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https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/1/jonsson_aronsson_continuingbonds.pdf**Afterlife Imagery in Sweden: The Role of Continuing Bonds****Annika Jonsson**

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Abstract

This article investigates how images of the afterlife are conveyed both on- and offline by people in Sweden identifying as mediums, spiritualists, spiritual, agnostics or atheists. It also explores whether the images encountered can be traced back to a relational or non-relational social imaginary. In this particular context, a relational imaginary facilitates relationships between the living and the dead. Such relationships are referred to as continuing bonds in a growing body of work. In contrast, a non-relational imaginary may promote relationships between human and non-human beings or ignore relationships altogether. The ambition is thus twofold – to excavate images of the afterlife and to discuss what separates these images on a deeper level in terms of the concept of the imaginary. The empirical material consists of face-to-face interviews and online observations.

Introduction

This article explores how images of the afterlife are conveyed both on- and offline by Swedish (or Swedish speaking) persons identifying as mediums, spiritualists, spiritual, atheists or agnostics. An image is here understood as a mental picture that is often verbalised as an idea or an argument. The article also establishes the origin of these images, following the arguments made by Abby Day (2011) in her book *Believing in Belonging*. The book is based on a study carried out in northern England in 2003–2004 with roughly 250 participants. When comparing her results with results from similar studies, Day argues that people in countries assumed to be secularised and individualised often hold relationship-centred beliefs. Likewise, people’s “supernatural” experiences tend to be socially forged. She writes (*ibid.*, 196):

By not asking religious questions I was able to draw out beliefs that could only be explained through theories of belonging: atheists who believe in ghosts, for example. Many of my informants often experienced continued belonging with deceased loved ones in what I describe as the sensuous, social supernatural, in contrast to other scholars who would describe such experiences as “religious”.

The tendency among scholars to interpret experiences of the deceased as present in terms of religion, she emphasises, obscures what tends to be at the heart of these experiences, namely love, loss and human capacity to form relationships. However, she recognises that religion sometimes is an important factor and therefore distinguishes between people with a *theocentric* and an *anthropocentric* orientation. While the former attributes meaning to God and involves an experience of a relationship with the divine, the latter focuses on other humans, in particular the deceased loved ones.

Day's (2011) way of describing and analysing the participants' experiences of their deceased rhymes well with current research carried out under the "continuing bond flag". The concept of continuing bond is commonly used to explore how the living form and maintain relationships with the dead by, for instance, holding on to objects and photos (Unruh 1983; Gibson 2008), partake in off- and online remembrance (Woodthorpe 2011; Haverinen 2014), and using spiritualist mediums (Walliss 2001). The term was established by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman in 1996, in order to initiate a multidisciplinary debate about the non-pathological relationships people may develop with their deceased. Although Day (2011) does not use this concept, her notion that people may, on the level of belief, be orientated toward other humans (pre as well as post death) pinpoints the core in much of the research on continuing bonds. Likewise, researchers interested in continuing bonds have something to offer Day. They reveal, for instance, how these bonds challenge the taken for granted boundaries between the living and the dead and how the "social being does not necessarily come to an end with death" (Valentine 2008, 175). While Day investigates beliefs in a broader sense and adds the concept of continuing bond to her idea of an anthropocentric orientation, we create a "thicker" analytical tool when investigating images of the afterlife.

As stated above, the purpose of our research is to explore images of the afterlife in Sweden and discern the origin of these images in the context of spirituality-beyond-religion, to use Sara MacKian's (2012) terminology (where atheists and agnostics also may fit in). A majority of the individuals interviewed offline and observed online define themselves as spiritualists, spiritual or something similar. Admittedly, we do not know what specific label every single person observed online would have preferred, but they were all publicly involved in conversations about life after death, ghosts, "the other side", and so on. We also interviewed six individuals defining themselves as either atheist or agnostic, since it is clear that such people also may convey images of the afterlife (Bennett & Bennett 2000; Day 2011; Valentine 2008). In relation to Day's research we ask: When analysing images of the afterlife in a primarily spirituality-beyond-religion context, is it possible to make distinctions between an anthropocentric (continuing bond) orientation and a non-anthropocentric orientation?

