevitability of mortality with equanimity. Sigrist (2015) identifies four elements necessary in a meaningful engagement with life:

1. involvement in projects which are relevant and important to one's authentic values and priorities;
2. agency in the endeavours;
3. success in the aims of the projects;
4. the willingness to take risks.

A life that incorporates those four elements, according to the author, implies a journey of self-discovery which in itself leads to a virtuous cycle of fulfilment.

Finding meaning within, rather than outside, the span of life is a major constituent aspect of the existential perspective. The finality of life is an important theme within this philosophical school of thought as seen in Chapter 2. As Gray (1951) points out, 'Existentialism consists chiefly … of a pervasive mood and a metaphysics and the two are, curiously enough, related to the point where they mutually determine each other' (p.114). The mood of the comments was one of resignation and determination to make the best of life as it presents itself. And that is

congruent with the metaphysics that the world is as our senses indicate it to be – in other words, there is nothing outside what we can rationally apprehend.

6.2.4.2.2Influence on the work with clients

Two main psychotherapeutic schools have a clear approach towards death: the psychoanalytic and the existential.

The psychoanalytic approach is informed by Freud's argument that death has no place in the unconscious. It is a construct because we cannot experience it. Death anxiety, his theory proposes, is a manifestation of something else (Freud, 2013); some other issue assailing the patient is producing the anxiety. Therapists who abide by this perspective typically use the tool of interpretation to identify the source of the problem so the subject of death may not be attended to in its own right. Razinsky (2007) points out that this is a blind spot in Freud's theory for which the theory has been the object of criticism by various thinkers.

The existential model dismisses the possibility that death may be a portal into some other kind of conscious experience, and the work with clients in existential therapy is towards and acceptance of endings (e.g. Barnett, 2009, Gray, 1951, Loy, 2010, Yalom, 2008b). Accepting the inevitability of death as final encourages clients to face and work through their fears without the assistance of comforting possibilities.

For both these approaches the subject of post-mortem consciousness is a non-issue. Yet, out of the 29 'non believers' over 72% expressed their view that these questions do influence their work with clients (see Figure 23).

6.2.4.3. The doubtful ones – don't know

Out of the 103 participants in the survey, 20 declared their position as nescient. They had clearly considered the options but could not commit either way. Many of their replies reflected those of both 'believers' and 'non-believers'.

Most of the responses in this group tended towards the belief that consciousness survives physical death. Only 2 out of the 14 comments left, had the opposite bias. This being so, from an overall picture of the survey, the number of people who entertained the idea of death as a portal would read closer to 70%.

With regard to working with clients, the replies in their entirety mentioned being open to whatever the client brings and working with that. This follows the idiographic emphasis of Carl Rogers' (1951) person-centred approach which aims at encouraging clients to actualise their potential and become their own person. The principles of the client-centred model have become incorporated into a variety of therapeutic approaches (Warner, 2000), with one of its core principles being that it is essentially non-directive, with therapists developing the work within the client's own frame of reference.

6.3. Conclusion

It is clear from the findings that a high percentage of participants do believe in some kind of conscious experience after death and that this belief plays an important role in their epistemological and ontological orientation.

The most important detail to emerge from this survey in the context of the question of this research, however, is that over 70% of respondents, irrespective of their beliefs in an afterlife, indicated that the question of what happens after death is relevant, influencing both how they live and how they work with clients. Although death is part of our routine experience, whether distantly removed (as in nature), closer (as in public figures and pets), or even closer (as in personal experiences of the loss of loved ones), confronting one's personal mortality is a singular subject towards which we develop singular rational notions, beliefs and emotional attitudes. In the secular world in which we live, especially in the West, our personal mortality is not part of our mental and emotional environment, yet it lurks in there in the back, as the TMT research (Solomon et al., 2015) indicates. That awareness at a personal level is important for us as psychotherapists, because our authenticity in the therapy room is understood to be one of the main elements which determine the positive outcomes of the work (Lietaer, 1993) and how we attend to the subject will indicate to clients our disposition towards it.

The issue of covert manifestation of death anxiety in clients through panic attacks, phobias and so on, stands in direct opposition to the Freudian psychoanalytical theory, which proposes that death anxiety is a manifestation of some other unconscious issue and the exploration needed is in that direction. Although such orthodox Freudian teaching is no longer predominant, this area would benefit from attention on training courses.

In order to gain a more comprehensive picture, questions could have been asked about the experience participants have of clients' issues around the meaning of death and their own mortality in their own clinics. This would have moved our understanding from a psycho-philosophical field to an evidential scenario, which would have been helpful in giving a better understanding the landscape as far as this important topic is concerned.

This question was explored in more depth in the interviews, a discussion towards which I turn my attention now.

Chapter 7 – Interviews Discussion

7.1. Overview

As mentioned in Chapter 3 on methodology, the results of the survey set the scene and the interviews with 12 therapists who identify themselves as spiritual were designed to explore in more detail, the beliefs the participants hold about post-mortem existence, how these inform their personal life, and whether and how they influence their work with clients. The criterion of spiritual ontology was chosen because this study focuses on perspectives on post-mortem existence, and believing that the nature of reality includes a transcendental dimension is more likely to be a belief of people who understand that this life is meaningful in a bigger context, as set out in spiritual traditions.

7.2. Participants' personal orientation

All participants interviewed confirmed they felt themselves to be part of a reality which transcends that perceived by the physical senses.

Although most of the interview participants confirmed their ontological status as spiritual, some revealed certainty regarding the nature of what they will find after death, whereas others were less certain.

For the two participants, Rachel and Paul, who had been part of fundamentalist Christian communities, the reality of Heaven and Hell as post-mortem destinations was a certainty that ruled their early lives. Rachel was born into a family of her community and Paul joined his at the age of around 14. Due to her fears of eternal damnation, Rachel suffered from severe depression following a traumatic event in her life which made her fear such an aftermath. Although distressing, this is not surprising, as mental health issues are recognised as being caused or exacerbated by authoritarian religions (Hartz & Everett, 1989).

Both participants mentioned how the negative influence in their early lives meant they were haunted by the fear of Hell and eternal damnation and although they both opted out of their respective communities in due course as adults, that fear, which was so firmly inculcated early on, lingered: had they made the right decision in leaving? Would they, after all, find themselves in Hell after death? It is known that the psychological impact of a fundamentalist past can persist for years (Moyers, 1990). In Paul's case it showed for example, in his refusal to work with homosexuals which persisted until he became more certain about his choice of leaving the fundamentalist community, which happened only slowly over time. For Rachel, the echoes of the fears of teachings she

heard in childhood persisted for a much longer period of time, and as she acknowledges, may still exist unconsciously as she wonders whether she is still today able to hear when/if clients mention something related to the paranormal, which was understood to be 'the work of the devil' for much of her younger life.

A different belief, based on the principles of a benevolent Christian God, was shown to be a source of profound spiritual faith, that was beneficial to Joan. She has felt held and supported by God throughout her life as a result of her beliefs. Faith incorporates trust, in both a cognitive and an affective way. The expression 'feeling held' suggests a strong, affective element in Joan's faith (Michon, 2017), which has been a source of joy and pleasure for her.

Rachel sees herself now as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), Paul is Pagan and Joan is still a practising Catholic. Fred follows Taoism, and Daniel, as a Christian priest, 'does not regard adherence to a creed of much merit'. The other seven participants define themselves as SBNR. What unites them as a group is seeing themselves ontologically in a relationship with a bigger picture – an existent transcendental world which, they recognise, is not available to rational understanding by our limited minds. Claire and Dianna use the word 'energies' to describe their epistemological relationship with that world, and Daniel is keenly aware of paranormal phenomena as evidence for the bigger picture. Sylvia, Laura and Fred use the concept of consciousness as a descriptor of the

metaphysical and cosmological reality, and Sally, Carol and Kim are less able to describe the nature of the world in which they live but feel confidently open to a reality of post-mortem consciousness.

7.2.1. Living in the bigger picture

To explain the world in which they live, participants expanded on their metaphysical views. The world of physics and the mystery of quantum theory were quoted by Sally, Daniel, Paul and Kim to explain the unexplainable. They referred to the inter-relations between all parts of physical reality, and the idea that everything is interconnected is also fundamental in understanding consciousness (Velmans, 2000). Daniel in particular is interested in the relationship between quantum theory and metaphysics, hoping to find in physics an explanation for his psychic experiences, which he sees as real but unexplainable.

At the core of the mystery of reality is the mystery of consciousness.

7.2.2. Consciousness as our playfield

As stated in Chapter 2, it is easier to explore our experience of consciousness than to explain what it is. Within the context of this study, as validation of the theory of post-mortem survival of consciousness, what Koestenbaum (1976) says is relevant: consciousness, he explains,

> is not a thought, but an experience, not a concept but an accessible region of being and that experience can only be apprehended through direct confrontation of the death of myself … Only through the reminder of death do I understand that I am more than a body, more than a personality, more than a name – I am also a consciousness, one that is aware of my body, of my personality and of my name, but that is not to be confused with them. (p.50)

In the hierarchy of sophistication of consciousness, 'God', as understood by mystical traditions, is understood as the Highest Consciousness (Bucke, 2011). The spiritual impulse from the participants, recognises the affinity of their own consciousness with that of the Divine, as one of quality, in other words, they recognise themselves as being a 'spark of the Divine'. Furthermore, they see themselves (and every other human) as embodied and interconnected consciousness, and this was clearly expressed by Sylvia, Fred, Paul, Dianna and Laura. They talked about connecting with their clients as a spiritual experience.

In exploring the spiritual space that can develop between therapist and client, West (2000) describes his own experiences and the results of his research with spiritual therapists. Drawing from his research into healing in therapy, he quotes from a participant:

> When a certain level of resonance is achieved something comes in. … when two people are in resonance, when there is a common purpose and there is something of a common field, and there is harmony there, I do think that there is often at that moment something else, something of the 'other' comes in at that point. That is my experience, that suddenly there is more than just two people in the room. Now whether that's grace, whether that is

> insight, whether that is healing, it depends on your language. … When you are talking about the grace coming in, we [therapist and client] both get something from it, but that's not my energy, but it's my skill or my craft to somehow bring us, this field we are in, this therapy, to the point where that can happen. (p.67).

This is corroborated by a personal contact in his research who said:

> Practitioners who consciously seek to develop and refine their awareness of their own field and those of their clients can deliberately modify their field to establish a resonance with clients in order to enhance therapeutic effectiveness (p.67).

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Rennebohm and Thoburn (2017) call the participation of the Divine in the therapeutic process, 'Spirit-in-Process'. Ultimately, how we understand the phenomenon is a matter of personal interpretation.

Claire and Dianna use different language and each told me that when working with clients, they feel they are a channel for some higher energy. Unlike Claire, Dianna feels she has agency and examines her intuition before giving it a voice. I speculate that this is because working shamanically, Dianna has a guide with whom she communicates regularly, whereas Claire is more open to directly articulating the message of that higher energy.

The word 'energy' used by participants in this context has a phenomenological connotation and refers to the flow that is the field of consciousness in our being-in-the world (Koestenbaum, 1976). It is the life-force which gives meaning to a particular moment or experience.

Dianna, who works shamanically, retrieves bits of the soul which have become disconnected, in order to render the client whole. The soul[28] in this model is an energetic entity which can be retrieved by another energetic entity (i.e. the therapist), thus restoring harmony to the being. Claire, who also works with energies, does not work shamanically. She understands that in what she calls the 'Unseen World' live benevolent, but also malevolent, energies or spirits. These are unhealthy and do not have good intentions. She talks of spirit attachments.

In 1999, psychiatrist Alan Sanderson, a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interests Group, formed the British Association for Spirit Release. This association brought together around 170 psychiatrists who used the concept of spirit attachment to help their patients. Powell (2005) explains that although the concept is denied and ignored by the current scientific paradigm, new physics, in particular the area of quantum theory, may well be shown to be helpful in offering explanations in the future, including explanations of the phenomenon of spirit attachment. Historically, the idea that spirits of dead people and/or other entities which may inhabit some other realm of existence can and do interfere with people's lives both in beneficial and in malevolent ways, has been part of the human narrative (Casey, 2009, Raphael, 2009, Segal, 2004). In the New Testament, we find in Mark 5:1-

[28] Note the use of the religious word 'soul' in a system which is patently not religious. In fact this participant does not refer to God but prefers the term 'All That Is' to refer to the Highest Consciousness.

20 that Jesus cleared a man of demonic possession, the terminology used for malevolent attachments.

