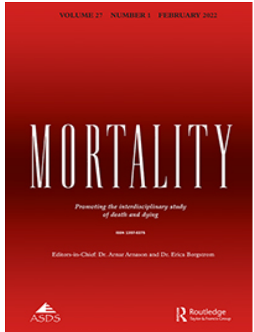

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Death Café, Bauman and striving for human connection in 'liquid times'

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ABSTRACT

The death-positive movement, the latest enactment of the death awareness movement, posits that contemporary societies are suffering under a 'death taboo' and that people should talk more about death. In this article, we analyse an international social franchise aligned with this movement – Death Café – whereby strangers gather in a café setting to talk informally about death and dying. Drawing on interviews conducted with 49 Death Café organisers in 34 countries, we apply the theories of Zygmunt Bauman to interpret this social initiative. Our analysis shows that the way in which the temporary café space is staged for atmosphere and attended by strangers who engage in 'taboo' conversation, all serves to engender feelings of intimacy and connection. Rather than viewing Death Cafés as primarily spaces for death awareness-raising, we interpret them as paradigmatic examples of what Bauman termed 'peg' communities, constructed to assuage the loneliness experienced by individuals in liquid modernity.

KEYWORDS

Bauman; Death Café; death positivity; death taboo; postmodernity

Introduction

The current cultural climate, at least in the Anglosphere, is ripe with both social and formal death education and awareness-raising initiatives. Some of these include Death Over Dinner (Hebb, 2018); Order of The Good Death (The Order of the Good Death, 2019); Death Salon (Death Salon, 2019); and the focus of this article, Death Café (Impermanence, 2011). The media has loosely defined this as the 'death positive movement' (Booth, 2019; Melzer, 2018). Death positivity is the continuation of a discourse that has been ongoing for nearly 50 years. We consider it to be the latest incarnation of a social movement that began in the 1970s, spearheaded and popularised by the likes of psychiatrist Kübler-Ross (1969), who promoted the 5 stages of grief model, and Mitford (1963), who critiqued the profiteering of the American funeral industry.

Death positive initiatives, like those of the 1970s, are typically oriented around the contention that late modern societies are death denying and that this negatively affects people's well-being at all stages of life. Advocates argue that talking about and engaging more actively with mortality, including end-of-life planning, is to be encouraged because it holds significant

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tangible benefits for people. Lofland (1978) was the first to critique the death awareness movement, memorably labelling it the 'happy death movement'. The rise of death positivity has precipitated a resurgence of interest in Lofland's early critique (Francis, 2019). While there are many similarities between the 1970s movement and death positivity, the latter is more firmly entrenched within consumer capitalism and death discussions are now decisively linked to lifestyle choices and identity politics (Koksvik, 2020).

In this article, we present a Baumanian interpretation of findings from a study of the most well-known of this 'new wave' of death awareness initiatives: Death Café. This is a social franchise whereby strangers gather in a café setting to talk about death and dying, whatever their stage of life. With no financial incentive, a Death Café takes the form of a few hours of free-flowing conversation, not intended to lead to any predetermined outcome or conclusion. The proposed goal is to 'increase awareness of death with the aim of helping people make the most of their (finite) lives' (Death Café, 2019). At the time of our study (May–December 2018), the Death Café website listed events taking place in 56 countries.[1] By the time of publication of this article, this had risen to 75 countries. Although the initiative has received attention from journalists (e.g. Booth, 2019; Melzer, 2018), there are currently very few research studies which critically address death positivity or its attendant initiatives. Studies of Death Café specifically are often noticeably uncritical, often candid in their admiration, and appear, in the main, intent on normalising and furthering the initiative (Baldwin, 2017; Fong, 2017; Hammer et al., 2019; Miles & Corr, 2017). We have previously written about Death Café in relation to end-of-life policies, which are often focused on encouraging citizens to plan for death, as well as examining organisers' motivations for engaging in what has become an international initiative (Richards et al., 2020). In this article, we offer a more critical and theoretically informed account of Death Café, drawing on the same qualitative interview study of 49 Death Café organisers from 34 territories worldwide.

In keeping with the history of death awareness, Death Café is particularly well established in the English speaking 'West': the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, followed thereafter by Western Europe. Predictably, our study found that it was less well-established in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. However, we were struck by the fact that across all our interviews, organisers expressed similar views about a cultural avoidance of death talk, the loss of traditional practices, and the outsourcing of death and dying to professionals – aspects of what is collectively termed 'the death taboo'. This was the case despite the different cultures, religions and traditions represented in the territories in our study. For us, this indicates that the sentiments which underpin involvement with Death Café – alienation from aspects of modernity and nostalgia for historical approaches perceived as being more authentic – are not exclusive to the 'West'. These narratives have found sympathetic audiences in other parts of the world which are grappling with societal changes and an accompanying sense of loss associated with the organisation of social life in a globalised modernity. Respondents reported their café attendees varied greatly in age and backgrounds, and it was not possible to create a picture of a 'typical' Death Café attendee. Although cafés that were organised within a healthcare setting did tend to focus slightly more on issues related to treatment and care and be attended by more healthcare professionals than Cafés organised in other settings, there were no other systematic or significant differences between Cafés in terms of reported topics of conversation, ambiance, or motivations for attending.