Even though the study was conducted in Sweden, we have not set out to make cultural/national comparisons. Instead our goal is to learn what images of the afterlife exist within this given setting and to understand more about the *social/relational* or *other* underpinnings of these images. With that said, the Swedish context is, of course, significant and needs to be sketched out. Ulf Sjödin (2003) claims that belief in the paranormal, such as beliefs in an afterlife, is more accepted today than they were in the '70s. He goes as far as to suggest that (ibid., 203) "the para-normal no longer is para-normal, but rather normal." Research on Swedish youth, indeed, shows that one in five persons believe in reincarnation, but as Sjödin points out, studies taking other afterlife possibilities into account reduce the number claiming to believe in reincarnation by two-thirds. He concludes that paranormal beliefs are probably not very central in young people's lives, although he argues that the decline in traditional, organised religion has led to an increased interest in existential questions overall. All in all, it is a slightly bewildering report, but what we take from this is that it is hard to know even what questions to ask in this area.

As Anders Sjöborg (2013) notes, large, quantitative surveys designed to map out beliefs can be a mixed blessing – they do map out something, but not always what was intended. He describes how he discovered, when conducting interviews as a complement to questionnaires, that students in upper secondary schools in Sweden used the word “atheist” in very different ways. While some said that they did not participate in organised religion, others actively held traditional, secular beliefs. His research, based on 1 850 questionnaires, showed that 30% of the students identified as atheist, 11% as spiritual, 16.7% as believer, 12.3% as seeker and, finally, 10.9% as religious. In a survey carried out in Sweden by Sifo in 2012 with 1 000 respondents, every fifth person claimed to have been in contact with or sensed the presence of a deceased (Sifo 2012). While we have access to a great deal of statistics in this area today, it is difficult to know what the numbers actually tell us. According to Ann af Burén (2015), the majority of Swedes are semi-secular, that is, they inconsistently mix various religious beliefs and atheist notions, and this undoubtedly creates yet another challenge.

Christopher Partridge (2004), historian of religion, suggests that a re-enchantment is taking place in the West, connected to the decline of Judeo-Christian beliefs as well as the pop cultural turn towards ghosts, vampires and fantasy realms. The increasing interest in the supernatural should, he claims, be seen as evidence of a real shift when it comes to mythology and worldviews. In Sweden, Liselotte Frisk and Anders Åkerbäck (2013) demonstrate that alongside the process of secularisation, there is an opposite process of sacralisation taking place. They use the term post-secular to denote a culture where religious, or spiritual, aspects may appear in everyday activities such as yoga or mindfulness. David Voas and Steve Bruce (2007, 57), however, assert that “meditation, yoga, bodywork and aromatherapy may all go mainstream but their spiritual content will be drained off”. They also point out that things that are commonly understood as part of spirituality often belong to pseudo-science, the idea of energy flows being a good example.

Researchers, in short, disagree on what orientations, to use Day’s terminology, are out there and what meanings to ascribe to a number of cultural phenomena that could be, but need not be, connected to belief. Investigating images of the afterlife conveyed by people in different settings (on- and offline) and trying to understand the origin of these images is one way of penetrating this question empirically.

The Social Imaginary

Although orientation (as in an anthropocentric or theocentric orientation) is a central concept in the arguments made by Day (2011), we found it difficult to use it in our analysis because it remains somewhat vague throughout her text and, when we tried to apply it to our material, it generated more questions than answers. While we understand her arguments, we needed a concept that felt familiar and hands-on usable. We chose the concept of the social imaginary.

In *After Method*, sociologist John Law (2004) highlights the role of imagination in the making of reality. He exemplifies with Uluru, or Ayer’s Rock as it is also known. Aboriginal people have a locally grounded, religious explanation as to how the rock came to be, and modern science quite another. Two different realities appear side by side, each generating different sets of certainties and possibilities. Whereas the Euro-American understanding prides itself on being independent, singular and prior, the Aboriginal reality allows for multiple accounts depending on the purpose. As Helen Verran (1998, 242), historian and philosopher of science, points out, Aboriginal Australians possess a “vast repertoire by which the world can be re-imagined, and in being re-imagined be re-made”. Imaginaries can thus work to both stabilise and destabilise, depending on the content and how they are underpinned by ideals and power relations.

In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, philosopher of social science Charles Taylor (2004) describes how a new imaginary stressing equality and human rights eventually came to play a key role in Western modernity. The idea that people, regardless of position in society, should enjoy a certain security started out as a philosophical argument and ended up being embraced by the vast majority. According to Taylor (2004, 2) “the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what it enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.” When we look for imaginaries then, we look for a deeper layer of understanding which surfaces, or is manifested, in multiple and, presumptively, consistent ways. This is what we believe Day (2011) is aiming for when referring to an “orientation”. An imaginary, which is usually conveyed in “images, stories, and legends” (Taylor 2004, 23), is prescriptive – it propels actors in certain directions. Joanna Latimer and Beverly Skeggs (2011, 397) highlight how actors, when propelled, also create their social environment, since an imaginary constitutes “a way of thinking the world into being.” Imaginaries are collective, but the collective in question could be society at large or a particular group in society (Taylor 2004).