Where a spirit attachment occurs, the person may be understood to have a porous consciousness for reasons relating to mental disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, trauma or inherent nature (Sanderson, 1998). Spirit possession is not to be confused with what used to be called 'multiple personality disorder', now called 'dissociative identity disorder' (DID)' although the manifestation may be similar. Kluft (1996) explains DID as a complex, chronic, dissociative psychopathology occurring mostly in people with traumatic childhood experiences. Although its nature is not completely understood, it is accepted that DID is a disruption of self-consciousness manifesting different volitions and tendencies through autonomous 'alters', which have personalities of their own (Maiese, 2016, Ross, Ferrell, & Schroeder, 2014, Stiles, 2017).

Transcendental intrusions are not necessarily negative. A positive, creative angle on influx of transcendental energies is what Kroth (2010) calls 'creative possession', which can be conscious or unconscious. An example of an unconscious creative possession is Paul McCartney's song 'Yesterday', which came to him in a dream in November 1963. He woke up with this song in his head, went to the piano, played it and wrote it down. Another example of what Kroth calls 'conscious creative possession' is the story of Alma Deutscher, born in 2005 in Dorking, England: this composer, violinist and pianist wrote her first full-length

opera (*Cinderella*) by the age of 10 and had it premièred in Vienna in 2016 under the patronage of conductor Zubin Mehta. The music comes to her whilst she walks around, often in her garden shaking a skipping rope given to her by an aunt. The BBC made a documentary on her, which was shown in the summer of 2017. Jay Greenberg is another example, born in 1991 in New Haven, Connecticut, he had written his first composition by the age of 6, one year before he started formal musical training. And, of course, there is the classic example of Mozart (1756-1791), who wrote his first composition at the age of 5.

In his book *Anger, Madness and the Daimonic*, Diamond (1996) develops the idea that the 'daimonic' is the source of such creativity. He quotes, amongst others, Kipling, who acknowledges his daemon being with him as he created the *Jungle Book*. Philemon was the name Jung gave to his daemon, with whom he had lengthy conversations (Jung, 2009). Jung experienced frequent influxes from the transcendental; in one of them he was faced with a crowd of spirits who said 'we have come back from Jerusalem where we found not what we sought' (Jung, 1967a, p.339). He said that 'the daemon and daimonic express a determining power which comes upon man from outside, like providence or fate, though the ethical decision is left to man' (Jung, 1959b, p.109). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to expand on this subject, however, it is relevant to point out that although the rational mind cannot make sense of such experiences, there is enough evidence from credible sources that these influxes not only exist both in creative and destructive modes but they also point to an

understanding of some kind of active connection with the transcendental, such as those articulated by Claire and Dianna.

Although not all of the participants used the term 'consciousness' to explain their relationship with the transcendental, it was clear that even though their language was different, their frame of reference was ontologically similar. The lived experience of an interaction with the transcendental is understood as paranormal or psi. These experiences typically violate current scientific theories, occupying a paradoxical place. On the one hand, the experiences are felt and interpreted as veridical by the experiencer; on the other, they do not conform with a scientific understanding of reality. They can be seen as consistent with the view of consciousness as primary, what Kastrup (2018) calls the 'Cosmic Universe'. The author uses the metaphor of 'alters'[29] of this fundamental reality, to describe organisms, including ourselves, expressing the Cosmic Consciousness in their own particular ways, at their own particular levels of sophistication within the greater whole. Cosmic Consciousness is therefore understood to be infinite and immortal (Bucke, 2011). Whereas third-person experience can be dismissed as unreliable, first-person experience is usually convincing to the experiencer; second-person evaluation will depend on worldview.

[29] The word 'alter' is used to describe particular personalities present in the condition called dissociative identity disorder.

All interviewed participants in this research were familiar with paranormal phenomena except for Rachel, due to her early life experience in a fundamentalist Christian community, and Joan who, as a practising Catholic, does not engage with this area.

7.2.3. Transpersonal experiences as supporting evidence

In the interviews, Sylvia, Laura, Carol, Daniel, Kim and Claire spoke about their powerful spontaneous paranormal experiences. Some of these experiences were interpreted as actions of discarnate spirits, and some as apparitions or hearing voices of known people who were dead. Daniel spoke about going to mediums in an effort to understand paranormal experiences such as communication with dead people, which revealed to him phenomena which challenge his rational thinking. He specifically calls himself a chartered scientist, expressing the need to validate his own lived experiences of paranormal phenomena within a credible worldview. Laura mentioned that she saw her father in the kitchen of his home a few days after he died but then questioned herself as to whether what she saw was real. Her analytical, logical orientation challenged her to admit something which was rationally impossible – seeing an apparition. Her 'inner knowing', however, endorsed her experience as veritable. Carol had a clairaudience experience, hearing the very distinctive voice of her dead uncle who gave her a message that was helpful to her dying aunt. Because of her disposition, she did not question the provenance of the message and accepted it for what it was. Kim sat with a dying friend and witnessed the physical manifestation of

this man's consciousness or soul, leaving his body; Laura witnessed paranormal activity in a house; Paul mentioned a ghost his grandmother saw; and Claire spoke of being a channel for healing people and animals.

As mentioned above, current conventional wisdom sometimes interprets experiences of hearing voices, having visions and so on, as pathological hallucinations at worst or, at best, products of the imagination (Bennet & Bennett, 2010, Carr & Sharp, 2014, Hayes, 2011). Of course, there are visions and experiences which can indeed be classified as pathological, normally when the experiencer shows evidence of constancy in their dysfunctional living (Clarke, 2001). However, when perfectly functional people have those experiences, something else may be going on. Tart (2001) explains that some people are able to shift their awareness consciously or unconsciously, onto somewhere other than the physical reality in which they find themselves, or indeed access other realities. The attribute of non-locality of mind, which is based on quantum theory (Bohm & Hiley, 1977, Radin, 2006b), may be one explanation. Others may be forthcoming. What can be said with confidence, however, is that psi or paranormal experiences are ubiquitous across the population (Rankin, 2008) which means that they may well be experienced by psychotherapy clients. Depending on their degree of understanding, people may feel frightened by them. Whether clients bring them to therapy or not will depend on various factors (see Section 7.3.).

The above-mentioned experiences described by the participants happened spontaneously. However, people also explore other dimensions of reality by means of altered states of consciousness induced by psychedelics and other drugs. Of the participants interviewed, only Laura and Sally mentioned having taken drugs in their early years. For Laura this experience was part of partying with her crowd of friends, but Sally was an active member of the hippie culture. She mentioned that her experiences with drugs were motivated by a desire to look for an entry into, and an exploration of, a 'higher dimension' which would reveal to her that there is more to the reality of our 'daily grind', as she put it. Although she did not mention it, I assume that Dianna must have also explored other 'realms' of existence in her shamanic training. Luke (2008) refers to the use of psychedelic substances for paranormal purposes as ubiquitous throughout cultures to facilitate spiritual knowledge. In some shamanic cultures these are referred to as 'sacred medicines'. The use of such substances with a view to learn about the nature of reality, however, is not limited to spiritual traditions. At the International Transpersonal Conference, Bache (2017) presented an account of his experiences over 20 years of high dose LSD intake sessions. He related his experiences, in which he travelled through different realms, within and outside time, and what he learned about himself as well as about this and other worlds. Although there is no absolute certainty on how psychedelic drugs work in the brain, the research by Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, Williams, Stone, Reed, Colasanti, Tyacke, Leech, Malizia, Murphy, Hobden, Evans, Feilding, Wise, and Nutt (2012) concludes that

'the results strongly imply that the subjective effects of psychedelic drugs are caused by decreased activity and connectivity in the brain's key connector hubs, thus enabling a state of unconstrained cognition' (p.2138). This conclusion seems to validate the access to other dimension of consciousness which feel real to the experiencer.

The nature of the 'field' of consciousness is beyond our understanding and some people are at home with its different dimensions and their influence. Mystics of all religions have been known to access those dimensions, in some ways even defying natural laws of gravity by levitating, such as did St. Joseph of Cupertino (1603-1663), who was witnessed by a congregation (Fante & Petracca, 1962). The resurrection of Jesus which became central to Christianity can be classified as paranormal, and, as mentioned above, visions of people after their death, defined as apparitions, are ubiquitous (Fontana, 2010, Presti, 2018, Salter, 2018). Under the lens of scientific investigation, however, such phenomena are impossible (Smith, 1965).

As seen in Chapter 2, belief incorporates an element of intuitive knowledge.

7.2.4. Tacit knowing, the tool of belief

By saying 'yeah, I know that' when reading about the experiences of the mystics, Sylvia exemplified tacit knowing (Polanyi, 2009). It is an intuitive knowing which bypasses rational explanations. For Sylvia, this resonance

echoes the experience of being part of, and a manifestation of, the Divine, as expressed by Meister Eckhart: 'the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me' (Eckhart, 2009, p.298). This kind of knowledge is what Ward (2014a) calls 'recognition'. It refers to a knowledge which is pre-knowing, intuitive, a felt sense. This is the world Sylvia sometimes inhabits, when she is not assailed by self-doubts, which she frequently is. This mystical knowing is very different from understanding God as an external object, authoritative and demanding, as promoted by the communities in which Rachel and Paul lived their early lives. In their case, fear became the iron curtain imposed by the rules behind which their experience could not go. Sylvia's knowing, in contrast, is imbued with awe and comes from an inner feeling she knows at her intuitive, tacit knowing level, to be absolutely real. Her belief in some kind of life after death has the same characteristics, it is an expression of her tacit knowing.

On the other hand, it was noticeable that a number of participants (e.g. Sally, Laura, Claire, Dianna, Daniel and Sylvia) made a point of declaring their adherence to the credibility of science. This is not surprising because, as mentioned above, materialistic science is the criterion of credibility in the current paradigm, as exemplified by the popularity of Francis Crick (1994), Richard Dawkins (2006b), Stephen Hawking (2011) and others.

7.2.5. Participants' sense of their own mortality

The idea of personal mortality was expressed by and large without a great deal of anxiety by the participants interviewed. They all believe in some kind of post-mortem existence.

Joan, who is a practising Catholic Christian, expressed her optimistic hope of an eternal existence in Heaven. With regards to Hell, that idea was not a reasonable possibility for any of the participants, supporting the research by Geiringer (2018) who found the concept of Hell to have disappeared in post-war Catholicism, replaced by a more autonomous form of religiosity.

Daniel, who exercises his interest in the survival of consciousness by being a member of the Society for Psychical Research and by having enthusiasm for mediumship and other paranormal experiences, maintains a stance of uncertainty regarding the nature of the afterlife. He claims a status of chartered scientist, betraying the difficulty in reconciling what he experiences as evidence and scientific knowledge. The scientific investigation of paranormal phenomena has been undertaken by the chief scientist of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Dean Radin (1997, 2006a, 2013, 2018), with some interesting results supporting the evidence that such phenomena are not a result of imagination. However, because they challenge the current paradigm, these results are dismissed by many scientists (Sheldrake, 2012). The phenomenon of near-death experiences (NDEs) is an example.

7.2.6. Near-death experiences

Kim, Paul and Carol mentioned NDEs as supporting their beliefs in post-mortem existence. Kim heard about them from a client whose experience was so powerful and so convincing that, as mentioned above, she 'utterly, utterly believed him'.

People who have experienced those phenomena report a state of consciousness in which their awareness is operating independently of their physical body (Van Lommel, 2013). The experiences are non-culturally specific and throughout the world people have reported similar trajectories; going through a tunnel, often hearing music, and moving towards a strong light where they find themselves being welcomed by beings (Fenwick, 1995, Greyson, 2010, Van Lommel, 2013). These experiences can be culturally informed. Christians may find themselves meeting saints or Jesus and, in other cultures, people meet their own sacred beings. In other instances, people may meet previously departed family members or angelic beings.

The irrefutable fact from the perspective of the people who experience them is that an NDE causes profound transformation, and people lose the fear of death (Rominger, 2009).

7.2.7. Models of post-mortem existence

The participants who were 'believers' considered death as an event in their future through different lenses:

- death as a portal into some other kind of consciousness without self-recognition – re-joining Cosmic Consciousness;
- death as a portal into some other kind of consciousness with self-recognition and recognition of others.

7.2.7.1. Post-mortem existence – without self-recognition

Fred was clear in his belief that his personal consciousness will 'dissolve' into something ultimate. The idea of returning to Cosmic Consciousness, or using different terminology 'God', is inherent in a number of spiritual traditions. In his seminal book *Cosmic Consciousness*, Bucke (2011) explains Cosmic Consciousness as 'consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of life and order of the universe' (p.14). The metaphor frequently used for returning to this greater reality is the drop of water, which is singular and individual whilst in the identity of a drop but loses its identity as a drop when it returns to the ocean, from where it once came. This metaphor was indeed used by Fred when he explained his view of what happens after death. Deikman (1982) using a similar metaphor explains what the mystics call the 'self as a personal aspect', which:

> is masked by ordinary consciousness, unbound by space and time, that can be both individual and universal – as with the wave that exists and then merges completely with the ocean from which it has never been separate and whose substance is its own. (p.65)

This view negates post-mortem self-recognition; it is the oblivion of personal identity. Fred and Daniel voiced their hope and preference for

this scenario, stating that it means giving up the stresses of life and dropping into a state of fundamental peace and tranquillity. This may be a state of consciousness that it is difficult to rationally understand since there is no self-recognition. Perhaps the nearest comparable would be the mystical experiences some people have had of pure consciousness, in which the self disappears and consciousness is experienced as merged into the whole of Creation (Forman, 1999).