To analyse our empirical material, we apply the theories of Zygmunt Bauman, specifically those developed in 'Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies' (1992) as well as his

influential notion of liquid modernity (2000). Despite Bauman's undeniable relevance to the sociology of death and dying, his work is infrequently discussed within the subfield. A speculated reason for this is that his ideas are considered too abstract to relate convincingly to empirical research (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 381). Our article, however, aims to do just this. We make an original contribution by applying Bauman's radical social theory to a real-world case study. Our central argument is thus: against a backdrop of proclaimed taboos and denials, which work to enhance group identity and frame participation as transgressive or bold, Death Café organisers intentionally 'stage' their Death Café in an attempt to foster social connection between attendees who are often (and optimally) strangers to one another. In doing so, the initiative reveals less about a human need to talk about death, and more about striving for human connection in late modern societies in response to the dislocation and loneliness experienced due to a 'failure of communion' (Bauman, 1992, p. 182).

What is a Death Café?

Death Café was conceived by the English web-developer, Jon Underwood, in 2011. Underwood wanted to create a community initiative around the topic of death when he came across a newspaper article about 'Café Mortels' in Switzerland (Guinness, 2010). The brainchild of Swiss sociologist, Bernard Crettaz, these were social gatherings in bistros where people would talk about death (Crettaz, 2010). Building on Crettaz' initiative, Jon Underwood created Death Café as a temporary or 'pop up' event where people, often strangers, would come together to talk about death over food and drink. Death Cafés were intended as 'safe spaces' for people to spend a few hours reflecting on the finite nature of life, in the 'ultimate prioritisation exercise' (BBC, 2014). The gatherings were to be free of ideological interference or profiteering and were not to function as or to replace bereavement groups or therapeutic counselling. After holding the first Death Café in his private home in London, Jon Underwood went on to organise many more around the UK and published guidance to allow others to replicate the model (Underwood, 2011). The idea soon spread to the USA (2012), and thereafter to other parts of the world (Richards et al. 2020).

As a social franchise, anyone is free to organise a Death Café in any location. Potential organisers are expected to follow a set of principles and are encouraged to register their events on a central website. Jon Underwood's work with Death Café, including acting as the spokesperson for the movement and undertaking the maintenance and administration of the website, was voluntary and non-remunerated. He maintained close contact with many Death Café organisers around the world. After Underwood's unexpected death in 2017, his family has carried on this work.

Method and analytical lens

We undertook a qualitative interview study with Death Café organisers around the world. The study received ethical clearance from University of Glasgow College of Social Science Research Ethics Committee, and Author 2 established a rapport with Underwood who gave approval for our use of the initiative's website to recruit participants. Following his death, we maintained contact with his family who also assisted with recruitment. Data collection occurred from May–December 2018. We reached out to organisers in all the 56 territories that were listed on the Death Café website at the time of data collection. We

wanted to discover both the scale of the movement and the reason for its spread and our guiding principle was to interview organisers in as many countries as possible. Where possible, we focused on contacting and interviewing the first Death Café organisers in each country/territory.

In total, we conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with 49 Death Café organisers (some were organiser dyads) from 34 territories. The mean age of our interviewees was between forty and fifty, but the organisers' ages ranged from 20 to 70. Thirty-five were women, and eight were men. The organisers came from varied backgrounds. Nevertheless, certain clusters of professions did stand out, notably 'death work', new age-related activities (e.g. divination, meditation, mandala paintings), and medicine/healthcare (Table 1). For more details on the recruitment and interviewing process, see (Richards et al., 2020). Our questions focused on understanding how and why the interviewee became involved with Death Café, their views on the value of talking about death and dying and what role Death Café plays, as well as questions concerning how they ran their café. We include our interview schedule (Figure 1) and a table (Table 2) indicating the motivation for becoming involved with Death Café, as reported by the organiser/s. Throughout the article, we relay only the continent the organiser came from rather than the country in order to respect our participants' anonymity while also providing the reader with an indication of spread and diversity (Table 3).

Our analytical framework came about inductively. Author 1 thematically coded the transcribed interviews in an iterative process using the programme NVivo, following the principles outlined by Ritchie et al. (2005). We allowed for themes that stood out to guide a second, fine-grained reading, which included other members of our research group and resulted in new codes. Throughout this process, we were struck by the recurring themes related to 1) a desire for human connection and creating atmospheres conducive to this, and 2) a general sense of disenchantment and nostalgia for 'traditional' practices or practices perceived as being more 'authentic'. Through discussions within the writing dyad and sense checking with members of the University of Glasgow End of Life Studies Group, Bauman's theories and commentaries on modernity, characterised by his notion of liquidity, appeared to us to be a particularly apt lens through which to interpret our data.

