Life After Death: The Last Information Gap – Until Now

A RESEARCH NOTE

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2004, we explored beliefs and experiential claims concerning life after death via representative samples of close to 5,000 people in the United States, Canada, and Britain. We started with an interest in tracking belief in LAD. We found much more. What is *intriguing* is the extent to which people haven’t given up on the possibility that life continues after death. What is *startling* is the extent to which they believe that individuals who have died are continuing to follow what is taking place in their lives and – even more – continuing to be in contact. What is *puzzling* is that these pervasive beliefs and claims persist, despite a substantive decline in recent decades in religious involvement and beliefs in all three settings. Such findings in countries with very different religious histories underline a paradox in the Information Age: we know more than enough about just about everything in life. But we continue to know very little about life after death. Yet, the beliefs and claims are far too important and common to be ignored. We conclude the paper by arguing that it’s time for social scientists to be among those who take a closer look.
Introduction
Since mid-70s: Monitoring Social Trends

* 7 Adult... 1975 → 2005: > 10,000
* 4 Teen... 1984 → 2008: > 15,000

- Readings of
  - Boomers * Pre-Boomers * Post-Boomers
  - Teens 80s 90s 00s Now

- Together: surveys lots of information on how we have changed & not changed since 1960s

- Ongoing surveys: with Angus Reid
  * 2013, 2014, 2015: March 3,000
The Attendance Situation

Weekly Attendance: 1950s and Now
Adults With No Religion: 1961-2011

Source: Statistics Canada, Census Data.
One of areas have pursued over years: life after death

Interest in has remained constant, as has belief in LAD

Similar patterns stability U.S., elsewhere

Little research into LAD beliefs & behaviour...apart from ours
Can Communicate with the Dead

1975-2015 (%)
Can Have Contact with the Spirit World
1990-2015 (%)
2014: we decided to explore the number of LAD beliefs.
Also, we wanted to understand the extent to which people think communication is occurring (World Values Survey, c. 1980).

- **March 2014**
  - USA: 1,018
  - Canada: 1,013
  - UK: 2,010

- **Started** with interest in tracking beliefs in LAD
- **Found** much more
The LAD Question
Data from an array of sources, including the World Values Survey, Gallup, and Pew, along with our own surveys in Canada, show that interest in the question of life after death persists pretty much globally.

The age-old question posed by the writer of the book of Job (14.14) continues to be asked: “If a man dies, shall he live again?”
Raising of the Question

Figure 1.
Raising of the Life after Death Question: Canada, 1975 and 2015 (%)
## Answers to the Question

Table 1. Belief in Life after Death, 2014 vs Earlier: United States, Canada, and Britain (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>USA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canada</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Britain</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Earlier year sources:
- U.S.: Gallup
- Britain: Brown 2006:29; 1939-1961; Gallup
- Canada: Gallup; Bibby PC 1975
Beyond the Initial Question
### Table 2. Believe Will See People Again Who Have Died: United States, Canada, and Britain (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Britain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will definitely see them again</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May possibly see them again</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will never see them again</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Contact with Those Who Have Died

#### Table 3. Believe in Contact with People Who Have Died: United States, Canada, and Britain (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Britain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Yes, I definitely do&quot; or &quot;Yes, I think so&quot;</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could be aware of what is taking place in our lives</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible to communicate with people who are no longer alive</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have felt that you were in touch With someone who has died</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responses to Death
### Table 4. Primary Responses to the Idea of Death: United States, Canada, and Britain (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No particular feeling</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorrow</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What will happen to you after you die?

- Heaven or another good place: 50% (USA), 29% (Canada), 19% (Britain)
- Simply stop existing: 15% (USA), 23% (Canada), 35% (Britain)
- Reincarnation: 4% (USA), 7% (Canada), 5% (Britain)
- Somewhere else: 9% (USA), 9% (Canada), 10% (Britain)
- Really don’t know: 22% (USA), 32% (Canada), 31% (Britain)
Variations
Variations in Beliefs and Responses

Table 5. Beliefs About Death by Service Attendance: United States, Canada, and Britain (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Britain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>87</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will see people again</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of our lives</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible communicate with</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt in touch someone who died</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary response: hope</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect go heaven similar place</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings: document reality of death being very much on the minds of people...
U.S, Canada, Britain...and elsewhere

✓ **Intriguing**: extent to which haven’t given up on possibility of life continuing after death

✓ **Startling**: extent which people who have died continuing follow what is taking place in our lives

✓ **Even more**: continuing to be in contact
So what does it all mean?

We think various responses are fairly predictable...

1. Cultural response:
   * Interpret death through cultural lenses, including religious subcultures
   * Beliefs & alleged experiences: culturally instilled

2. Clinical response:
   * Views & claims: help people deal with death
   * Also created to do so
3. An empirical response:

- If one...five...one hundred...several thousand...
- Such is the case these days with respect to at least some beliefs & claims about LAD

Currently...

- LAD & Interaction questions
  * largely ignored by academics
  * even religious groups: often little to say
- Extensive market:
  left largely to channelers & charlatans
- Result: claims are trivialized, claimants stigmatized
- Most people: remain largely in the dark
Obviously: clear-cut answers elusive
Nonetheless: much more attention needs be given LAD issue
More discussions…even more exploratory research
Topic too NB to be treated as taboo
It’s time to take a closer look!

✓ Emile Durkheim…
   “Science moves too slowly”

✓ Rodney Stark…
   “Are some questions only the gods can satisfy”

But that does not mean that science shouldn’t try.