7.2.7.2. Post-mortem existence with self-recognition

Dianna, Kim, Claire, Laura, Sally, Sylvia, Carol, Paul and Joan believe that post-mortem existence does include self-recognition.

For Joan, the post-mortem environment is the Christian Heaven with an expectation of future resurrection of the body. Dianna, Kim, Laura, Sally, Sylvia, Carol and Paul believe in reincarnation. They were careful to point out, however, that it is not the ego which survives but the self.

'Ego' and 'self' have particular meanings. The word 'ego' was used by Freud (2001) to indicate an aspect of the psyche which had different attributes from the id and the superego. The ego is the mediator between the forces of the id and the superego and is that aspect of ourselves which we present to the world. Ego, in the sense of personality, is not what survives death; what does is that part of us that has no attributes, the self.

Having no attributes of personality and character, the self is equal to the pure experience of 'I AM' as developed by Needleman (2003). It is the part of us he calls the 'soul'. The connection of the self or soul with the Ultimate Consciousness, or God in this model, is permanent and in special moments it is through the soul that we experience the influx of the Divine Mind, an experience which is suffused with the emotion of the sublime. Needleman says that 'whatever the depth or degree of this contact with the Self (or soul), it is intrinsically incomprehensible to the ordinary time-driven mind [i.e. the rational] – except when it is actually taking place' (p.110).

It is the self, or soul, which 8 out of the 12 interviewed participants in the study believe survives death and goes on to be reincarnated in sequential lives.

7.2.8. The reincarnation journey

Singleton (2015) found that in 2008, 46% of the population in the UK, the same proportion in Australia, and 75% of people in the US believed in life after death. Based on this research, he further studied beliefs of Australian youths (aged 13 to 29 years) and found that their ideas about life after death were idiosyncratic and self-directed, not attached to any religious doctrine or teachings. He concluded that there is widespread belief in reincarnation, pointing to the pervasive individualism present in current Western culture, which allows for a degree of freedom in the way people can imagine their fate after death.

The idea of reincarnation is potentially relevant to the profession of psychotherapy. If reincarnation is indeed our journey – if we, humans, are engaged in progressive learning towards some kind of evolution of the soul – then as well as future lives, it is likely that we have had past lives. If that is so, it is possible that some of the circumstances and issues in our lives are a result, not of early life psychological experiences, but possibly of past lives issues. Claire sees her clients in the light of possible past lives issues they may be bringing into this life. She explained that although this is always at the back of her mind, she will only discuss it with her clients if she feels they are open to this idea. Carol used this idea to explain to herself the difficulties that some of her clients experience as being necessary for their spiritual development. She also mentioned that she had herself undergone past lives therapy.

7.2.8.1. Past lives therapy

Past lives therapies have a high profile in the contemporary Western world. Typing 'past lives therapy' into https://www.google.co.uk returns 150 million hits, including therapy offers, training and accreditation organisations. It must be said that neither the UKCP (the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) nor the BACP (the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) accredit this modality. In this approach, past lives are accessed with the use of hypnosis following a variety of protocols. During the process, people are supposed to access memories associated with previous incarnations which have direct

relevance to problems they may be facing in their current lives. Paul, who is a hypnotherapist is often asked by clients to explore current issues through this approach, but he does not believe in the veracity of the information accessed, so he refuses. However, even accepting that what comes up in such a process is unlikely to constitute true memories, the process can be seen through the lens of metaphor. Jungian therapist, Roger Woolger (1944-2011), developed a regression method he called 'Deep Memory Process'. In his book *Other Lives, Other Selves* (1987), he says:

> Past life therapy, as a rule, does not set out to prove anything. Proof or disproof of reincarnation is strictly the province of parapsychology and research. … As a means to relieving symptoms, the ability to access past life memories and secondary personalities has a number of advantages over established therapies. One great benefit of working through phobias, separation anxiety, guilt, etc, as past life stories is that the process displaces the conflicts from the stuck places in the rememberer's current life to an entirely new context. By becoming 'another person' through the suggestion of the therapist, the ego is relieved of the burden of confronting 'real' parents, 'real' losses, 'real disabilities', and so on. The psyche is freed by the magical 'as if' to produce stories that do not threaten the living ego, which is invited to sit back and watch the drama, as it were. (p.312)

According to the presence of offers and facilities on the internet, past lives regression therapists and their modality are clearly in demand. But that is not the same as dealing with the subject of death in therapy.

7.3. Working with clients

For some, death is scary, threatening, the ultimate unknown. It is a mystery. Death is an issue which may unbalance some people and, as such, is of relevance to the work of psychotherapy. Attitudes to death within the profession of psychology have in the past few decades been informed by psychological studies conducted with the aim of having an overview of how the population relates to the subject (Becker, 1973, Greenberg & Arndt, 2011, Thorson & Powell, 1994). The main signifier explored is anxiety (Carleton, 2016), understood and accepted as frequently associated with thoughts about personal mortality, and scales have been devised to enable a fast and generic assessment (Kelly & Corriveau, 1995, Petty, Hayslip, Caballero, & Jenkins, 2015, Templer, 1970).

An interesting evaluation, however, was made by Neimeyer, Wittkowski, and Moser (2010), who conducted an extensive meta-analysis of studies over the decades between the 1960s and 2000. They uncovered that although they are still referred to, older studies suffer from a number of problems which demonstrate that the results of early research are not intrinsically relevant and are therefore of questionable reliability. The authors point to a number of statistical instruments which were devised to demonstrate levels of death anxiety such as the Multi-Dimensional Fear of Death Scale Scores, the Death Anxiety Scale, the Collett-Lester scale and the Temoler Fear of Death Self Scale – and show that the samples for these studies were drawn mostly from student populations

which may paint an incorrect picture. They demonstrate that in studies in which samples include a wider range of age groups, death anxiety varies across ages. Furthermore, say the authors, other important variables should also have been considered, such as level of health and other cultural indicators. Because death is the province of religion, the authors say that a number of studies have been designed to specifically establish a connection between fear of death and religion. In their final comments, the authors say:

> The majority of contemporary researchers continue to rely upon older, unidimensional measures that have serious psychometric limitations. Not only does this compromise the scientific quality of the resulting literature, but it also diminishes the clinical utility of death attitude assessment. (p.332)

As well as being limited in their approach, their quantitative nature means that these older studies ignored the question of meaning, leaving the individual person afflicted by the death anxiety unattended. Quantitative research into death attitudes are therefore in themselves irrelevant for the psychotherapeutic effort, as this process focuses on the meaning that clients make of issues explored. My examination of the extant psychotherapy and counselling literature has not uncovered any qualitative study on this subject.

The interviews with the 12 participants found that the topic of death is not very present in their work with clients. All of the participants agreed that death is an important issue for them and for people in general, which naturally includes their clients. They were all keen to participate in this research, yet in the interviews they revealed that death is not a topic frequently, or ever, mentioned by clients or explored in therapy.

In response to my question as to why this should be so, Daniel used the word 'disgust'. He said, 'Clients would run a mile, due to disgust at the thought of death'. Disgust is different from fear (Cisler et al., 2009). Whereas fear is a response to an imminent threat, disgust is a revulsion response, in connection with potential contamination. Haidt et al. (1994), however, use the premise of terror management theory to argue that disgust is a protection from the knowledge of our own mortality, which manifests as death anxiety. But Fessler and Navarrete (2005) dispute these findings, showing that those premises are not upheld. Their research shows that 'both the evocative power of death stimuli and the negative effects of age on death disgust are consistent with the argument that disgust is an adaptation motivating disease avoidance rather than a psychodynamic defense mechanism' (p.279). From this, it is curious that the word 'disgust' was used by a participant in what seems to have been some cognitive dissonance[30], as this participant is a priest as well as a therapist with a very early interest in death and the afterlife; he is also

[30] Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation in which the person exhibits conflicting behaviours, beliefs or attitudes.

familiar with mediumship and is a member of the Society for Psychical Research. It may be an indication of the strength of feeling that mortality induces.

Claire observed in the interview that the fear of ageing in a client, revealed an underlying fear of death; Claire expressed surprise that the client did not bring the subject up herself. Claire's awareness, however, did not translate into action and the open exploration of those fears.

Joan was aware that symptoms such as phobias[31] panic attacks[32] and generalised anxiety may betray a fundamental fear of death but acknowledged that in her practice the subject is mainly absent.

Phobias (Stravynski et al., 1995), panic attacks (Gazarian et al., 2016) and even obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD)[33] ((Menzies & Dar-Nimrod, 2017) have a strong element of anxiety in their phenomenology. 'Anxiety- all anxiety – is rooted in the awareness of our mortality' says Kastenbaum (2000, p.104). Becker (1973) agrees and, as seen in Chapter 2, his ideas were seminal for the development of terror management theory. Following an extensive overview of the literature examining the current perspectives on fears and their manifestations, Carleton (2016) found that the most fundamental fear is the fear of the unknown. It is a

[31] Phobias – excessive and persistent fear of an object or situation.
[32] Panic attacks - intense fear that something bad will happen manifesting in distressing physical symptoms.
[33] Obsessive-compulsive disorder – ensuring safety via the obsessive repetition of certain behaviour.

'fear that rules all other fears, brings them together producing anxiety, and binds them, facilitating anxiety and neuroticism' (p.15). The arguments above therefore lead to the tentative conclusion that fear of the unknown and of death may be covertly (if not overtly) present within the anxiety issues some clients bring to therapy. Yet this research shows that there is little awareness of that and even less engagement with the topic by most of the participants.

Except for Daniel, Kim and Paul, all of the other participants showed surprise at the awareness that this important subject is not part of their experience in their work with clients, and voiced out loud their concern as to whether there might be something in them which is at the root of this concerning situation.

7.3.1. The authentic therapist

Death, and all the associated issues (including what may come after), is a difficult subject and, as seen above, a source of fears and anxieties. The question as to whether, in 2019, anything has changed, hovers over the comment made in 1959 by psychiatrist C.W. Wahl (in Feifel, 1959) who wrote that 'it is surprising and significant that the phenomenon of the fear of death, or anxiety about it (thanatophobia as it is called) while certainly no clinical rarity, has almost no description in the psychiatric or psychoanalytic literature' (p.19). He goes on to suggest that, being human, psychiatrists are subject to those very same fears, making them

reluctant to consider or study this subject. The same could be said of counsellors and psychotherapists in 2019.

However, as practitioners, we must be aware that we are ourselves the instrument of change in our clients, a channel through which our training and our inclinations become manifest (Baldwin, 2013, Rowan & Jacobs, 2002). If, as therapists, we have not resolved our own issues, there is the danger that we will react to related clients' problems in an unhelpful way. We may get stuck, avoid or distort the issue, or even ignore, or lose focus in our work with clients. We may become aware of the discomfort or disorientation felt when such a situation develops in the work, or we may not. Gelso (2014) argues that:

> The therapist's job is to monitor his/her internal reactions, understand them in relation to his/her unresolved conflicts and the patient's material and person, and prevent them from intruding negatively into the therapeutic relationship. (p.125)

Freud recognised this danger within the power of the therapist. He believed that in order to be successful professionals, therapists needed to know themselves sufficiently in order not to get entangled with the life of their patients, which ultimately could have the effect of harming them. He developed the idea of countertransference to ensure that therapists become aware of potentially unconscious ways in which they might see their patients as sons, daughters, mothers, fathers and so on, therefore distorting the patients' identity by their projection (Freud, 1912). Zachrisson (2009) points out that from its inception, the concept of

countertransference has become more inclusive over time and today refers to anything that takes the analyst out of the analytical position, including situations when the analyst is influenced and emotionally affected by what is happening in the interchange with the patient. Although the concept of countertransference refers particularly to the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic modalities of therapy, the phenomenon described inevitably exists in other psychotherapeutic approaches.

Carl Rogers (1902-1987), founder of the person-centred approach, called the genuineness of the therapist 'congruence' (Rogers, 1961). Frankel and Sommerbeck (2007) point out that in the evolution in Rogers' practice from about 1957, the approach moved from client-centred, to *we*-centred, which entails an inclusion of the perspective of the therapist in the work with clients. It puts a greater emphasis on the therapist's responsibility to decipher and maintain clarity on which issues may be triggered within themselves in the therapeutic encounter, and which are clients' issues.