Zygmunt Bauman: mortality, liquidity and community

Zygmunt Bauman is one of the most widely read and commented on sociologists of the contemporary era (Jacobsen, 2011). His work is often described as being difficult to pin down or categorise as it draws upon various theoretical sources and spans different perspectives and schools of thought. Indeed, it was never Bauman's objective to build an all-encompassing

Table 1. Professions of Death Café organisers.

Organiser professions	Number
Death Industry (death literacy, funeral industry, thanatology, end of life doula)	13
Healthcare	10
Mental health	6
New age	3
Clergy	2
Other	15
TOTAL	49

Interview Schedule

1. What is your age and gender?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your profession?
4. Can you remember where you first heard about the death café concept?
5. What initially interested you about the idea?
6. Had you heard about other death cafes happening in your country?
7. Why did you decide to organise one yourself?
8. Have you heard from others in your country about their experiences of running death cafes?
9. When did you run the death café? How many have you run? Are they run regularly?
10. What was/is the format?
    a. When
    b. Where
    c. How advertised
    d. Who turned up (number, age, gender, class, occupation)
    e. number of attendees
    f. An agenda? Set questions/guide? Or open?
    g. If organised several/ongoing: How, if at all, has the format changed over time?
11. What were the opportunities and challenges of setting up a death cafe?
12. Did you make any adaptations to the standardised death café format (non-facilitated, open to everyone, coffee and cake etc). If so, why were these adaptations considered necessary?
13. What would you say are the broader cultural attitudes to death and dying in your country/region/community
14. Can you give some examples of the kind of topics that were discussed in the death café?
15. Outcomes (more death cafes? spin off events? Feedback from attendees? Reported effects?)
16. What are your views on 'openness' about death?
17. What are you views on the benefits of talking about death? Or raising awareness of death and dying in society?
18. Outcomes: Do you think death cafes have a practical outcome for people, in terms of advance care planning etc.?
19. Do you envisage running more death cafes in the future and would these have the same focus?
20. What do you think the future holds for the death café movement? (Jon Underwood as a figurehead, does it have its own momentum, what is the ultimate aim etc)
21. Is there any promotional materials you would be happy to send us?

Figure 1. Interview schedule.

Table 2. Motivations for organising a Death Cafe, categorised thematically.

Theme	Select quotes (From different participants)
Desire to talk about death in context of a societal taboo	"We all know we're going to die, but nobody talks about it (. . .) So basically, the motivation has to do with finding a space of trust where you can talk. And to regain the importance of talking.' "I really had the idea of spreading positivity around the concept of death talk." "An interest in speaking about taboo and marginalised topics, and an interest to spend time with people who find it meaningful and who dare to talk about death."
Bereavement	"Eight years ago, my wife died. Then I thought maybe I could do something for the other people who might have the same experience or same feeling."
Desire for intimacy and a deep connection	"What I'm actually interested in is the deeper things of what make us human, and so, you know, in a way, I think underneath . . . is the thing of exploring intimacy and connection . . . which I think are the most human things, uniquely human qualities or interactions' 'it's more about living, there's something about living deeper, and asking the question about, what makes us unique as humans, what makes us more human."
Community building	"From my perspective, it's probably the greatest example of living and being an active participant of your society and your community"
Carpe Diem[2]	"Buddhists have been saying this for a very long time, that when we have less fear of dying and death, then life becomes more vibrant"

*We go into this motivation in more detail in Richards et al. (2020).

Table 3. Geographic spread of interviews.

Continent	Number of interviews
Europe	23
Africa	3
North America	4
South America	4
Asia	5
Middle East	3
Oceania	1
TOTAL	43

theoretical system or to present a set of essential theoretical concepts as several other influential sociologists have done (Jacobsen & Poder, 2008, p. 3). Rather, Bauman's sociology was concerned with the human consequences of social development, specifically those associated with modernity. Throughout his career, Bauman wrote on a broad range of topics including the Holocaust, consumerism, love, sexuality, ethics and more, all as a way of attending to different aspects of modernity's social transformations and its effects. 'In all my books' he stated 'I constantly enter the same room, only that I enter the room through different doors' (Bauman in Welzer, 2002, p. 109).

In 'Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies' (1992), this 'door' is death. Here, Bauman (1992) posits that awareness of mortality, which is uniquely human, is the very impetus which drives the creation of culture and society: 'It is because we know that we must die that we are so busy making life' (p. 6). Cultures therefore develop as and through strategies of forgetting or 'strategies of survival'. By placing the defiance of death and the drive for (symbolic) immortality at the core of human activity, Bauman argues (1992, pp. 1–2) that it is the institutions and rituals which are ostensibly unrelated to death that are the most revealing of our relationship to it. Bauman (1992) sets out three attitudes with attendant strategies of survival; the pre-modern, modern and the postmodern. These are not chronological periods, but intellectual

constructs to attempt to bring analytical order to an ever-changing and disorderly reality (Jacobsen & Kearl, 2014). Later, Bauman came to replace 'postmodernity' with 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). Ray (2007, p. 66) argues that this change in terminology was not due to a substantial change in theory. Rather, for Bauman, the word 'postmodernity' was a stop-gap choice in his search for the right word. Ultimately, he found it inadequate because the prefix suggested that what ensued had been left behind: that modernity was essentially over. Yet for Bauman, this is not the case, so liquidity offered a better metaphor for contemporary experience (Ray, 2007, p. 67). We use the term 'liquid modernity' throughout our article.