When analysing the empirical material, we looked for people’s experiences, ideas, arguments, warnings, advices, wishes, words et cetera that alluded to different imaginaries, specifically a relational (anthropocentric) imaginary, putting continuing bonds and the social first, and what tentatively could be termed a non-relational imaginary, emphasising other aspects. We paid particular attention to stories told about extraordinary experiences and descriptions of spirits/souls, “the other side”, and, obviously, the afterlife.

Method and Material

The empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews and online observations. As Joseph A. Maxwell (2013) has argued, using different methods allows researchers to arrive at more nuanced understandings of phenomena. Above all, it gave us the possibility to compare different materials. The 15 interviewees, aged between 25 and 67, were chosen for different reasons. Five of them work as professional mediums and are of special interest since they are the authorities (when there are any) in the spirituality-beyond-religion (MacKian 2012) area. They can be expected to influence public conversations, thus strengthening or weakening imaginaries, to a higher degree than others. Mediums perform “deathwork”, as Tony Walter (2005, 383) puts it, just like a coroner or a therapist. They offer interpretations of the deceased to the living, but what separates them from other deathworkers is their claim to actually accessing the deceased. The remaining interviewees were chosen through a snowballing sampling process (Thompson 2002). When informed about the research agenda, the primary interviewees were able to identify other appropriate informants who they knew either to be engaged in what we understood as the making of continuing bonds (they did not use the concept) or holding a specific view of the afterlife. Our only initial criterion was that the interviewees should identify, or speak, as spiritualists, spiritual (or something similar), atheists or agnostics.

The interview questions depended on the informant. Mediums were asked what they thought happen to people after physical death. Are the deceased turned into spirits or similar ethereal beings, and what, in that case, do they consist of, a consciousness, some kind of energy et cetera? They were also asked in what ways physical death might alter people, more specifically what is left of them that is recognisable to the living. Do the deceased retain personality and emotionality? Other questions concerned how they, as mediums, perceive spirits, whether spirits can be trapped here on earth, if and why they visit the living, and how space and time work in the “spirit realm/s”. Of the remaining ten interviewees, one was identified as a spiritualist, three as agnostics, an additional two as spiritual (or “spiritually curious”), and four as atheists. These interviewees were primarily asked questions about their experiences of losing loved

ones. We wanted to know what the relationship was like when the person in question was still alive and how the death was treated in the family and/or among friends. When relevant, we asked questions about what happens after death and if it is possible to communicate with the deceased. A majority of the non-believers, that is, atheists and agnostics, conveyed images of the afterlife without being asked any leading questions.

The online observations were carried out on four homepages run by mediums as well as on four bigger sites dedicated to the supernatural, spiritual or similar, where the members shared their experiences and discussed or advised on a number of issues connected to life after death, visits from the other side, reincarnation, and so on. We did not become members of the sites, and thus the accessible content was limited. We only examined conversations of certain length, since these obviously appeared more important to the members than shorter conversations. Some threads were up to three years old and others were still active, and this determined if one observation was enough or if revisits were needed. The conversations chosen typically contained words like “afterlife” or “spirits” in the headline, or phrases like “My grandmother visits me” and “The other side”. The conversations were copied into a document, running into 95 pages. It should be noted that the aim was not to investigate the sites themselves or to make generalisations about the overall content on the sites, but to examine images of the afterlife.

The homepages run by the mediums were treated in much the same way. Certain topics presented by the mediums were chosen for analysis. As a rule, the interviewees, sites, members on the sites, and the homepage owners have been thoroughly anonymised. However, four of the interviewed mediums, all well-known nationally and in some case internationally, preferred to be named. They are Vendela Cederholm, Terry Evans, Jörgen Gustafsson and Anna-Lena Vikström. The names of the other interviewees have been altered.

The issue of what kind of reality online that communication and experiences are part of has been discussed. Norman Denzin (1999, 108) asserts that life online is simply a continuation of life offline, that the “cybernarratives are grounded in everyday lives and biographies of the women and men who write them.” Previous studies demonstrate that religious identities online do not differ that much from religious identities offline, since all religious identities in contemporary society are “performed and mediated” (Lövheim 2013, 52). They are not written in stone, but need revision and continuous work, whether digital or enacted in face-to-face situations. As Heidi Campbell (2013) points out, however, online religious communities tend to function quite differently from offline religious groups. They are more loosely organised and members may display very different levels of commitment. This is of course important to take into account when, for instance, interpreting the labels people use online. We have chosen to name one of our categories “spiritual” for this specific reason – it is vague enough to encompass people with an interest in spiritualism and/or the “supernatural”, but it does not specify any particular level of commitment.