Congruence, as a requirement in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy, is expected in all modalities (Aponte & Winter, 2013). For a closer examination of the process, we need to look into the tool box of the therapist and, alongside theory, technique, logic and philosophy, find empathy, a fundamental attitude that enables the client to feel heard and understood. Empathy is close to, but not identical to, countertransference (Racker, 1957). Whereas in countertransference the

attention is directed towards the self of the therapist, in empathy the feeling-laden attention is with the other – in this case, the client. In the situation under examination, in which clients may bring issues that generate discomfort, anxiety (or anger) in the therapist, if that is not recognised by the practitioner, empathy will be compromised (Lietaer, 1993). Upon feeling those uncomfortable feelings in the face of a particular issue, an aware therapist will know to stand back internally and question him/herself as to the root of the reaction (Gendlin, 1981). Virginia Satir (1916-1988) developed a model of therapy which identified four goals for the process:

1. to increase self-esteem;
2. to foster better choice making;
3. to increase responsibility;
4. to develop congruence.

Underlining the mutuality in the process, these goals are intended to be applied to both the therapist and the client (Lum, 2002). An example of compromised empathy is Cowan-Jenssen (2007), who describes how her denial of her own anxiety about mortality kept her from fully understanding the depth of her client's terror of living and dying. She reveals her insights when she says: 'I think the great challenge for therapists when faced with death and death anxiety is not to retreat behind the frame and take refuge in ritual and authority. The therapist is in a more powerful position than the patient' (p.83).

In addition to recognising the problems caused by the unexamined lives of therapists in their work with clients, it is important to point out that empathy operates in clients as well, and they can sense biases, resistances, unresponsiveness, discomfort and even disrespect coming from therapists (Cheung & Pau, 2013). Clients can sense, from the stance of the practitioner, what can and what cannot be brought to therapy (Aponte & Kissil, 2014, Cornell, 2016, Sen, 2017). Paulson, Everall, and Stuart (2001), quoting research from Hill, Thompson, Cogar, and Denman (1993) and Grafanaki and McLeod (1995), remark that 'clients may hide what they perceive as hindering experiences in the therapeutic process rather than assert their own feelings and thoughts' (p.51). Consequently, if these alarm bells have gone off within the client, the therapeutic process is very likely to be severely compromised. Clients may not bring up issues that they may wish to explore for their better understanding, or issues that may be causing distress, such as those relating to their own mortality for fear of them not being understood or even accepted. In such situations, the value of therapy may be substantially diminished.

Paranormal or anomalous experiences belong to another area which clients may find difficult to discuss. The title of Roxburgh and Evenden's (2016) paper – 'Most People Think You're a Fruit Loop': Clients' Experiences of Seeking Support for Anomalous Experiences' – is indicative of what the authors found in their research. Participant Paul, in this study, spoke of clients he had had in the past who told him about

their paranormal experiences, saying to Paul, that they had never told anybody else about them. His inference is that those clients would either not have been believed, would have been pathologized or would else have been thought mad.

Could the reason why this subject does not come up in therapy be because the participants involved have not really dealt with this difficult issue within themselves? Could it be that despite the fact that they are spiritual and recognise a connection with the transcendental, the issue of their own mortality remains unexamined? Kim, for example, was made aware by an unsuccessful interaction with a client that her deficit in the area of death needed addressing. She consequently engaged in studies in the field of thanatology which included a close examination of personal mortality, and she is now able to detect a client's anxiety and reluctance in this area. Because she is totally at ease with the subject, she uses a stance of curiosity, openly exploring and asking questions, so as to enable clients to find the required safety in the therapeutic alliance to address their fears or questions. This shows that when the therapist is confident within him/herself about the subject, s/he will communicate this reality and through the empathic process clients will pick up on that openness.

Other considerations which keep the subject of death and the possible afterlife absent from the work need to be considered.

7.3.2. Credibility

Laura and Sally spoke of their awareness that speaking about their beliefs in some kind of conscious experience after death may affect their credibility as professionals.

Credibility is essential in the work with clients, and the aspect of credibility addressed here is the part of congruence, this time within a larger context than that discussed above. Here I am referring to credibility within a social, philosophical and paradigmatic context. The credibility criterion in the current paradigm is informed by materialist science, which argues that consciousness is generated by the brain and therefore extinguished when the body dies. Death is therefore necessarily the end of conscious experience. High-profile scholars such as Nobel Prize winner Francis Crick (1994), Richard Dawkins (2006a, 2006b, 2017), Daniel Dennett (1991, 2003, 2017), Sue Blackmore (1993, 2005a, 2012) and others hold this view, which therefore dominates the high ground of credibility.

This research has shown that even participants who strongly believe in some kind of conscious experience after death are reluctant, or resistant, to address the subject with clients for fear of losing credibility. Laura was particularly vocal in that respect, and acknowledged that in an ideal world, without the danger of rejection by clients, she would happily engage with the subject in her work.

It was evident, however, that the enthusiasm of participants to talk about the subject betrayed the need they felt to express freely their views – but when it comes to work with clients, there seems to be a closing down.

7.3.3. Ethics

All participants mentioned at some point, their awareness of not imposing their own views within the therapeutic process, a rule ubiquitously promoted in training (Schmid, 2001, Steen, Engels, & Thweatt, 2006, West, 2002). This seems to point to confusion between imposing one's own views and exploring clients' views. Enquiry as a tool of the profession enables the therapist to bring to the surface fears that may lurk in the dark recesses of the client's mind or the unconscious. Perhaps what was articulated by these participants, was that a congruent therapist may betray his/her beliefs in life after death in the process of exploration, and this, they believe, would be ethically unacceptable. This is an area which would benefit from further research.

However, as demonstrated by Kim and Paul, who are themselves at ease with their cosmology and their beliefs, being willing to engage clients in discussing their beliefs and anxieties around death and dying allows this important subject to be brought into the open, when appropriate, and confronted by clients. Kim especially expanded on how she adopts an attitude of interest by freely asking clients questions and by modelling her own stance regarding the topic of death in all its dimensions, which allows clients to do the same.

7.3.4. Training

Training was an issue brought up by Paul, Joan and Sylvia, and is of concern. It seems important that practitioners are well equipped to deal with the subject of death including all its ramifications in their work with clients, and for that to happen it needs to be an explicit part of professional training. It is beyond the remit of this study to explore the current situation with regard to training organisations, but this is certainly an aspect that is due a high degree of consideration.

7.3.5. None of the above

One further scenario must be added to potentially explain the absence of the topic of personal mortality and its associated issues in the interviewees' work with clients. Perhaps these topics were not part of the presenting issues by these clients, either overtly or covertly, over the participants' years of practice. My view, however, is that this is unlikely. In the light of studies on anxiety (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011), OCD (Menzies & Dar-Nimrod, 2017), eating disorders (Marne & Harris, 2016), phobias (Stravynski et al., 1995), panic attacks (Gazarian et al., 2016) and others, which indicate the potential for an element of death anxiety in these pathologies, it is unlikely that even if these issues did not present overtly, none of the participants' clients over the years will have had fears associated with personal mortality hiding within a presenting issue.

7.4. Participants' appreciation of participating in this research

Seven out of the 12 participants voiced their appreciation of participating in this research. Carol, Fred, Sally and Sylvia said they had not previously been aware of the importance of the subject of death and post-mortem consciousness and were grateful to have had the opportunity to explore it. Rachel confessed that participating in this research had made her aware that she may not be hearing clients fully by virtue of her early experience within a fundamentalist community. Dianna realised that the reality of an afterlife is so natural for her, that she too may not be hearing the concerns of clients. And Joan wrote to me after the interview saying how much more open she is now to hearing faith matters from her clients. She used the word 'inspired' in her message of thanks.

7.5. Conclusion

This subject was clearly of interest to the participants, who as spiritual people have a developed framework of understanding for their relationship with the bigger picture in which they live. The way they frame their connection with the transcendental varies, as does the language they use, but essentially, the ontological relationships are similar, and they understand their lives as meaningful within this association. Their views and convictions as to what happens after death vary, as do their thoughts and philosophies. Only one participant is affiliated with a particular religion, and all of the others are not, being

eclectic in their approach, but still committed to climbing – or just sitting on – the 'spiritual mountain'.

What emerged in this exploration, was that although the participants recognised the importance of death as their and everybody's final destination, the subject found no room for exploration in the work with clients in 10 out of the 12 participants. Nine of those participants were perplexed at this realisation and wondered whether there was something in themselves that was shutting out this theme.

This chapter proposed five possibilities from these findings: (1) the possibility that participants had not worked on their own mortality; (2) the possibility that participants feared losing credibility if the question of life after death were to be discussed with clients; (3) that participants were confused between the ethical stance of not imposing their own views and the acceptable, and indeed important, effort to explore difficult issues in therapy; (4) the question over the inclusion of the subject of death, including post-mortem consciousness, in training programmes; and (5) the possibility that clients may not have had death-related concerns as an overt or covert part of their issues.

Chapter 8 - Synthesising the Survey and Interviews Discussions

8.1. Overview

This overview of the results is intended to synthesise the findings of this study and bring them to a higher level of understanding. It identifies and comments on the themes which were present or absent in both the survey and the interviews. It uses both methods in which data were collected, the survey and the interviews, to complement each other so as to give greater understanding to the research question, which was: Post-mortem consciousness: views of psychotherapists and their influence on the work with clients.

The aims of the research are:

- to explore psychotherapists' views on post-mortem consciousness;

- to explore whether those ideas influence their work with clients.

8.2. The synthesis

It emerged in the survey that out of the 103 respondents, 75 were over the age of 50. Interestingly, I set the lower limit of age 50 as a criterion for the interview participants intuitively, before the results of the survey came in. It seems to confirm that the subject of death becomes more pertinent as we grow older (Katzorreck & Kunzmann, 2018).
Looking across both methods of data collection, we find that higher percentages of participants in both the survey and the interviews were female: 82 of the 103 participants in the survey, and 40 of the 54 'believers' in the survey were women. Of the 12 interviewees, 9 were women. It is admittedly difficult to make sense of these figures, not knowing what the profession as a whole consists of in terms of percentages of both sexes, so, although interesting to note, they may not be relevant.

Most respondents to the survey described themselves as spiritual but not religious (SBNR) (31), with Christians coming in close second place (23). The interview participants mostly also described themselves as SBNR.

Of the 54 'believers' in the survey, a majority of 26 believe their identity, defined as self-recognition, will survive death, against 13 who think it will not (i.e., their consciousness will survive and they will re-join Cosmic Consciousness or God). This compares with 10 out of 12 interviewees

who believe in post-mortem self-recognition and 2 who do not. Although a few comments in the survey mentioned eternity and being with God after death, most commenters wrote about their responsibility towards their future reincarnated existence through the lens of karma. Reincarnation was also a theme mentioned by the majority of interviewees. This confirms the views of Singleton (2015) that ideas about reincarnation in contemporary Western society have become detached from their religious roots. In fact, Peres (2012) asks the question whether reincarnation should be considered in psychotherapy.

Both the 'believers' in the survey and the interviewees mentioned the mystery of the nature of reality, a reality beyond what can be apprehended by the physical senses. In both groups there was mention of an intuitive tacit knowing in this respect. Interest in the experiences of the mystics was mentioned by participants in both groups also. In both settings, I heard about living and working with energies, guides and spirit. Talking to dead loved ones was mentioned in the survey, which a respondent pointed out is unremarkable in the Catholic tradition, where talking to saints is common. There was no mention of talking to the dead by any of the interview participants and nobody mentioned bringing this approach into therapy, something Beischel et al. (2014) found useful with bereaved clients. No comment in the survey mentioned working with paranormal experiences which clients may bring, and only Paul, Kim and Claire said in their interviews that this theme had arisen in their work with clients.

In response to the question 'Do these beliefs influence your work with clients, if so how?', there were a number of comments in the survey indicating a willingness to work with whatever the client brings, including ideas of life after death. These, however, were generic rather than specific, so whether the subject of life after death is, or has been, actually addressed by any of the respondents remains unknown. Of the practitioners interviewed, only Kim and Paul acknowledged working with this subject, and Kim explained her approach of using open and candid questioning with clients.

Many of the survey respondents spontaneously acknowledged that their beliefs would be empathically transmitted to clients. In the interviews, this theme was not touched upon, not even when participants realised that there may be something in themselves that is preventing the subject from emerging in the work.

The enthusiasm of participants to participate in the interviews was matched in the survey by a few people who left positive, grateful comments pointing out that the subject is not sufficiently explored, yet 'the subject is nevertheless there, overtly or covertly, whether we talk about it or not', as expressed by a survey participant.