For Bauman, modernity itself is solid. It is an orientation towards grand narratives, projects and optimism – both at the societal and individual levels. Modern individuals move forwards in a goal-oriented manner, and their identity develops accordingly. Modernity is future-oriented and it makes sense to make sacrifices in the present in service to future goods. For Bauman (1992), the modern survival strategy is to deconstruct mortality, turning it into a host of potentially avoidable elements (e.g. disease) and precipitating a lifelong preoccupation with health, hygiene, lifestyle and safety. In 'liquid modernity', however, the modern illusion of projects and progress dissipates. Indeed, the word liquid becomes a metaphor for all aspects of life, including human identities and relations: nothing is fixed or stable and everything is uncertain, rapidly changing and in a state of constant flux. A distinguishing feature of liquid modernity in Bauman's view is pervasive deregulation and privatisation of modernising tasks, by which any improvements upon society, as upon individual lives, become the responsibility of individuals themselves. Individuals face the continuous task of self-reflexively creating and maintaining their identities – a notion Bauman shares with theorists like Giddens (1991) and which is also echoed in Weberian analyses of contemporary life (Mellor & Schilling, 1993). This makes for a society where social bonds are transient and weak (Bauman, 2000, p. 14) and the attendant attitude is inherently a lonely one; life is not lived cumulatively but as 'a string of episodes' (Bauman, 1992, p. 170).

For Bauman (2000, p. 62), there is no end goal to identity development as identities too become liquid and always in the making. The absence of fixed guiding principles or end goals, together with a pervasive maxim championing human freedom and empowerment, causes not only social disintegration, but continuous individual 'responsibilisation' by which individuals are deemed accountable for all their choices and their attendant consequences. Responsiblisation rests, Bauman argues (2002, p. 177), on the false presumption that we are all equally able to shape our life trajectory and that all possess the tools to solve life's problems on their own. He summarises this strategy poignantly, stating that contemporary individuals are expected to 'seek and find *biographical* solutions to *systemically* produced problems' (Bauman, 2002, p. 177). The idea of responsibilisation is well-supported and developed by other social theorists as well, perhaps most notably in the work of Nikolas Rose (e.g. 1990, 1996).

Befittingly, the survival strategy of liquid modernity is to deconstruct *immortality*. This survival strategy attempts to resolve 'the haunting issue of survival by making it less haunting or not haunting at all' (Bauman, 1992, p. 187). If death is *the other* of 'solid' modern life, liquid modernity attempts to take it out of hiding and subsume it into the realm of the ordinary to achieve something akin to a preventive inoculation. By ingesting the toxin daily, that is by rehearsing the ephemerality of things and of human bonds,

mortality loses its power and the individual becomes indifferent to it (Bauman, 1992, p. 188). In brief, if all that matters is the present moment, nothing has intrinsic value and nothing lasts forever – death is all around and immortality too becomes fleeting.

Although at first glance paradoxical, a refrain of Bauman's thinking is that liquid modernity is the age of communities. In his view, we strive for it more than ever before. Indeed, the focus on community and community-building is arguably a staple of the current policy and research landscape (Blackshaw, 2008), not least in English-speaking countries. However, in line with the fluid and precarious character of liquid life, this increased focus on community is, for Bauman, an indication of its inherent impossibility. The embrace of and longing for community in contemporary societies is due precisely to the fact that it cannot be solidly realised (Blackshaw, 2008, p. 333). While solid communities are all-consuming and effective as they exist without the need for legitimation simply as a taken for granted feature of ordinary life, contemporary communities are self-defined, consciously made up of a collection of individuals acting out their self-identities. The main means of creating such communities is through shared intimacies. Indeed, Bauman argues, in liquid modernity, personal and intimate sentiments must be externalised in order to make sense, and thus interpersonal and public sharing of private matters is encouraged (Bauman, 2000, p. 69). Yet, as a solution to the precarious and fleeting quality of relationships, they are only viable in liquid modernity as far as they are aligned with the individualisation of tasks and responsibilities (Bauman, 2000, p. 38). The result is what Bauman (2000, p. 37) calls 'peg' communities: fragile, transitory gatherings 'around a nail on which solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears'.