The Afterlife as a Better Place

One of the most prominent ideas conveyed, both off- and online, was that the deceased end up in a better place. From a Christian, highly generalised, perspective this notion evokes the image of heaven, but the idea is present in numerous cosmologies and mythologies. As one of the interviewed mediums summed it up: “*They’re not in pain on the other side and they don’t have problems the way we do, they’re happier*”. On her homepage, another medium asserted that “*they leave their sorrows behind, it’s another existence all together*”. This idea also prevailed on the sites whenever the afterlife was described and discussed. Even though a few members online voiced concern regarding where their dead loved ones had gone, the overarching notion was that life taking place after physical death is better in all respects. Cederholm (medium) believed

that when we “*cross over*” (die), the best in us can be highlighted. We become more loving as we, for example, gain insight into our previous wrongdoings. She has encountered bitterness in the spirit world, but only on a few occasions. Vikström (medium) claimed that all of the spirits that she has been in contact with reported that they were well and Evans (medium) too asserted that the “*light world*” is a higher form of consciousness, which provides the ultimate wellbeing for its residents.

Even though the online observations mostly confirmed the supremacy of this idea, at least when it came to family members, partners, relatives and friends, conversations and comments about hauntings and unwanted visitors were quite common as well. Sara Duppils (2013, 73), active in religious studies, investigates beliefs in “alternative, existential dimensions” on a Swedish site called *The Ghost Web*. She points out that hauntings tend to be attributed primarily to unknown spirits. The interviewed mediums were not in agreement on this topic. According to Evans the place-bound spirits do not want to or cannot go into the light due to unresolved, emotional issues. They thus exist in a kind of in-between world. Another medium suggested that spirits could become confused and simply fail to realise that it is time to move on. Geographer Edward Relph (1976) states that place can be experienced on a scale from insidedness to outsidedness, where the latter extreme means that the place is observed in terms of its exterior properties only, and serves, at best, as a background to activities. In contrast, insidedness means that the individual experiences a natural sense of belonging and truly identifies with a place. When it comes to the place-bound spirits, or ghosts, two versions appear – in one version they are tied to a place in a problematic way and exist in a form of outsidedness, and in the other version they are too much part of a place to let go – the insidedness itself becomes the problem.

David, who identified as an agnostic leaning toward atheism, explained in the interview that he has never sensed the presence of the deceased. Questions posed by the interviewer were open-ended in respect to whether presence could be interpreted as “just a feeling” or as a supernatural experience. Interestingly, David immediately framed the topic as the supernatural. On the issue of sensing presence he said, “*I’ve feared that I would, perhaps I’ve seen too many movies, when people come back... It’s not a good thing*”. David’s perception reflects the idea that a spirit’s place-boundedness signifies that something has gone wrong, but in his case this idea can be traced back primarily to horror movies. When asked about the titles of influential movies, his answer was that “*they’ve all fused into a sort of composite*”.

Partridge (2004), alongside others, argues that popular culture is often overlooked when we are to make sense of people’s experiences and beliefs today. He states that series such as *X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can inspire people to relate to the world in new ways. Taking this point seriously, the idea that an imaginary can be inspired by movies and popular culture (which, in turn, might be built on religious motifs) seems evident. Indeed, notions on where the deceased are but also on where they *should* and *should not* be constitute an important part of the imaginary because it propels individuals in different directions. While some, who believe that their dead loved ones are in a better place, look forward to getting in touch with them, others, like David, only fear contact. An imaginary (inspired by Christianity) favouring the idea that the deceased end up in a heaven-like environment seems to facilitate positive relationships with the deceased simply because the dead are believed to be at peace.

Michael, an atheist sometimes flirting with agnosticism, talked about how he used to spend a lot of time at his grandparents’ place in the countryside when he was younger and how their passing away meant not only losing two significant others, but an entire world. When describing the loss, he drew a parallel to the experience of reading *The Neverending Story* as a boy. He said: “*I really don’t know whether there’s any difference between my grandma and*

Atreyu.¹ *That grandma used to live in this world doesn't seem to matter that much anymore*". While this may seem like a harsh statement belittling the existence of real humans, it is, we suggest, more accurate to understand it as evidence of how deeply moved Michael was by Ende's novel. Further, it means that, just like Atreyu, his grandparents will live forever, encapsulated in a world that is now, in one sense, as unreal as *Fantastica* (where Atreyu lives). Paul Heelas and Benjamin Seel (2003, 233) discuss the significance of literature such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* for the status of imaginary worlds and state that it probably influences people by "providing a taste of re-enchantment".