The overall findings lead to the acknowledgement that the subject of death is not overtly present in the work of the people who engaged in this

research. If we assume that the therapy room is the place where clients can bring their deepest fears, overtly or covertly, then the results of this study show that it is possible that practitioners may not be hearing their clients. At this point, a differentiation becomes necessary. Although the study explores the views of therapists on what may happen after death, this can only be explored once the question of death itself has been attended to. This being considered, five possibilities are suggested as explanations:

1. Therapists have not dealt with the subject of their own mortality themselves.
2. With regard to post-mortem existence, therapists fear losing professional credibility.
3. With regard to post-mortem existence, therapists have confusion between imposition and exploration of views in client work.
4. Training programmes do not include post-mortem consciousness as part of addressing the subject of death.
5. Death and what may happen after is not an issue which has been overtly or covertly brought to therapy.

These five possibilities may be a consequence of the fact that death has for a long time been a taboo subject in the West. This was developed in Chapter 2, where Gorer (1955) who called his article 'The Pornography of Death', was mentioned. It seems clear that an effort to demolish this taboo in Western societies has been under way in the past few decades in books such as Davies and Park (2012), Mannix (2018) and Modi (2014)

and the media (e.g. Bateman, 2017, O'Hara, 2017, Peacock, 2014). But the word 'taboo' is still used and this simple fact, indicates that the subject remains controversial.

I found the literature on death in the field of counselling and psychotherapy to be sparse and on post-mortem existence virtually non-existent. This research therefore shows that the subject of death in all its dimensions has not been aired sufficiently for the profession to become a useful resource for clients who are consciously or unconsciously struggling with the issue.

8.3. Suicide

This topic did not appear in this research, save for a brief comment from a survey participant, who mentioned that Christian clients would not entertain suicide because God would not approve of it. No interviewee spoke about suicide, although suicidal ideation is sometimes present in the minds of people suffering from anxiety and depression (Taylor, Gooding, Wood, & Tarrier, 2011). Many studies exist addressing the work with suicidal clients (e.g. Goss, 2011, Reeves, 2017, Reeves, Bowl, Wheeler, & Guthrie, 2004, Taylor et al., 2011), but I found only one study (Dransart, 2018) which studied survivors of suicide and mentioned thoughts of an afterlife by participants. It mentioned in its conclusion that participants expressed the wish for faith and spiritual leaders, as well as for mental health or social care professionals, to address religious and spiritual issues in open communication. Yet, it is known that ideas

of an afterlife fuel, to a great extent, the motivations of some suicide bombers (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009, Lester, Yang, & Lindsay, 2004, Noah, 2001).

8.4. Through the lens of McGilchrist's theory

I propose that an explanation for the findings this research exposed may be found in McGilchrist's (2009) theory.

His research, as shown in Chapter 2, indicates that the two hemispheres of the brain operate different *kinds of attention,* which result in different perceptions. Left hemisphere thinking is informed by certainty, quantification, analysis, clarity, abstraction from context and so on, whereas right hemisphere perception is intuitive, inclusive and more nuanced, and understands that truth can be fluid and relative rather than fixed. Although stressing that both hemispheres are necessary and involved in *all* mental activity, McGilchrist says:

> At the level of experience, the world we know is synthesised from the work of the two cerebral hemispheres, each hemisphere having its own way of understanding the world – its own 'take' on it. This synthesis is unlikely to be symmetrical and the world we actually experience, phenomenologically, at any point in time is determined by which hemisphere's version of the world ultimately comes to predominate. Though I would resist the simplistic idea of a 'left or right hemisphere personality' overall there is evidence … that certainly for some kinds of activities, we consistently prefer one hemisphere over the other in ways that may differ between individuals. (p10)

McGilchrist is indicating that in our engagement with the world, we give preference to one or the other way of seeing the world, as determined by the kind of attention typical of left or right brain hemispheres. We are presently living in a world in which the predominance of left hemisphere thinking is mainstream. It is a world in which there is little tolerance for the ambiguity and nuances of right hemisphere thinking, a world of binary values – yes/no, right/wrong – and the search for the *one*, single truth. This is a world in which science and the scientific method constitute the single holder of credibility, where the idea of an afterlife has no purchase. Looking at the findings of this study through this lens may be useful in shining a light on what may be informing the beliefs, perspectives and attitudes of participants.

Death as the ultimate unknown is understandably a scary place. Whether death is a 'wall' or a 'door' (Feifel, 1959) will ultimately depend on belief, and belief, as expanded on in Chapter 2, is predicated differently depending on whether it is developed from the predominance of a left or a right hemisphere perspective.

The sense that some participants felt uncomfortable with aligning themselves with a position that challenges the current materialistic mindset explains the necessity they found to affiliate themselves with science and scientific signifiers to protect the credibility of their stance. In addition, the mention of professional credibility and ethics as

inhibitors of the presence of the subject of life after death in the therapy room is also relevant. Going further, and considering that the subject of post-mortem consciousness is not included in conventional counselling and psychotherapy training and is generally sidelined in mainstream academic institutions, other than within a religious setting, supports McGilchrist's argument that we are living at a time when there is a left hemisphere framework of understanding, and the results of this research seem to support this view.

The subject of post-mortem consciousness, as examined by an analytical, reductionist, left hemisphere perspective, is a non-subject. Death must therefore be dealt with in therapy in the way Yalom (2008b) suggests, by focusing on endings. The exploration of post-mortem consciousness in therapy may at this time require a degree of rebelliousness on the part of the practitioner, in the view of mainstream thinking. Yet, over half of the survey respondents endorsed their view of post-mortem existence with a further 19.4% expressing uncertainty but most, in their comments, conveying positive tendencies towards this view. We must acknowledge that the profession of counselling and psychotherapy is situated within the framework of the current materialistic paradigm, and therefore those practitioners who showed themselves as sharing beliefs outside the acceptable 'norm' maybe find themselves in a challenging place of exposure, especially if they are not working independently.

8.5. Conclusion

Looking across both methods of data collection, we see that the majority of participants believe in self-recognition in their post-mortem existence. People from both methods of data collection (survey and interviews) acknowledge the mysterious nature of reality and are open to the idea that this in itself is evidence that post-mortem consciousness is a credible possibility. Across both modalities, people mentioned working with 'energies', 'guides' and 'spirits', suggesting an active interaction with the transcendental. Nobody, however, mentioned working in this way with clients – for example, encouraging clients to speak to their dead loved ones.

A majority of survey respondents stated that they would work with anything clients may bring, including post-mortem ideas, but no explicit examples were given, leaving a question mark over this assertion.

A significant number of respondents to the survey acknowledged that clients pick up on what is 'allowed' to be discussed in the therapy work, yet this was not mentioned by the interviewees. Nine out of 12 interviewees acknowledged that perhaps there is something *in them* which prevents the issue of death and post-mortem consciousness being discussed in the work and five potential reasons emerged: practitioners not having worked on their own issues around mortality; practitioner's fear of losing professional credibility if dealing with post-mortem consciousness ideas; confusion between imposition and exploration of

views regarding post-mortem consciousness; the absence of the subject of post-mortem consciousness in training programmes; and the subject of death and associated concerns not being part (overtly or covertly) of clients' issues brought to therapy.

It transpired from the interviews that practitioners are ill-prepared to deal with death in all its dimensions in therapy, not being sufficiently aware of the role this terror plays in syndromes such as panic attacks, anxiety and phobias. The only modality which specifically deals with this is existential therapy, but, for such therapists, post-mortem existence is a non-issue. The importance of the inclusion of the subject of death and its ramifications within training programmes cannot be overestimated.

More than half of the people in the survey (and all interviewees) declared they believe in post-mortem consciousness. Only Kim and Paul, however, declared that openly work with the issue with clients. The profession of counselling and psychotherapy sits very clearly within the parameters of science and practitioners who challenge the status quo may open themselves to criticism.

McGilchrist's (2009) theory provides a useful lens to examine the issue. His conclusion is that we are living at a time of left hemisphere thinking and the relevance for this research is the dismissal of an afterlife as a possibility since it is believed that the brain generates consciousness.

Paranormal experiences are also rejected as credible, seen instead as the result of malfunctioning of the brain. The current scenario is typical of the usurpation of the master's power by the emissary. McGilchrist says:

> Today all the available sources of intuitive life – cultural tradition, the natural world, the body, religion and art – have been so conceptualised, devitalised and 'deconstructed' (ironised) by the world of words, mechanistic systems and theories constituted by the left hemisphere that their power to help us see beyond the hermetic world that it has set up has been largely drained from them. (p.244)

The next chapter will set out the conclusions arrived at in this research.

Chapter 9 - Conclusions

9.1. Answering the question

The title of this study is 'Post-mortem consciousness: views of psychotherapists and their influence on the work with clients'. In the introduction to this thesis, I set out my aim to look at the title encapsulating the intention of this research, as divided into two parts. The first part involved research into the views of practitioners about post-mortem consciousness, and the second was the influence of those views on their work with clients. I also showed in chapter 2 that notions of post-mortem consciousness have scholarly and research foundations indicating that 'believing' practitioners can be considered serious and credible, in a paradigm in which such ideas are marginalised.

9.2. Post-mortem consciousness

I have shown that ideas about post-mortem consciousness have a long historical presence, albeit alongside another strand of belief which says death is final. Through the lens of McGilchrist's theory, I have shown that the predominance of left or right hemisphere types of perceptions determines the worldview of the individual, and also of society. The theory shows that the current paradigm is predominantly governed by

the left hemisphere-type of perception which makes materialist and secular values the mainstays of belief and credibility. The consequence is that right hemisphere-types perspectives – which are open to overviews and tolerant of possibilities, allowing therefore the viability of post-mortem consciousness – are marginalised, and people holding these views, disparaged.

I have briefly addressed the subject of consciousness, showing the different perspectives on its nature and noting the views of secular and materialist philosophers and scientists, who consider the brain as generating consciousness. However, I have covered more extensively the scholarly and scientific view of consciousness as primary, or as a fundamental attribute of reality, which in its infinite nature suggests post-mortem existence as possible. This is because, as stated, my intention in this thesis is to suggest that post-mortem consciousness, not easily accepted in the current secular paradigm, is a credible theory.

As so much of the attitude to post-mortem consciousness is a matter of belief, I explored the literature on this topic and found belief to be not only based on reason but also to have an inbuilt 'felt sense' element and importantly, a tacit knowing. Because paranormal, psychic or psi phenomena are so ubiquitous, I found that much of the belief in an afterlife is based on people's personal experiences of such paranormal or anomalous events. Others may base their beliefs on the trustworthiness

of these accounts written or told by first-hand experiencers. I found that believing in an afterlife brings meaning and also hope to people.

Post-mortem consciousness is, of course, closely associated with death as an event in life and I have shown how some philosophers and psychologists have incorporated death in their thinking. Especially in psychology, Freud and Jung, the fathers of the discipline, have headed the different opinions about the role of death (and the afterlife) in people's lives and psychology. I have also shown that the existentialist movement had a major impact on the appreciation of the importance of death, especially with the development of the terror management theory, which argues that our efforts to enhance our self-esteem in various ways are a result of our struggle to come to terms with or to deny our mortal nature. Post-mortem consciousness, in this philosophy, is dismissed.

In psychotherapy, I have shown that the subject of personal death is given a wide berth. Studies on the experience of other people's death, dying, bereavement and grief work are widespread in the profession, but personal death and ideas of the afterlife do not figure in the literature explored.

I have also shown that this study addresses a gap which exists in research in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy, which demonstrates blindness with regard to the subject of post-mortem consciousness, even though the belief in an afterlife, and specifically in

reincarnation has been shown by studies to be pervasive in Western society.

9.3. Views of Psychotherapists

With regard to stage one of this study, the views of psychotherapists, I have shown by means of the survey, that out of the 103 anonymous practitioners who participated in the research, 54 (52.4%) believe in some kind of conscious existence after death and only 29 people (28.2%) are definite about death being the end of conscious experience. The others replied 'don't know' to the question. In addition, and importantly, 79 (76.7%) people out of the total believe questions about what happens after death are important to the way they live their lives, irrespective of what they believe happens after death. And 72 (69.9%) say these questions influence their work. These results clearly point to the importance of the subject for these participants and may indicate that other professionals feel the same way, although it is acknowledged that this sample is not necessarily representative of the wider population of therapists.

Practitioners acknowledged the mysterious nature of reality in both the survey and the interviews. This elicited awe as well as bewilderment in some. It also led to the idea that the paranormal, of which a number of interviewees had personal experience, is in some way associated with the mystery of existence and therefore gives credibility to those experiences.

Participants who had paranormal experience expressed their belief that they are evidence of post-mortem consciousness.