Bauman's theory, as laid out here, provides an ideal lens through which to examine the phenomenon of Death Café. We argue that Death Cafés are paradigmatic examples of what Bauman termed 'peg' communities, constructed to assuage the loneliness experienced by individuals in liquid modernity. We begin by exploring Death Café organisers' views about the death taboo, which is an important place to start given that their perception of a taboo on death is commonly what motivates their engagement with the initiative in the first place (Richards et al., 2020). The fact that the conversation focuses on a supposedly 'taboo' topic helps to encourage sharing and expressivity amongst Death Café attendees ultimately creating a sense of intimacy which draws the 'peg' community together. We then look at how Death Café organisers strive to create a certain atmosphere in their gatherings through choice of venue and food, also as an attempt to create a sense of togetherness. We then move on to discuss another feature of Death Cafés which is that they should (optimally) be a meeting of strangers. This feature, too, in the view of organisers, affects the way in which intimacy is shared and evoked in the Death Café setting. Finally, in the discussion, we return to the theories of Bauman to shed light on Death Café as a uniquely liquid modern phenomenon.

The death taboo thesis

For the Death Café organisers we interviewed, all identified the 'death taboo', or the practicalities of death and dying being removed from ordinary people's lives, as their main motivation for setting up a café. One European organiser commented:

> We wanted to normalise death and have conversations about death, and we felt that society was very alienated from death and the fact that we're dying. (…) It shouldn't be a taboo anymore (Organiser, Europe).

This was echoed by one organiser in Asia, who explained that although death was not a pleasant subject, they wanted to normalise it and make it so that

> it's not something to be frightened of, it's not something to not talk about, it's not a taboo subject

Alternatively, in the words two other organisers:

> We just want people to start talking about death, dying, and just making it less taboo (Organiser, North America).

> [Death Café] was just the perfect container to be able to offer people in terms of a space to have those taboo conversations (Organiser, Europe).

Some organisers expressed nostalgia for historical approaches that were perceived as more 'authentic' and these sentiments were often expressed alongside feelings of disenfranchisement and disillusionment with the contemporary world:

> the power (. . .) is away from the family, away from the local community. So now babies are not born at home, they're born in hospitals. Now people aren't waked at home, they're waked in funeral homes. That personal connection has been lost. That comes up in every Death Café that I've run. (There is) some sadness around that and then noticing that that is a cultural shift (Organiser, Europe).

The death taboo, then, and feelings of nostalgia for past cultural practices and attitudes formed the primary motivation for organisers' involvement in the movement. For Lofland (1978), the first academic to critique the 'happy death movement', the movement partook from and fed into 1970s counterculture ideas denouncing modern Western society as 'dehumanising, unemotional, technologically dominated, and inauthentic' (pp. 91–92). Interestingly, while several of the Death Café organisers we interviewed were involved in medical or healthcare professions (Table 2), some were also involved in self-development practices, mindfulness, and clairvoyance, evidencing a continued link to alternative lifestyles and counterculture ideas. Lofland (1978) argued that within the death awareness movement, a sense of loss or nostalgia was an important component in cleaving an opposition between idealised historical practices and dehumanising contemporary ones. In their comprehensive review of the death taboo literature, Tradii and Robert (2017) identify a value-laden 'narrative of fall' within the death awareness movement; a narrative that valorises traditional cosmologies and suggests contemporary societies are 'doing it wrong'. Despite great variation in both the character and reach of the 'new wave' of death-positive initiatives, the death taboo and denial narrative underpins them all and relies on much the same arguments as it did in the 1970s (Tradii & Robert, 2017, p. 1, 8).

Part of the death-positive movement's message is that that people need to challenge the death taboo and engagement with death and dying should be normalised: it is about 'making death a part of your life' (The Order of the Good Death, 2019). Despite the stated goals of normalisation, however, we argue that it is in fact the background of 'taboo' and secrecy which is crucial to fostering human connections through a sense of elevated intimacy:

> I wouldn't say death, per se, is interesting. It's just because it's so big and scary, it kind of throws open the gates for deeper sharing, deeper intimacy (Organiser, Europe).

> I don't know any other topic which brings people as close together than death and dying (Organiser, Europe).

Talking about death is understood to bypass small talk, niceties or pretence, and therefore makes conversation seem more authentic. According to Crettaz (2010, p. 124) who ran the original Café Mortels in Switzerland, café conversations functioned as nothing less than a conduit through which attendees were 'born into authenticity'. This special quality of death talk was also reflected by the Death Café organisers we interviewed, for whom it was said to bring the conversation to a 'human level' or who expressed that 'being willing to talk about death and dying is actually about being willing to connect easily with people' (Organiser, North America). One interviewee commented: 'I feel it touches the real part of everybody (. . .) I'd like to talk more sincerely, so this topic is a good way' (Organiser, Asia).

We see, therefore, that being open about death and dying and engaging in death talk was perceived by our interviewees as engaging in a particularly sincere and authentic form of conversation. The backdrop of taboo and secrecy is crucial as it frames Death Café participation as transgressive and bold, enhancing the group's identity amongst attendees.