In line with this, the atheist interviewee Jessica referred to her deceased grandmother as a "Moggie". Moggie is the imaginary friend of Alfie Atkins in the illustrated children's book by Gunilla Bergström.² There are over 20 books in the Alfie series, the first of which was published in 1972. In the books, Moggie is visible as a ghost-like, semi-transparent boy and Alfie treats him as he would any friend. To Jessica, her grandmother is like an imaginary friend – someone who knows her intimately and to whom she can talk without the fear of being misunderstood. Together with her sister Linda, Jessica also referred to the same grandmother as a guardian angel – someone who looks after them from an indistinct above. Walter (forthcoming) analyses how the once-human angel imagery, which appears to have become more common during the 21st century, constitutes a vernacular resource for people when exploring their relationships with their deceased. He suggests that this image may help people to make sense of loss, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof. Duppils (2013) also notes the tendency by the members on *The Ghost Web* to refer to the deceased as guardian angels.

Although Michael, Jessica and Linda did not imagine their deceased relatives and friends in a better place in a clear-cut way, they still preserved them beyond the matter-of-fact world. It could be argued that their images of the afterlife were empty since they lack religious content, but we better be careful when making such suggestions. As Day (2011), af Burén (2015) and others have shown, a belief is not always easily decipherable in contemporary society – maybe the Moggie-analogy contains more existentially important ingredients than one might think.

Emotions, Memories and Relatability

Another prominent feature of the empirical material was the strong focus on emotions and memories. Cederholm (medium) posed the question "*what is a spirit?*" and answered that it is everything but the physical body. It is feelings, experiences, knowledge, personality, perceptions and thought. A spirit, in other words, retains emotional registers and personality and these traits supposedly do not fade with time. On the same note, a medium wrote on her homepage that "*death does not rob them of their memories [...] Your memories wouldn't vanish just because you moved to another country*". All mediums interviewed claimed that spirits primarily convey feelings. In contact with mediums, the spirit and the message it carries are interpreted through its personality and emotional mode. The task of the medium is to interpret these messages as objectively as possible. Some of the mediums further explained that they use their intuition or receive messages through associations. Several of them also distinguished between being in contact with a spirit and experiencing memories. Memories that can be experienced are usually limited to a specific event (or and person), which is somehow repeated

¹ Atreyu is the one of the main characters in Michael Ende's epic fantasy novel from 1979. In the novel, a boy named Bastian reads about *Fantastica*, a world threatened by something called "The Nothing". At the same time, the empress of *Fantastica* is dying and a young warrior called Atreyu is sent out to find a cure. In the end, Bastian himself is included in the story and travels to *Fantastica*. In the movie from 1984, *Fantastica* was renamed *Fantasia*.

² Alfons Åberg in Swedish.

and picked up by receptive people. In short, once-human spirits are primarily seen as constituted by feelings and memories, or rather, this is what is important about them.

We suggest that a deeper understanding is at play here, making the dead, or those who have “crossed over” ordinary people from the perspective of the living. They are able to feel what we feel; thus they are capable of human relationality. However, in regard to the notion of a better afterlife where spirits let go of pettiness, sadness and other emotions that are commonly conceived of as negative but that also make humans human, this seems to create something of a paradox. The idea that once-human spirits end up in a carefree heaven-like afterlife, which was embraced by mediums and members alike, collides with the image of the very same spirits as emotionally human-like. If you are able to leave your sorrows behind and become an enlightened being, supposedly a whole range of human emotions would cease to be significant. The mediums, then, emphasising the transformation humans go through when they die, ended up in an interesting doubleness.