In both the survey and the interviews, ideas about reincarnation were associated with the meaning it gives current life and also the hope for a continuation of existence after death. Post-mortem consciousness in general was often mentioned as offering hope of a reunion with loved ones. Not just in terms of questions about their personal lives, but also with regard to their work with clients, those ideas have been shown to be in the minds of practitioners. None of them, however, worked with the modality of past lives therapy.

9.4. Influence of those views on their work with clients

With regard to stage two of the research, the work with clients, this is where the surprise appeared. Those responses to the survey which indicated that participants would work with whatever the client brought to therapy did not give a clear picture of whether the subject of death and post-mortem consciousness was encountered by practitioners. No conclusion could be drawn there. But the interviews offered clarity on this point. Except for two participants (Kim and Paul), all the others found that the subject of personal mortality was not overtly present in their work with clients. Furthermore, the question of post-mortem consciousness was totally absent as a client's issue for all the participants interviewed. Given that personal mortality is a future event for every person, an idea well understood to be anxiety provoking, and

given that the therapy room should be a safe place for the deepest fears to be explored, it is curious that this subject was not present in the work of the practitioners interviewed. Interestingly, except for Kim and Paul who comfortably deal with the subject of personal mortality in their work with clients and Daniel who has not mentioned it, all others have asked themselves (as a result of the interviews) whether there is something in them which is preventing the subject from surfacing in the work. Accepting this as a real possibility, I identify five explanations:

1. that the practitioners have not worked on the subject of personal mortality themselves:
2. confusion between the practitioner imposing their views and exploring those of the client:
3. the absence of post-mortem consciousness as part of the subject of death in training programmes:
4. the practitioner's fear of having their credibility challenged if they allow for a discussion of post-mortem consciousness, in view of the current secular and materialist paradigm:
5. death and related concerns not being part of the issues that bring clients to therapy (either overtly or covertly).

Whereas the first three will require opening up the subject within the profession, inviting discussion, for the fourth reason, the fear of having credibility challenged there is no short-term solution that I can identify. This is the area addressed by McGilchrist's theory. Therefore, unless and

until there is a fundamental shift in worldview towards a more open-minded approach within the profession, whether the subject will find a presence in the work with clients will depend on the courage of the individual practitioner. The fifth explanation was included for completion. The possibility exists that none of the clients seen by the practitioners interviewed had, during the time of their work, had issues, overtly or covertly, regarding their personal mortality or about a potential post-mortem existence. This is possible, but I would say unlikely. It is more likely that the issues were just not 'allowed' or picked up in the work.

It was interesting to note the enthusiasm of interviewees to be involved in this research and also the encouraging comments I read from survey participants. I felt that this subject touched a nerve in those people and such comments reiterated to me its importance.

9.5. Limitations and further research

I acknowledge that the survey was very generic and the picture which emerged is characterised by broad brushstrokes. It was intentionally designed to be short to attract respondents, and a more in-depth questionnaire might have provided better answers, especially regarding more detailed information about work with clients, specifically on the subject of post-mortem consciousness.

With regard to the interviews, I am aware that, on reflection, I did not sufficiently explore how the participants deal with issues known to be

potentially associated with death anxiety, such as panic attacks, anxieties and phobias. This could have provided a better picture. I have also neglected to ask practitioners how much short-term and how much long-term work was part of their practice, as the subject of death and post-mortem consciousness may not surface in short-term work. I should also have specified in the participation criteria a minimum number of current clients, which would have given a better idea of the level of experience of participants.

This research did not include an exploration of the current attitude of training organisations on the subject of death and post-mortem consciousness. Research in this field would be valuable, since, as this study has shown, death and associated issues are relevant elements possibly existing, often covertly, in the concerns clients bring to therapy. Furthermore, since the topic of post-mortem consciousness is present in the collective psyche, as shown, it is possible that it is present, with all the associated fears and questions, in the psyche of individuals.

Another important aspect which would benefit from further research is shining a light on clients, rather than practitioners, as this study did. It would be helpful to conduct research into how clients feel, regarding whether they would like to have a higher degree of freedom to explore the issues of death and post-mortem consciousness in therapy.

Research into suicidal ideation and ideas about what may come after death in people who contemplate taking their own life would also be beneficial for the profession.

9.6. Originality

This research demonstrates originality by addressing the following deficits:

- The subject of post-mortem consciousness is absent from the discourse in counselling and psychotherapy.
- Research into views of therapists on the topic of post-mortem consciousness is absent in the counselling and psychotherapeutic profession.
- Research into whether these views influence the work with clients is absent in the counselling and psychotherapeutic profession.

In addition, originality is also shown by the use of a mixed-methodology incorporating a survey and interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The findings of both the survey and the interviews show that the subject of life after death is one in which therapists engage in their private lives, and one that they find important regarding their work with clients. Yet, as this research showed, it is mostly absent from the work with the clients of the practitioners interviewed. Furthermore, although the survey

respondents stated overwhelmingly that they work with anything that clients bring, no objective indication was given that issues around what happens after death are present in their work.

9.7. Implications for practice, training and supervision

The findings of this research point to the need in the field of counselling and psychotherapy to open up the discourse around death and what may come after. Confronting the challenges of the current materialistic paradigm, this subject would benefit from being aired in conferences and seminars attended by practitioners, which will give them the opportunity to reflect (and interact with colleagues) on this important topic, within the safety of a professional forum.

In addition, and perhaps as a consequence, training organisations might find the subject relevant to be included in their courses, allowing current students who will become future practitioners to be at ease with ideas of post-mortem consciousness – whether it is part of their philosophy or not. This would hopefully enhance their competency to look out for overt and also covert indications of this issue being present in the concerns brought by clients.

Finally, supervisors would benefit from being open to those ideas as they work with their supervisees, allowing those supervisees to become more

open to issues around post-mortem consciousness that clients may find difficult to bring openly.

9.8. Personal reflections

I am aware that the results that I found are very different from what I expected. I thought I would find a relatively clear narrative of how colleagues deal with the subject of post-mortem consciousness in their work and learn from their experiences. But that was not the case, and what most surprised me was the fear of having their credibility challenged if as therapist, they were to invite, or allow, clients to speak about their beliefs concerning what happens after death.

Coming to the end of this research I can reflect on what it meant for me. As mentioned in the introduction, the subject of consciousness has always been a telos in my life, informing much of how I think and what I do. So, the subject of post-mortem consciousness has been an intrinsic part of my interest. Yet, I noted that when I was asked by people whom I did not know well about the subject of my research, I found myself having to clear my throat before telling them. I felt a degree of embarrassment, not knowing how people would react, and at times was aware of a note of disbelief in their reaction. This may be an indication of how those therapists feel who, in the interviews, mentioned their fear of losing credibility. As the project developed this changed, and today, with the benefit of what I learned, I feel more robust in such situations.

Throughout the study, I have paid attention and noticed how much ideas of the afterlife figure in classical and current literature, films, TV shows, radio programmes and so on, which convinced me that it is indeed in the popular imagination – the word 'imagination' being used not as fantasy, but as that realm in which our thoughts develop.

I was pleased to note that over 50% of the survey respondents confirmed their belief in post-mortem consciousness, although I am aware that in itself it is not an indication of the wider population of counsellors and psychotherapists. It also felt gratifying to read the positive comments respondents made in the survey about this research and to hear from interviewees the importance they gave to the opportunity to talk about the subject.

As a practitioner, I feel that counselling and psychotherapy are valuable processes towards the psychological (and spiritual) growth of clients, and it is my hope that this research will help to open the way for therapists (and clients) to feel freer to deal with the subject of post-mortem consciousness and consequently death in their work.

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Appendix 1

Participant Information Sheet

Research working title
Death and beyond: spiritual therapists' views and their impact on the work with clients.

Background
My name is Claudia Nielsen. I am a psychotherapist with over 20 years experience and am at present engaged in PhD research at the University of Chester.

My choice of theme is a consequence of my life long interest in the mystery of consciousness and human existence. This interest drove me to study psychology, and later train as a psychotherapist. It has also led me to earn an MA in the Study of Mysticism and Religious Experience. I am involved with organisations such as IONS (Institute of Noetic Sciences), and the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN) both having as their mission the study of consciousness, or as viewed from a different angle, the intersection of science, spirituality and human experience. Spirituality, as an umbrella term to encompass matters of transcendence, has become progressively more important to me as I have moved into the second half of my life and within that interest I see death - as part of human experience - as central.

Invitation

I am inviting participants to tell me about their experiences of spirituality and in particular their personal views of what happens after death. That may be within a religious or spiritual, or non-religious, framework.

I would also like to hear about your professional experience with clients especially with regards to death and dying - how you deal with their fears and how you work with the material they bring. This could be their paranormal and mystical experiences, but also their resilience resources, dreams, fears, as well as the more common experiences of depression, panic attacks, being stuck in life, etc. I am also interested in philosophical questions such as how you explore their sense of self, their place in the world, as well as how you engage with clients who have a more secular perspective and see their issues within this framework.

Am I eligible to take part?
Participants should meet the following criteria:

- Fluent in English
- Feel sufficiently grounded in their experience to be able to participate safely
- Age 50 or older
- UKCP, BACP or BPS accredited
- Have over 10 years experience as therapist
- See themselves as spiritual or religious

What will happen?
If after reading this information sheet you are interested in taking part, the next step is to complete and return the attached Inclusion Checklist. In the event that the study is over-subscribed, recruitment decisions will be made based on the biographical data provided. I will then contact you to let you know whether you have been included in the study, or not. If you have, I will contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time and place to meet. If not, I will contact you to thank you for your interest in the study.

You will be asked to provide your written consent before the interview begins. When we meet, I will invite you to explore your experiences; this will take the form of a digitally recorded interview lasting no more than an hour. I may invite you for a possible second interview if necessary for my research and if agreeable to you. I will make every effort to come to a place that is convenient to you.

After the interview, I will transcribe the recording, and you will be offered the opportunity to check this for accuracy.

What are the potential advantages of taking part?
You may value the opportunity to tell your story. By taking part, you will be contributing to increasing awareness of this under-researched topic.

What are the potential disadvantages of taking part?

There are no obvious disadvantages. However, in the unlikely event that disturbing memories of past experiences cause any distress, you will be given a list of UKCP and/or BACP accredited therapists in your locality.

Participants' rights
Your participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any point, without prejudice, before the data analysis has begun, without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.

You will be offered the opportunity to read and agree the transcript of your interview, and at that point will be giving consent for the data to be used in the study. Once final consent has been given and the analysis begins, you will not be able to withdraw or change the material, as the data will have added into the group data set, and it will no longer be possible to isolate it.

Confidentiality
The interview will take place in an environment where privacy can be ensured. I will give you a pseudonym, which I will use throughout the research to protect your anonymity. Verbatim quotes may be used in the final dissertation but I will ensure that I only use material that will not identify participants. The transcripts and related data will be securely stored for a period of five years, by me, and then destroyed in compliance with the data protection act. Upon satisfactory completion of my PhD the recording will be securely destroyed.

What will happen to the results?
The results of the research will be part of my PhD thesis which will be submitted to Chester University. The thesis will be available electronically. I hope to contribute to relevant research conferences and publications.

What if I am unhappy with the process?
If you are unhappy with any aspect of the process, I would ask you to contact me, Claudia Nielsen, in the first instance: Claudia@cnielsen.eu.

If the outcome is not satisfactory, you can contact my Research Supervisor, Prof. Peter Gubi: p.gubi@chester.ac.uk

If the issue still cannot be resolved, please contact the Dean of Social Sciences, Dr David Balsamo: d.balsamo@chester.ac.uk

Any questions?
Please feel free to contact me via email with any queries: claudia@cnielsen.eu

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Appendix 2

Inclusion check list

Research working Title: *Death and beyond: spiritual therapists' views and the impact on their work with clients.*

Please write your replies alongside or below each of the questions and email the list back to me at Claudia@cnielsen.eu

Date:

1. Name
2. Email address
3. Date of Birth
4. Please confirm you are fluent in English
5. Do you feel sufficiently grounded in your experience to be able to participate safely?
6. What are the Professional Bodies you are accredited by?
7. How long have you been practising and are you currently working as therapist?
8. What is the therapeutic modality you work with?
9. How many clients do you have at the moment?
10. In what setting do you work? (eg. Privately, NHS, etc)
11. Can you please write a little about your spirituality (if any) and how would you describe yourself within that context (eg. Christian, Buddhist, spiritual but not religious (SBNR), etc)?

Appendix 3

Consent Form (IPA Participants)

Death and beyond: spiritual therapists' views and the impact on their work with clients.