Staging the café: venue and refreshments

Culturally, the café is a distinctive site of communality, sociability and civic life (Laurier & Philo, 2005, p. 3). Oldenburg (1989) described cafés as paradigmatic examples of what he called 'third places' which are neither private nor completely public and therefore hold unique potential for dialogue. Bernard Crettaz's original vision for Café Mortels also relied on the special conviviality of this setting. In his words, cafés 'create levity in order to authorise admissions of the deepest kind (. . .) because everyone knows, we go to the bistro to confess the essential things with an air of nothing special' (2010, 32, author translation). Likewise, staging a Death Café as a 'café' is essential. Organising Death Cafés as informal meetings over a beverage and a treat, with no experts present, positions the gatherings as a place of positive 'being with'. As an organiser in Asia commented:

> I think it is important because the word 'café' and the food sets a tone and it is an easy and not a serious gathering.

Death Cafés become a social event whereby a person attends, not to be educated, but to commune with equals. Noticeably, the Death Café organisers we interviewed expressed the view that choice of venue and of refreshments was important to inducing the 'right' atmosphere, one which was conducive to death talk. Organisers held Death Cafés in cafés, bars and restaurants, but also in private homes, bookshops, cemeteries and workplaces. Although some organisers opted for venues out of convenience in relation to logistics or cost, the qualities of the space itself were deemed important and organisers paid close attention to the staging of their cafés. Some tried several venues before finding an appropriate one: 'We tried a few different places (. . .), one was too noisy and one was too quiet and too tucked away' (Organiser, Oceania). A recurring theme in our interviews had to do with mood, feel, or *atmosphere*:

> Any Death Café I've attended so far, they worked a little bit differently, but they all managed to get this atmosphere going (Organiser, Europe).

> I felt like creating the right atmosphere and (...) the right circumstances is as important as saying it's okay to talk about death (Organiser, Middle East).

In everyday language, atmosphere can refer to ambiance, sense of place, or simply *the feel* of a room. An atmosphere is 'in the air' and works on the individual affectively to induce a particular mood (Böhme, 2013). Staging of atmospheres is a characteristic feature of contemporary society (Böhme, 2013; Thibaud, 2015) and a crucial component of organised social gatherings.

> I deliberately use a smaller room if I can get away with it, because it's much more intimate - people will tend to speak (Organiser, Europe).

> I think it actually is better for talking about death and dying when it's a little more secret, a little cosier (Organiser, North America).

Whereas some organisers sought out access to natural light and an open space, others favoured more homey and quiet spaces, softer light and more privacy. Our interviews also revealed that eating and drinking together was a key element of Death Café gatherings:

> There should always be food and drink. It's about nourishment and feeling comfortable (Organiser, Oceania).

> I usually spend about eight hours the day before making all the cake myself (...) I think people appreciate having the homemade stuff. It's a bit cosier (Organiser, Europe).

Cultural anthropologists and sociologists have written extensively on the topic of commensality – the act of sharing a meal, and the life affirming and trust-building qualities of this are well documented (e.g. Douglas, 1972). The way food is experienced often has to do with the memories that it evokes and its wider social meaning (Lupton, 1994). Indeed, according to one interviewee who knew Underwood personally, the choice of 'tea and cake', prominent in the Death Café concept and marketing from the beginning, was chosen because it was specifically meaningful in the British context as a reminder of family gatherings and the comforts of home. Unsurprisingly, we found that cultural adaptations were made across the world, such as substituting cake with local sweets or a hot meal, holding gatherings in venues offering alcoholic beverages, or serving cold rather than hot drinks.

The particular atmosphere, which is 'staged' in Death Cafés – in which the chosen venue and refreshments play a part – helps to achieve an environment of safety and comfort, as well as intimacy. All of this was deemed by organisers to be important for fostering human connection. Another key aspect of the Death Café form which organisers deemed important to furthering human connections was that those attendings were strangers.

A meeting of strangers

Crucially, the intention behind Death Café is that they are 'pop up' events, often involving strangers (Impermanence, 2011). In other words, people can attend non-committedly, with 'no strings attached', and may even remain anonymous. As one organiser of a Death Café in the Middle East told us:

> It was really important for me to give the right vibe. I said, you can be anonymous; you don't have to say your name. You can say nothing, you can just listen, everything is acceptable.

Indeed, some organisers attributed the special and meaningful community generated in their Death Café specifically to the fact that it was a meeting of strangers:

> There is something special that comes from conversations where no one has to pretend anything and we're all strangers. And since no one knows anything of our history, there is nothing to hide. So, what happens is that you encounter the other from a place of vulnerability (Organiser, South America).
>
> These conversations (. . .) are so deep and so profound, and in some ways more profound than conversations I have with close friends or loved ones (Organiser, North America).

The word 'magical' was used by some organisers, with one explaining that

> The talks very quickly get very personal (. . .) it's like in the death business I have encountered, it's kind of an intimate situation with total strangers. And in a very good way (Organiser, Europe).