While the mediums, both on- and offline, agreed that the self is never lost (although it is transformed through insights and spiritual growth), a member on one of the sites initiated a lengthy discussion concerning precisely whether those “on the other side” are imbued with emotions or not. Another member answered: *“Of course you have feelings! You’re the same person, with the same thoughts, memories, feelings and personality. The only thing lacking is the physical body.”* The first, topic-initiating member responded that *“feelings are a chemical process taking place in a biological body”* and from that point the debate got quite heated. Overall, the conversations on the sites were characterised by a friendly, interested and slightly therapeutic tone, and therefore we believe the heated state to be significant – it reveals something about the importance of the topic. It should be noted that the topic-initiating member referred to above was the only one (in our material) to question the emotional content of spirits/souls. It is not strange that the conversation aggravated many of the members. If the deceased are unable to feel or remember, they have lost the traits required to interact in a meaningful way with the living. They then become The Other and are, in a relational sense, truly lost. In terms of continuing bonds, this means that the living would have to rely solely on memories of the deceased, as a deceased person has transformed into a different kind of being. As sociologist Christine Valentine (2008) shows, people maintaining continuing bonds quite often experience these bonds as reciprocal and this is a great comfort. From a continuing bond perspective, it is, for that reason, crucial to keep the deceased as human and relatable as possible.

Some members were seeking forgiveness for the way they had acted towards their dead loved ones (while the person was still alive). In one case a widower described the drawn-out process of his wife’s death and confessed that he could not be there for her all the way, since he was too exhausted. Other members intervened to offer him consolation, as in most cases where members addressed issues of guilt and shame. Presumably the consolation factor is one of the reasons why members choose to write about difficult things on these sites. In all the instances we observed where a member expressed similar regrets, the “rescuers” portrayed the deceased as sympathetic and all-knowing beings who would never hold a grudge against the living. As with the mediums, this creates a bit of a conflict, since it turns the deceased/spirits into compassionate, angelic creatures. A piece of their humanity/relatability is, as it were, sacrificed for the benefit of the living.

Similarly, other members wanted confirmation that it was in fact true love: *“If he loved me, why doesn’t he give me a sign?”* Such questions were posed mainly by members with female nicks (online names), but it is of course impossible to determine the gender of each member based on that. Lack of signals from boyfriends or husbands, occasionally girlfriends, friends or relatives caused quite a lot of distress and no wonder – it could indicate that the bond was broken or indeed had never been as solid as it seemed. Some also worried that the deceased would be jealous of new boyfriends

or girlfriends. The interviewed mediums expressed no concerns regarding issues like these. One even talked about the fact that so many of her customers dwelled on them with distaste. Trying to get spirits to leave “love confirmations”, she said, was the worst thing about working as a medium. Here, the relational imaginary of the members (and medium customers) and the non-relational imaginary used by the mediums end up on a collision course.

All of the deceased/spirits referred to, by mediums and members alike, kept their gender and apparently age. One of the mediums underlined that this is only to be recognisable to the living in communication. Keeping gender and other basic identity markers intact enhances relatability in a society where no such changes are supposed to occur. It further allows, we suggest, emotional content in individuals to be imagined as eternal.

So far it seems clear that in most cases a vast majority of the members on the sites used a relational, continuing bond facilitating imaginary. The idea that souls may form “soul families” and that you thus live all your lives surrounded by the same people was, in line with this, voiced every now and then by the members. The mediums, however, switched between a relational imaginary and a different more holistic imaginary, where the deceased were seen as spirits/souls in their own right. None of the interviewed mediums fully supported the notion of “soul families”, but one of the online mediums advocated this view.

Communication, Space and Proximity

A third noticeable feature of the empirical material was the prevalence of conversations about the possibilities to communicate with and being seen, heard et cetera by the deceased/spirits. One medium was asked on her homepage whether a dead boyfriend felt jealous because there was a new boyfriend in the picture. She answered that “*they’ve got their own lives to live.*” This notion was put forward by mediums both on- and offline, as well as by some members claiming special knowledge in this area. It established a distance between the living and the dead and worked to encourage the living to go on with their lives. A majority of the members on the sites would, in contrast, regularly comfort each other by saying things like “*your grandfather is always with you.*”

Interviewee Paula, who identified as a spiritualist, lost her husband, Leif, to ALS two years ago. She believed that his soul is on a journey and that, in time, it will disappear completely from this realm. While having problems describing the exact journey, certain elements were very clear. After a lived life the soul harvests the knowledge, so to speak, in a disembodied state. It might then be reborn here on earth or go somewhere else; this is unclear. Leif will be reachable for some time after passing over and then he will enter another existence or a domain further away. While certain ideas place the soul/spirit of the deceased permanently close to the living, other notions, then, grant the soul a more independent existence. This affects the communication and relationship as a whole. Paula, due to her spiritualist belief, imagined that the spiritual continuing bond she has with Leif is temporary. In the interview she ended up stressing the importance of the non-spiritual, mundane bond, that is, the bond based on memories and (collective) memorialisation.