Name of Researcher: Claudia Nielsen Please initial box

1. I have read the transcript of the interview to ensure its accuracy ☐

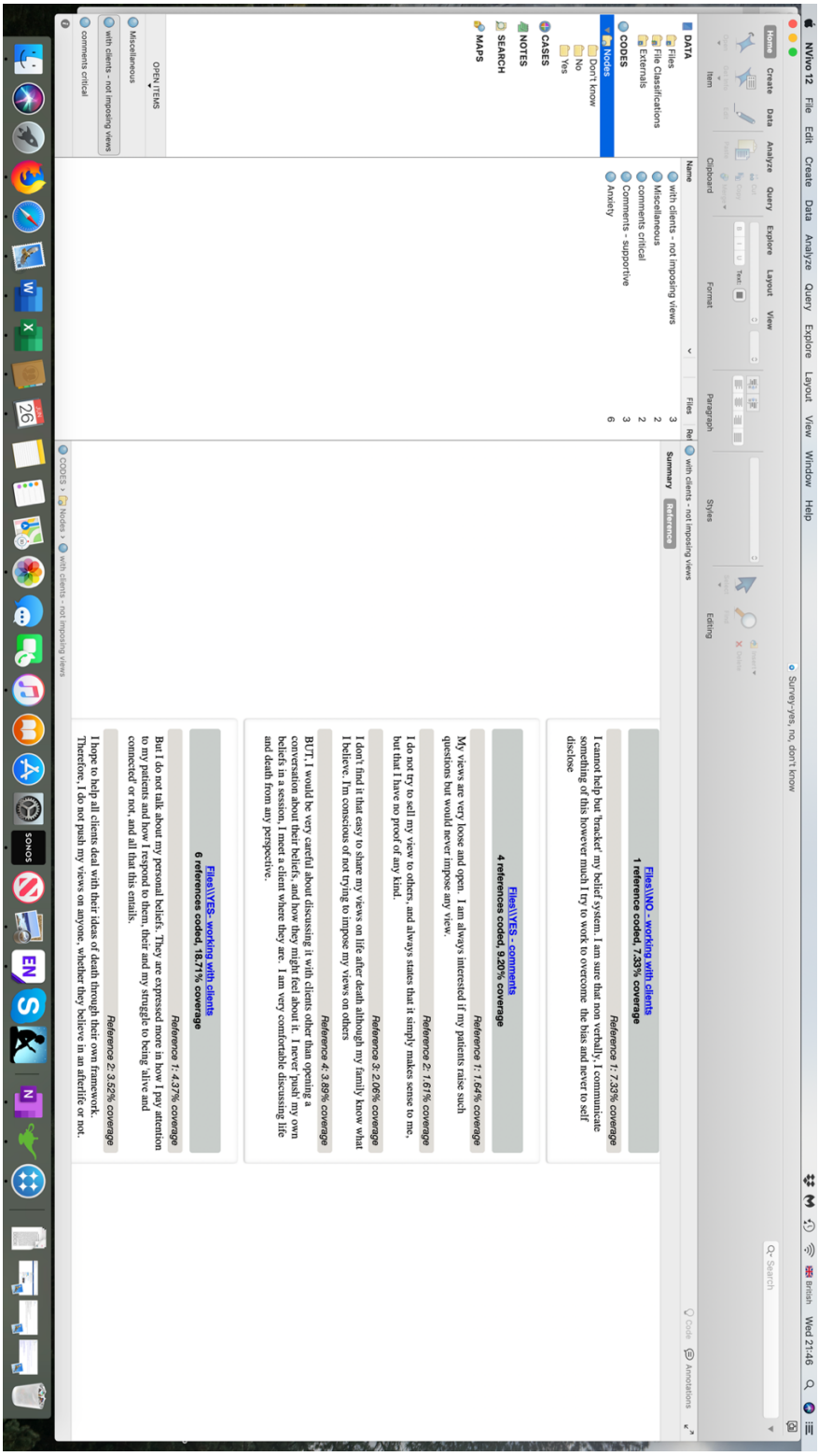
2. I agree to quotations from my contribution to this research being used in the researcher's thesis and in subsequent publications and presentations. ☐

3. I understand I will be given a pseudonym to protect my anonymity. I also understand that verbatim quotes may be used in the final dissertation but that only material that will not identify participants will be used. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

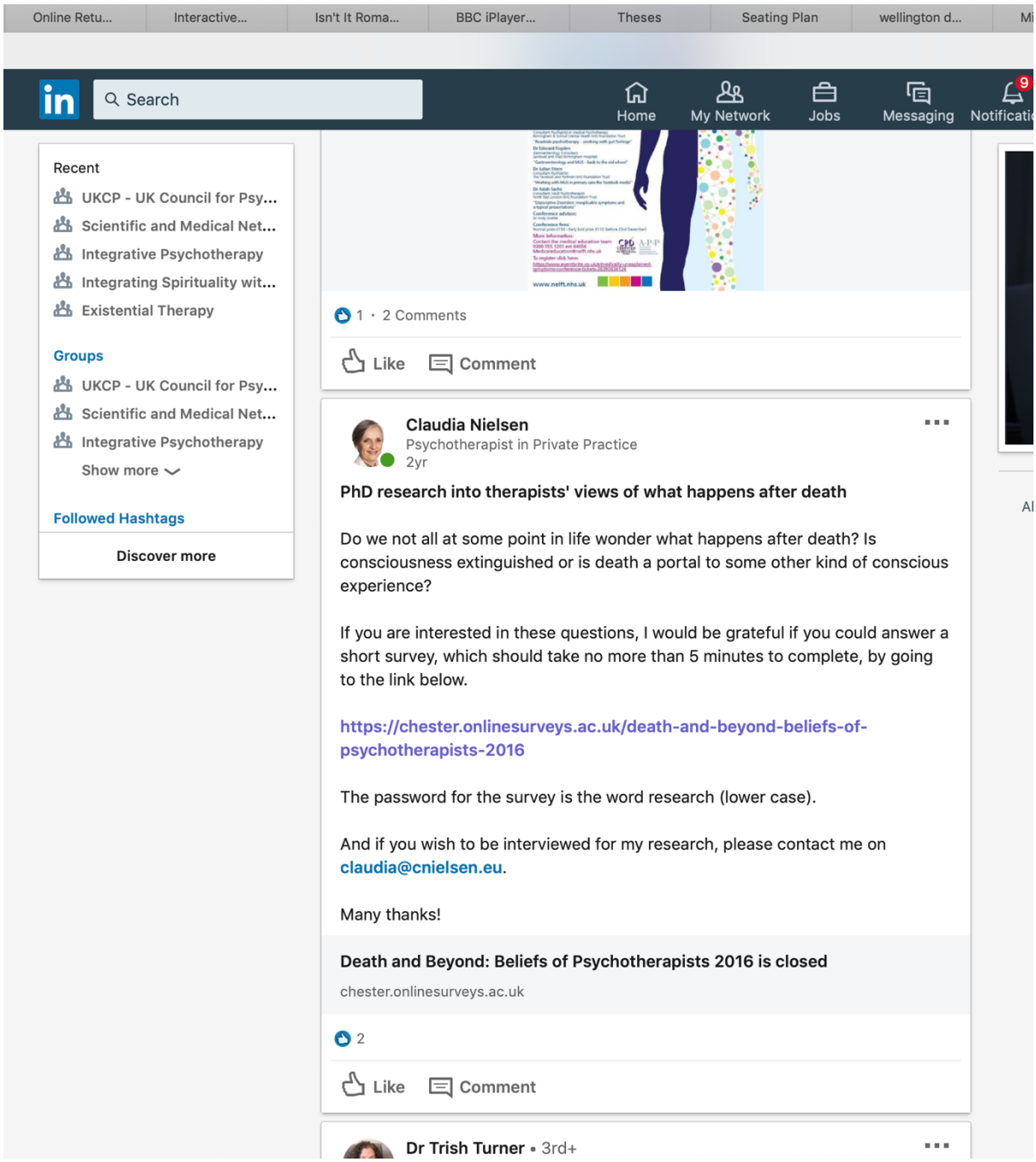
Appendix 4

Nvivo screenshot



Appendix 5

Linked in advert



Appendix 6

Extract from reflexive journal

05.07.16.

Following the two interviews with Claire and Daniel, I get the sense that the research is not going to confirm my suspicions that a) death is a subject which is overtly or covertly in the therapy room, and b) that people's beliefs have an impact in the way they work with clients. On the other hand, I need to ask more incisive questions about what is going on in people's heads in terms of their spiritual beliefs, as they sit with clients and explore their issues.

13.07.16
Was the language used in my survey not attractive enough to attract the expected, needed, interested participants?

18.07.16
Has the interview made my interviewees reflect? The question was specifically on their views on the afterlife and how it impacts their work. Neither Claire nor Daniel said anything specific about that.

Transcribing Claire's interview, it feels like she indulged in speaking about her experience of becoming a therapist rather than addressing my question …. Was I too permissive?

01.08.16
Subject matter of my research lies on the threshold of people's understanding what is credible – credible to them and to others. Claire's belief of negative attachments being picked off by her teacher. Daniel – was reluctant to own his own beliefs, even though he acknowledged that he does not talk about this to others. Third interviewee was honest about it. I must make it clear that it is anonymized and must encourage people to be honest.

09.08.16
Meanwhile I have interviewed Daniel, Laura and Fred. I feel that I am not getting the answers I am looking for. Dennis although fundamentally interested in life after death as his interest and participation in the SPR prove, is unwilling to confirm his belief in it. He is without belief. Laura acknowledged that if it would not destroy her credibility, she would be happy to explore the possibility with clients and Fred does not want there to be life after death because that would mean continuing restlessness, he therefore does not believe in it. I need to look further into the nature of belief.

Meanwhile I have posted the survey on linked in, first on the UKCP page and got 9 responses. I have then posted it on the Integrative and the HIPS page and also on the BACP notice board. I had one response from UKCP and will explore interviewing him.

Appendix 7

Input in subordinate and superordinate themes

Personal Beliefs	The mystery of reality and limitations of the human mind	Daniel, Rachel, Claire, Dianna, Laura, Paul, Carol
	Tacit knowing	Dianna, Laura, Sylvia, Sally,
	Validation of Beliefs	Kim, Daniel, Joan, Carol, Laura, Paul, Sylvia, Claire, Sally
Being a spiritual person	Ontology	Kim, Dianna, Daniel, Laura, Paul, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally, Joan
	Life experience of spirituality	Kim, Daniel, Joan, Carol, Laura, Paul, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally, Claire, Dianna, Joan
	Personal approach to mortality	Kim, Dianna, Daniel, Joan, Carol, Laura, Paul, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally, Claire
The subject of death in the work with clients	Noticing the presence or absence of the subject in the work with clients	Kim, Dianna, Daniel, Joan, Laura, Paul, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally
	Attitudes in the work with clients	Kim, Dianna, Daniel, Joan, Carol, Paul, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally, Claire
	Self-reflection	Kim, Dianna, Carol, Laura, Paul, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally,
	Ethics and credibility	Laura, Sally, Kim, Joan, Paul, Joan, Rachel
	Interest in and benefits of participating in this research	Dianna, Joan, Carol, Fred, Rachel, Sylvia, Sally

Appendix 8

Constructing sub and superordinate themes - extracts

Personal Beliefs
The mystery of reality

DANIEL – Yes, I've no idea … erm, presumably … I mean one of the things that have been suggested that there is a kind of parallel reality, something that we don't understand about the physics, I take, I take quite an interest in cosmology, erm, that just seems so utterly vast, and … incomprehensible .. you could only have sort of one of two responses, one is that you let your jaw drop a bit, or that you say humbug …

RACHEL –I think …. The word that comes into my head is mystery … I think I am far more able than I was a couple of decades ago, to be with the … the concepts of the unknowing, mystery and chaos, and complexity and I wouldn't even begin to doubt, to feel that we are the most sophisticated or the most …….. at all, I would … that sense of, … levels and layers of experience I suppose, and … an awareness of hearing things quite differently when I really slow down … something about re-returning to an aspect of the more mystical sense of silence, sense of sacred, I think maybe I would use this more than spirituality, and that sense of … deep attunement somehow, to the invisible, things we are not hearing because of the noise of what we are … something like that, so being much more mindful of being attuned to the people in my world and recognising perhaps at times when people are with me very strongly, are they in pain, is that why they have come to me, and occasionally that's the case, but I know, when I've got too crowded then I cease to hear, so I do have … an element of feeling aware of those aspects of being open to other levels of communication

CLAIRE - the more that I experience of the metaphysical world, the more I become aware of …. First of all, how little I know, you know and how limited I am, how, how … what I was told was the real world, is so isn't, you know, and it kind of leaves me with all these questions … of …. You know … what is and what isn't … you know, what is my imagination, what is … you know …. What happens in the unseen world, what happens in … through me …. Yeah, all of it … … this unseen realm that either facilitates us, guides us, heals us, helps us, or …. Can also hinder us …. If we don't know how to work with it …. Erm … the role of that … that …. that plays in anyone's life who wants to … to recognise it …

DIANNA - I think because of the things I've done shamanically I have a different understanding of things… my perspective is that everything is energy and because it is energy that doesn't mean there's a … it's a very difficult one this, I don't use the term God, but I use the term Great Spirit by that I mean we are all part of the All That Is.