Another European organiser likened this transitory openness to meeting a stranger on a train, prompting intimate conversations because of the complete lack of familiarity and the knowledge that you would never meet again. Indeed, it was suggested by some organisers that the conversations might not achieve the same quality or the same atmosphere in a context where people were not strangers; some organisers said they would reseat people if it happened that they already knew each other. As one put it, a Death Café would not work as well in a pre-existing community because 'everybody already knows each other so you don't have that whole stranger thing' (Organiser, North America). Importantly, therefore, our interviews suggest that the non-committal element of Death Café, where conversations take place primarily among strangers, encourages honesty and openness and promotes feelings of intimacy in ways that a more continuous commitment or conversations with people with whom one maintains a continuous relationship, might not.

Striving for human connection

Our interviewees described the effects of attending Death Cafés as profound. One characterised their activity as tethering them to the community (Organiser, Africa) and our interviewees repeatedly expressed the wonderful feelings that both they and others would get from attending Death Cafés, and how respectful, empathetic, and engaging the encounters were as follows:

> It's an amazing outcome, you know, it's not quantifiable. (. . .) I couldn't say exactly why it benefited me, but I felt deep down it benefited me, it benefited the people who attended in a very deep way (Organiser, North America).
>
> Another impact is the feeling after a Death Café. It's such a special happiness. People go away very happy, so like it doesn't seem we talk two hours about death. It's so friendly and happy and life-looking (Organiser, Europe).

Some emphasised how the Death Cafés worked to create connection: 'To see you're not alone, you know, because there's also this community thing' (Organiser, Europe). The 'real human connection' (Organiser, Europe) generated during the Death Café was typically contrasted with the broader cultural climate, which was considered to hinder such connections, or criticised for being too fast-paced, shallow, or indeed, too lonely:

> Many people suffer from loneliness. And a space like this gives you some friends and makes you think everybody's somehow connected to everybody, and you don't feel that lonely at all (Organiser, Asia).

> We're probably feeling some sort of kindred spirit with all the other people who are there, like 'Okay, some other people get me even though they might have (. . .) different opinions on certain things.' But at the end of the day, there's a communal feeling that just makes you feel a little bit better than when you came in (Organiser, Africa).

The desire to connect with others stood out as a dominant theme across our interviews. We have shown that Death Café organisers often strive to stage an atmosphere that is not only conducive to conversation, but which favours certain affective responses in both themselves and attendees: kinship, intimacy and genuine interpersonal connection to counter experiences of loneliness. In this sense, our interviews support the idea that Death Café gatherings may function as a remedy for, or reaction to, what Bauman terms a 'failure of communion'.

Discussion

Death Cafés are social, affective spaces. In fact, Death Café is one of the several contemporary initiatives that aim to capitalise on the potential offered by the café form to elicit meaningful conversations on all manner of topics. Other examples include Conversation Café (Conversation Café, 2020); open, hosted conversations held in any type of space, where 'people gather to make sense of our world', bypass small talk to achieve 'conversations that matter'. There is also the management consultancy initiative 'World Café' wherein the 'intimacy and collective engagement' of the café is thought to allow conversation to 'emerge in a natural way' (Brown, 2001, p. 7) and the initiative 'Chatty Café', founded with the express purpose of combatting loneliness (The Chatty Café Scheme, 2020). Death Café, too, seeks to capitalise on the café form, but ostensibly with a specific focus in mind: raising people's awareness of their mortality so they can 'make the most of their (finite) lives' (Impermanence, 2011). As an enactment of the contemporary death positivity movement following in the footsteps of death awareness, Death Café therefore differs from these other café initiatives in this important way.

Lofland (1978) situated the death awareness movement in the context of a broader disenchantment with modernity. This movement erected the death taboo as its main obstacle and it remains the featured foe of contemporary death positivity. The death taboo was mentioned by interviewees from a number of different countries with different religious and cultural traditions, not least with reference to medicine and healthcare. In many ways, this shows the globalising effects of modernity, which includes the way that death is socially organised (Walter, 2020). We argue that in the Death Cafés themselves, this 'narrative of fall' that romanticises an imagined pre-taboo past (Tradii & Robert, 2017), works to accentuate the feeling of partaking in something special, enhancing group identity through framing participation as transgressive or bold. Talking about death favours the ideal of authenticity or 'sincere' talk. In other words, the subject matter of death is important not because it represents a challenge to the death taboo, but because it enhances the affective bonds and expressivity within the group and helps to satisfy the criteria for human connection in late modern social life.

In contrast to the death awareness movement of the 1970s, today's death-positive climate evidences the effects of further capitalist development. There is a distinct connection to the lifestyle and wellness industries and their attendant commercial interests. Concomitantly, a central element of death positivity and death talk concerns articulating one's wishes regarding end of life and making funeral and disposition plans (Leland, 2018; Melzer, 2018). To put it in a different way, engaging with death might in actuality mean practical planning and aligning oneself with a specific lifestyle.