As stated above, most of the members believed that the soul of their deceased would stay in place. This idea was mocked by the atheist interviewee Alice, who deemed it utterly egotistic, and it was also problematised by a few of the members on the sites. If the soul remains bound to lives lived here on earth, then physical life takes centre stage in a way that does not fit with the idea of a heaven-like afterlife. Interestingly, only a handful of conversations addressing this issue turned up in our online material. It was, generally speaking, perfectly valid for the members to fixate the deceased to physical life on earth, even though it endangered the idea of a separate and better afterlife. We interpret the lack of conflict

regarding this issue, or the silence rather, as evidence of the supremacy of the relational imaginary. Continuing bonds, spiritual or mundane, depend on the presence of the deceased. Allowing for conflicts regarding this issue would therefore be counterproductive. The silence is thus presumably not a coincidence, but a consequence of the wish to picture the deceased as both close to the living and comfortingly carefree.

The interviewed mediums all adhered to the idea that the souls or spirits (these concepts were used interchangeably), although able to approach the living to offer advice and the like, are preoccupied in other realms. As already touched upon, the mediums perceived themselves as primarily conveying the emotions that the spirits project. But what can be said about the proximity? Gustafsson (medium) stated that everything takes place in his head. A spirit projects images into his brain, which turns him into a catalyst between the spirit world and this world. This notion was not shared by the other interviewed mediums, who described using all senses – vision, hearing, smell, taste and sensation – when communicating with the spirits. The “spirit space” construed by Gustafsson but also, in different respects, by all the interviewed mediums, is intensely relational because *it is* emotions, experiences and atmospheres.

Vikström (medium) suggested that there are an infinite number of dimensions, or spirit worlds, but that distance does not exist, and a third medium underlined that it is not for us to know what the other side looks like. Cederholm (medium) claimed that the past, the present and the future are interwoven and the other mediums took similar stances, saying that time does not exist in the light world, that previous life and future life are lived concurrently and so on. The conception of time that they do acknowledge appears to be what Bodil Jönsson (1999) terms experienced time, that is, time as experiences and not temporal units.

Looking at the mediums' descriptions, things are either very different on the other side/in other dimensions, or we simply do not know anything about it. Communication with the spirits, however, does not seem to be suffering because of this. As Walter (forthcoming) points out, the contemporary trend (among believers and non-believers alike) to imagine the beloved dead as angels rests on the Christian premise that love concurs all. If the space and time differences described by the mediums were acknowledged in detail, explaining communication between the living and the dead could become rather difficult. As in the case above, we suggest that the lack of disagreement when it comes to communication with once-human spirits is informed by the idea, or feeling perhaps, that love concurs all. Yet again it seems obvious that the mediums are balancing two imaginaries – one relational and one non-relational. On the one hand, they stress the independence of the once-human spirit and, indirectly, the Otherness of once-human spirits. On the other hand, communication with the once-human spirits is possible and even though they dwell in a very different or entirely unknown world, this world is (to the mediums) a world of emotions and memories.

Surprisingly few of the members on the sites discussed space and time in relation to their deceased. A couple of references to string theory in quantum physics were made, the idea that the afterlife will be whatever you believe was voiced, and comments like “*it is not for us to know*” appeared here and there, but overall this was not an interesting topic. Communication with the deceased, on the other hand, was. Mediumship was discussed as well as the possibility to receive messages from the dead in dreams and in other ways. That the dead can take the shape of an animal was a frequent idea. One member described how her mother visited her in the shape of a squirrel every now and then and others would depict special meetings with, above all, butterflies, birds, dogs and cats. On the whole, the ideas voiced online permitted more interaction between the living and the dead than those conveyed by the interviewed mediums.

The afterlife portrayed both on-and offline appeared to be quite lonely. The interviewed mediums did not describe spirits socialising or traveling together, and the only communication they referred to was between human spirits and

living humans. Likewise, the members did not talk about communication with a collective of souls or spirits, but only with specific individuals. They sometimes stated things like “*she’s with grandpa now*”, and seemed to picture dead loved ones reunited with family or kin on the other side, but they did not elaborate on this topic. On the whole, once-human spirits did not seem to communicate with each other.

Day (2012) suggests that people’s way of relating to their deceased is a modern form of ancestor veneration. Ancestor veneration evokes the concept of collectivity. Interestingly, the continuing bonds we have encountered are not first and foremost between the living and the dead as collectives, but between separate individuals. The bonds are evidently chosen most of the time – not forced onto people. It is possible that the absence of collectives in our material poses a challenge to Day’s theory about modern day ancestor veneration, depending on what this concept it taken to include. It has been suggested that, despite detraditionalisation and increased individualism, people’s need of relationships and connectedness is as strong as ever (Smart 2007). What has changed, however, is that people are able to choose their (non-birth family) relationships more freely. This is clearly mirrored in our data. In most cases, it is not feelings of obligation that motivate people to seek communication with their deceased, but love and longing, occasionally guilt and shame.