LAURA - I believe there is so much more that we don't understand and I just think it is our inability as human beings and our brain power that we can't link in… - there's something that is actually incredibly basic and simple that plants and animals might understand but as human beings we've either become so sophisticated that me miss what's in front of us or we don't have the vocabulary to explain it, and it is a connectivity, a sort of a, a consciousness that everything living experiences …

PAUL - Just my speculation …. is that its more … it's not necessarily like a line … like that, it may be more like a kind of network interconnected that is outside of time as it were … I think the spirit world is outside of time … that's just my personal speculation … you know … I think it is possible to step outside of time, and that is how come precognition can happen

CAROL - so my belief system is …. you know, we incarnate, but at the same time there can be essences still there, in another realm as well

Tacit Knowing

DIANNA- it feels like we are at school and this is a term at school and at the end of term …. See how well we did, and then next term we start again and we learn more … until eventually we become completely part of All That Is … I don't know … I don't know … but there is that kind of karmic narrative underlying … that's how it feels somehow …

LAURA - sometimes I think nothing happens, that we die and that's it, but I can't believe that I just can't believe that, because (…) because I bel, I believe there is so much more that we don't understand and I just think it is our inability as human beings and our brain power that we can't link in, and … why don't I believe that? Well, I mean, I suppose the concrete part of me would say, I don't want to believe it, I don't want to believe that we're just here

and we live and die, erm, but there .. it's just this feeling I have and it is really hard to articulate, that there is so much more …

SYLVIA- I'm always looking for proof you see … because I don't have yet unknowing of the ultimate, that's why I am reading, that's perhaps why I was interested in your study … I like sitting with Eckhart Tolle book and listening to his … and people who have experienced something big .. cos I think well, they have experienced that, and they are talking from their own experience, maybe I could have that too or … is it … or maybe that it resonates somewhere with something inside me, maybe that's what it is … oh yeah, somewhere it's … oh yeah, I know that … Somewhere inside there is a "yeah, I know it" … Even though I can't hold on to it, or that it goes quickly or I can't seem to live it

SALLY- I never really fully understood that the Jewish religions does not uphold life after death, it is really quite interesting, because in my mind there is the sense, there must be something more than that, I would say that where my beliefs on life after death lie, it's more on the level of understanding the universe as kind of … as an energy canvas, of which I am a part of, we all are a part of, and I do believe, I do feel, and … it's only a feeling it's a belief, you know, nobody came back to tell us what it really is, ahn, is that I am part of something much bigger than that, and as such, even if my body …, extinguishes its life force, I am still there, but the I is very different, it is not that ego I, it's, it's something, you know, it's a spec in the universe if you like, that might have big importance in the whole canvas of things because we all – as much as we are just little specs at the same time we are really important.

Validation of beliefs

KIM - and I have seen the soul leaving the body … I should have said that to you, I've actually have seen it with my own eyes ….. I don't consider myself somebody who is particularly gifted in that way, other than I am very open, and when I was sitting with David, just about an hour before he died. he was just breathing very, very steadily and quietly … quite strong breaths … and I kept just touching him, and talking to him a bit, not a lot, quiet and peaceful, and I turned round and I saw smoke coming out of his head … and then I thought, oh, Katrina, you're tired, it is 1am, the lighting is low, you know, all those barriers, that you put up to something spiritual is happening in front of your eyes, and you're not even seeing it, and acknowledging it, and then I rubbed my eyes, and I looked again, and there was again this heat, haze, smoke, whatever you would call it, coming out of his head, and rising up. I knew that his spirit was leaving his body …. So, I sat there waiting, and then there was that tiny catch in his breath, that little something … and I went next door and got my friend, and I said, I think he is going to die soon, and she came back, and he died in thirty minutes. … he was surrounded by this white light, this person, who he didn't know a sort of a figure person, came to him and said very casually, he demonstrated it to me, he said 'it was like this' he went, 'you just gonna have to go back, you gonna have to go back', and he said 'I don't want to go back, I want to be here' he said it was such a wonderful feeling and he felt surrounded by this very pure love so, I guess a near death experience …

DANIEL - I've never had experience of objects appearing, I've seen some objects of alleged appearance, they called that *Apports*, that had come, erm, no I never had anything co ……. Oh that's not true, I have had something come through a sitting, erm, most of my contact has come outside of those in various ways …- I had some precognitive dreams as a child, and a couple of apparitions, … and then early adulthood a period of time with a poltergeist, seemed to mingle around

JOAN - I had a kind of out-of-body experience where I seem to … there were two things that were going on, it was like a dream but it was like being out of the body, one of the purposes of my own suffering may have been to make me more compassionate or you know a nicer person, and then the second bit was that there were these spiritual beings, and they were like on a sort of holiday desert island location, not desert but tropical island. They were so relaxed, they were laughing, and they were happy

CAROL - I noticed … I had a few experiences that led me to know … to have a felt sense that there was something beyond death … my grandmother - She came to me in the dream and the quality of the dream was so different from anything else … and for me … it was a very clear message, she was there …. She was protecting me … when dad died ahn … I knew … I just knew he was dying .. I had a real sense of the energy in the room changing for a couple of hours before he died … I felt my dad's presence after he died, very physical sense of his presence being around me … I've done past lives regression ahn … I'm quite interested in, I've read … yeah that's probably my weirdest and wackiest …. it felt like it was … (emotional) …

between lives and ehn … I had a very strong sense of my guide … there was a real connection perhaps with my guide

LAURA - I think we had quite a lot of experiences that were hard to erm, explain away. , it opened up a whole vista of world, that … this isn't just about life that we live every day as human beings, there is another life that we don't understand, …- there were strange things that used to happen, in her house for instance, clocks would stop, and there would be banging on the window and not … sorts of things that you would associate with the supernatural …. - I think this is one of the dilemmas I have had, is it is it my imagination, have I imagined these things, you know, after my father died, I saw him, really clearly, really clearly, the morning after he died, or a couple of mornings later, we were in his house, and he walked into the kitchen and I saw him walk into the kitchen, but did I? did I really see him??… well yes, I suppose I did, and I thought, well, I'd .. you know and I'd …

PAUL - but in my family we always had … used to talk about …. you might say paranormal experiences …we always , like telepathy, precognitive dreams, seeing ghosts and so on and so forth .. my grandmother for example saw a ghost and that story was … the family tradition is that it was … the ghost of my aunt

SYLVIA- I became interested in near-death experiences and have read a lot about that … I think it is such a mystery because ….. we are so … we are such … consciousness seems to be such … so much who we are and people who had near-death experiences seem to have had experiences that didn't seem to need their bodies, which is curious because we seem to think that we need a body to have our … our rationality … yet there are examples of people who have been blind since birth but when they are in a near death experience they can actually see things, I mean like that, which completely refute the who notion that … so consciousness is what kind of interests me **…** - I was there when my mother died which was in 1985 … erm … she'd been unwell … she was in her 80's, and me and my daughter had gone up to see her [….] … and we were coming back to London, she lives in Aberdeen … and she died that morning, and I remember seeing her dead and knowing that she wasn't there … it was sort of so palpable that she wasn't there

CLAIRE - then I just got this information of which came through the heart and it was very loving and it was a blessing and erm it was … I can't remember the words but it was around love and it was about peace. And about the information that this, this being, which I couldn't see, all I could do is hear and feel that they were free now and they could go! I've had past life experiences that have, that have come through and informed like with this client, but on the personal level as well, it, you know, I was a witch in a past life, but I was a, a dark witch, erm, and I think you know, it is really interesting, and I think that when I first started doing this work, that that was one of my biggest fears, it just like, I'm gonna be condemned as a witch, you know, it's like, I'm, I'm and I, that was so …

SALLY - I would say that where my beliefs on life after death lie, it's more on the level of understanding the universe as kind of … as an energy canvas, of which I am a part of, we all are a part of, and I do believe, I do feel, and … it's only a feeling it's a belief, you know, nobody came back to tell us what it really is, ahn, is that I am part of something much bigger than that, and as such, even if my body …, extinguishes its life force, I am still there, but the I is very different, it is not that ego I, it's, it's something, you know, it's a spec in the universe if you like, that might have big importance in the whole canvas of things because we all – as much as we are just little specs at the same time we are really important.

Appendix 9

Articles authored:

Nielsen, C. (2015a). Death, the ultimate frontier: then what? *Thresholds*, 12-15.

Nielsen, C. (2015b). Exploring Dark Corners: an Invitation to Psychotherapists. *Network Review, 118*, 26-27.

Nielsen, C. (2017). Can We Talk About Death? *The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy, 17*(1), 57-62.

Appendix 10

Example: Transcript section

Daniel

CN – ok, so the first thing that I'd like to ask you is how you came to be a therapist.

P2 – Ah, thank you very much, I won't go on too long, I think, I think dissatisfaction with traditional religion, I began life as a priest, very young …

CN – how young

P2 – erm, going back 40 something years, 46 years, 47? I don't, I don't calculated it, 47 years! Dissatisfied! So there I was on the look out for something new. Erm, got an opportunity, medical council, or some such council gave me a grant to get trained, I got trained in counselling … see it is as simple as that!

CN – ok

P2 – no grand things ….

CN - yeah, aha … and you've been in the profession ever since.

P2 – yes.

CN – right! Uhu! And what is it that appeals to you regarding my research.

P2 –oh, oh well! Obviously the religious link is one thing, but the other thing is right from my very very earliest years I had an interest in mortality …

CN – ah yeah!

P2 – this formed as soon as I can remember, and from time to time occasional paranormal experiences. And I've been a member of the Society of Psychical Research on and off since I was a teenager.

CN – right uhu, I see! So this is a long standing interest!

P2 – yeah.

CN – and … so what is it that you … what are your beliefs around death,

P2 – yes, I talk a lot about it, I go to various talks, I got one of them on the map, the next one I am going to … is about erm …. Erm …. Poltergeists, evidential bits … I am a labelled chartered scientist, so I take, I try to take a scientific view of it, when I did my first degree, one of the professors there …

CN – what was your first degree?

P2 – theology … he was very interested in death as a motivator for religion so I studied a lot, mortality type rituals, understandings of what we do when we die and so on, so I suppose, despite having a label of priest I have to say I am very agnostic, I take an open minded view and there are all sorts of very interesting things coming out in that field, really … erm, yeah …

CN - and death itself, what does death look like to you, what do you think happens after death

P2 – I haven't the slightest informed clue, just some leads maybe and these leads are informed by some quite astonishing research if you know the history of research into post mortem survival, erm, you'd know of cross correspondence of Cayce and other things … quite interesting and quite detailed and one of my great evidential areas is the issue of the drop-in communicator

CN – the drop-in communicator …what is that?

P2 – that is if you are holding a séance, a spiritualist service and someone just drops in and says I'm Joe and I died 50 years ago and the hospital I died in is such and such and you can find out all about me, and I am coming to tell you about how things are, and they go on and tell you about their lives, and then you go, you look it up and you find you find that at least 90% seems true. What on earth is all that about! And they are one of my strongest support evidences for a post mortem survival.

CN – right

P2 – then you go into sort of things such as Jesus, resurrections, one of them, which I think quite remarkable things, equally quite extraordinary frankly, going on over the ages, and still going on, and going on, and going on under experimental conditions would you believe it …

CN – experimental?

P2 – experimental …

CN – in what way?

P2 – well, just simply day light sittings, objects appearing, writings appearing …

CN – have you had experience of that?

P2 – I've never had experience of objects appearing, I've seen some objects of alleged appearance, they called that *Apports*, that had come, erm, no I never had anything co ……. Oh that's not true, I have had something come through a sitting, erm, most of my contact has come outside of those in various ways …

CN – so, erm sittings, and you mentioned in the form you completed for me, that you had been to mediums and that you had relevant information that came through via a medium ….

P2 – yes, yes

CN aha … and is that information from people that you had known?

P2 – yes, yeah

CN – right and … information that the medium could not have known ..
P2 – oh yes,

CN – and did you know?

P2 – yeah

CN - But the medium didn't..

P2 – yes that's right.

CN – could it have been telepathic?

P2 – of course! This is one of the hypothesis, called the Super ESP hypothesis, you probably heard the phrase … of course it is possible, but the attempts to produce ESP or super ESP, I know people have been trying to read each other's secrets militarily and otherwise for a long time and had no success whatsoever, even the use of psychedelic drugs and all sorts of things … hasn't worked!