In liquid modernity, people have to consciously and continuously create meaningful frameworks for their own lives and a coherent identity within it in a never-ending process of 'development' and self-reflexivity (Bauman, 2000, 2002). In late modern culture that places great emphasis on 'sharing' and public articulations of the private, expressivity is a favoured way of engaging in self-reflexive identity construction (Bauman, 2000, 2002). Wood (1977) was the first to coin the term 'expressive death', and the original death awareness movement relied greatly on specific ideals of expressivity (Lofland, 1978, p. 100). Crettaz (2010), too, was explicit about this when laying out his rules for Café Mortel: 'Everyone is invited to talk from their heart and their guts; no theoretical approach to death will be tolerated' (34 author translation). In our analysis, Death Cafés are staged in such a way that the expressive and self-actualising tendencies of liquid modernity can come to the fore and people are able to connect with one another in a way that makes sense within the interactional logic of liquid modernity.

A core tenant of death-positive initiatives such as Death Café is that individuals and society as a whole would be better off if continuously reminded of and engaging with death. In light of this pronouncement, Bauman's theory of the liquid modern survival strategy, which depends on a continuous engagement with mortality, not as a liberating activity but as a 'preventive inoculation' to produce indifference, is particularly interesting. A Baumanian reading of death positivity suggests to us a culture that has lost its shine, and which fails to provide meaning. Following Bauman (1992, p. 142), if contemporary death is experienced as individual, self-enclosed, unshared and lonely, this is a reflection of the characteristics of late modern existence in general and not some warped relationship with death in particular.

As we have seen, Bauman views liquid modernity as inherently lonely and characterised by precariousness and an attendant search for communities to provide stability and assuage this sense of disconnection. This is reflected in the laments of organisers for 'more spaces for people to talk'; that is, the felt need to explicitly *stage* events in order to enable people to converse and *commune*. Befitting of fluid individuals continuously in-the-making, communities are not solid, however, but rather are self-consciously created to suit individual self-actualisation. We find this reflected in the very character of the Death Café initiative: an organised meeting-place the content and experience of which may be consumed and then abandoned by the strangers who attend. Indeed, the 'pop-up', transient nature of the events, where attendance necessitates only one common denominator (an interest in talking about death) and requires no commitment beyond the event itself, makes Death Café community-forming a prime example of what Bauman terms 'peg communities'. Liquid modern company with others, Bauman (2000) argues, functions mostly by showing us that others are lonely too (pp. 35–36). As such, communing assuages loneliness by demonstrating its commonness rather than by eliminating it. Evidence of this tendency can be found in our interviews where a sense of 'kindred spirit' and togetherness is founded on sharing intimacies in a non-committal space, which is afterwards abandoned or re-joined at will.

A final feature of Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, which we see reflected in, or evidenced by, the Death Café form is the late modern trend towards individual responsibilisation. Death Café may be seen as a practical example of encouraging individual biographical responses to systemically created problems. Indeed, the motto of creating increased awareness of dying, is as we have seen, posited as a prompt to make the most out of one's life. In our interviews, we observe that what is reported as a societal problem – taboo and denial of death – is levied on to the individual participant to both handle and ideally to change; not through collective action, but through individual lifestyle strategies and coping mechanisms, such as increased awareness of dying, identity created through expressivity, and autonomous choices made in preparation for death.

Conclusion

Death Café is the most popular and well-known of a 'new wave' of social initiatives associated with the death awareness movement; a new social movement which began in America in the 1970s, chastising modernity's disenchantment with death. As our study shows, this social franchise, which started in London, England in 2011, has spread to upwards of 34 countries around the world in a relatively short space of time, and has gained a large amount of media attention (Booth, 2019; Melzer, 2018). Drawing on the influential work of Bauman (1992, 2000), we have offered the first critical analysis of Death Café by asking: why this form and why now? Our interviews with Death Café organisers in a wide range of countries revealed striking similarities in the perception that Death Café was needed to encourage and elicit 'death talk' not permissible in other public spaces (Anonymous 2). However, our analysis presented here also suggests that Death Café is in part a response to the profound loneliness experienced in liquid modernity. We argue that the form in which Death Café takes – pop-up, fluid spaces not requiring long-term commitment and with the possibility to 'stage' atmospheres designed to promote instant identification and 'sharing' – are a case of Baumanian 'peg communities' and liquid modernity *par excellence*. The topic of conversation – death – imagined as secret and transgressive, and with its claims to authenticity, is a primary conductor for connection within the space of the café and gives rise to a particular liquid modern form of intimacy or 'communion'. Death Café also conforms to another feature of liquid modernity – inescapable individual responsibilisation whereby individuals are expected to find or make their own meaning, in death as in life. The 'survival strategy' which Death Café and the death-positive movement more widely purport to offer is to remove people's death anxiety by normalising death-themed conversations and turn continuous engagement with death into a form of regular inoculation. As a social initiative which is ostensibly about death education and awareness-raising, Bauman's theories permit a different, more radical view of Death Café: as a form which exemplifies the specific condition and organisation of life in liquid modernity.

Note

1. However, despite extensive searching, details about Death Cafés in all the countries listed on the website could not be traced due to broken weblinks or no other detectable web trace.

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