Conclusion

We wish to stress that it is unclear what the members on the sites would have told us if interviewed instead of merely observed. The overall consensus on the sites indicates that the sites function as “spaces of belonging” (Lundby 2011, 1231), which means spaces where you are supposed to form a community around, for instance, an interest in the supernatural. This is a limitation of the study and a logical next step would be to conduct complementary interviews with a selection of members on the sites.

When it comes to the results, an overarching conclusion is that it is important to pay attention to illogical “gaps” when we are to understand images of the afterlife and the origin of these images. We have presented several such gaps, or apparent incongruencies, in our analysis. Depending on what these involve and their prevalence, we suggest that they either prove the strength of a certain imaginary (like the relational imaginary used by the members) or mark the collision between different imaginaries (like the two imaginaries used by the mediums).

The online material was quite homogeneous insofar as both members and mediums mainly used a relational imaginary facilitating continuing bonds and the presence of the dead. Emotions and experiences took precedence over holistic views and notions that removed the deceased from the earthly realm. Since the members were all believers or “spiritually interested”, the fact that they routinely conveyed images of the afterlife was not unexpected. The fact that they mainly used a relational imaginary is not as easily explained, however, and needs to be further explored. Our guess is that online communities might function as “support groups” to a higher degree than other communities and that the members on the observed sites to a large extent helped each other handling loss.

The people who were interviewed represent, in terms of beliefs, a more mixed group. Ten interviews were conducted with people ranging from spiritualist to atheists. The atheists and agnostics did not talk about souls, spirits or other dimensions, but five out of seven still conveyed images of the afterlife. Sometimes these images were elaborate, as in Michael’s use of *The Neverending Story*, sometimes brief, as in Jessica and Linda referring to their grandmother as an angel. Admittedly the images conveyed by the non-believers differed from those conveyed by mediums (or spiritualists, rather)

and the members on the sites, but ultimately it seems to boil down to the same thing – it allowed them to picture their deceased *somewhere* or at least *as something*. Only Alice (atheist) and David (agnostic) did not convey any images of the afterlife, although David entertained the possibility that the dead might come back if dissatisfied. Just like the members on the sites, then, most of the interviewees were informed by a relational imaginary that allowed them to somehow picture their deceased and so characterise the bond between them.

In contrast, the interviewed mediums (and to some extent the online mediums) combined a relational imaginary with another, more holistic imaginary that granted spirits an independent existence and made them less human-like. They spoke, of course, as professionals and representatives of spiritualism in Sweden, and it is regrettable that we do not have room to analyse this aspect of the interviews here. This probably shaped the conversations we had with them to some extent. The only time when the relational imaginary of the “non-professionals” collided in a noticeable way with the non-relational imaginary of the “professionals”, however, was when people sought “love confirmation” from the spirits. While this was a serious topic to a significant number of the (female) members on the sites, the interviewed mediums (and the online mediums to some degree) appeared indifferent to or even annoyed by the wishes of the living in this area.

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Abstrakti

Tässä artikkelissa tarkastellaan, millaisia kuoleman kuvastoja itsensä meedioiksi, spiritualisteiksi, agnostikoiksi ja ateisteiksi mieltävät ihmiset online- ja offline-ympäristöissä ilmentävät. Tekstissä tutkitaan myös, ovatko kuvastot jäljitettävissä sellaiseen kuvitteelliseen todellisuuteen, joka perustuu sosiaalisiin suhteisiin. Artikkelissa esitettyjen tulosten mukaan sellainen todellisuus helpottaa suhdetta elävien ja kuolleiden välillä. Tällaisiin suhteisiin viitataan käsitteellä "jatkuvat siteet" (*continuing bonds*) myös laajemmin. Tämän vastakohtana suhteisiin perustumaton kuvitteellinen todellisuus saattaa edistää suhteita ihmisten ja ei-inhimillisten olentojen välillä tai sivuuttaa suhteet täysin. Artikkelin tavoite on näin ollen kaksitahoinen: tarkastella kuolemanjälkeisen elämän kuvastoja ja pohtia kuvitteellisen todellisuuden käsitteen kautta, mikä näitä kuvastoja syvemmillä tasolla erottaa. Artikkelissa käytetty empirinen aineisto koostuu henkilökohtaisista haastatteluista ja online-havainnoinnista.