# I'm dead, therefore I am

## The postself and notions of immortality in contemporary Dutch society

Joanna Wojtkowiak

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# Content

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

# Chapter 1
# Introduction
# Death, identity and immortality

"If you are reading this, I am no longer here. Full of gratitude
I can look back at a beautiful life. My greatest thank goes to
my wife, who gave me all the space I needed to follow my
own path, in a world full of choral singing and liturgy. To
my sons, who made my life richer, and my daughter in law
and the grandchildren. Thanks for 50 years of choir school,
thanks to all the generations of singers and employees.
Thanks for a life full of music. May my life's work continue."[1]

This text was originally published in handwriting in a Dutch death
announcement. Interestingly, it is the deceased who says goodbye here and
at the same time his death is announced. The deceased thanks his loved ones
and he expresses his happiness and satisfaction with his life and his legacy
of choral music. Moreover, he mentions 'all the generations of singers and
employees' and 'may my life's work continue'. The quotation points towards a
feeling of connectedness with other generations, which is core to the concepts
of 'symbolic immortality' and 'generativity' (Erikson, 1980; Lifton, 1976).
According to Robert Lifton (1976) symbolic immortality refers to the feeling
of connectedness with history and generations from the past and those in
the future. The term 'generativity' comes from the work of developmental
psychologist Erik Erikson (1980) and describes the sense of leaving a legacy for
the following generations, such as through children and in the fruits of one's

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1        Dutch: Als u dit leest, ben ik er niet meer. Vol dankbaarheid kan ik terugzien op een
mooi leven. Mijn grootste dank gaat uit naar mijn vrouw, die mij alle ruimte gaf om mijn eigen
weg te volgen, binnen mijn wereld vol koorzang en liturgie, Naar mijn zonen, die mijn leven
rijker maakten en mijn schoondochter en de kleinkinderen. Dank aan 50 jaar koorschool, dank
aan al die generaties zangertjes en medewerkers. Dank voor een leven vol muziek. Moge mijn
levenswerk voortgang vinden.

labor. Erikson defines generativity as one of the central goals in the identity development of later adulthood. The man in this death announcement is thus happy with his legacy, even in the face of death and he feels connected to previous generations of choir singers.

What is also interesting in this death announcement is the sensation that the deceased is transcending his death by leaving this text. In an obituary, the death of a person is announced, but here the person who is already dead is informing us 'I am no longer here'. A similar effect of death transcendence is found in suicide letters (Shneidman, Faberow & Litman, 1970). These last words of the person who has taken his or her life will be read after death. The last words are important clues for how the life of the deceased will be remembered. Edwin Shneidman (1973; 2008), who worked on suicide his entire career, refers to the preoccupation with one's own reputation after death as the postself. He notes that the postself is a common concern for those who are going to die. In earlier times people left material and spiritual testaments as notions of their postself. Contemporary expressions of the postself focus on a person's individuality. Writing the final words for one's own death announcement includes negotiating with oneself, and probably with others, about how one wants to be remembered after death. The person who has written these words to be read after his or her death was aware of the fact that his loved ones will remember him or her on the basis of this last message. In this sense the postself is a way of creating a posthumous identity.

This study deals with death transcendence[2] that is created by the dying for after death, here referred to as the postself. Moreover, the bereaved react to the postself when the person actually passes away and the funeral has to be planned. The memory that is created after death, for example in commemorative practices, is also influenced by the things that the deceased leaves behind. The death announcement also said that the deceased was buried in private. The death notice thus not only reveals the deceased's postself, but also informs us of the mourners' choice to have a private funeral. The social legacy in the form of this text has an important role in creating a memory of the deceased. The postself needs to be studied from the perspectives of both the dying and the mourners; i.e., those who are going to be remembered and those who are remembering. There are people who actively invest in a postself, like in the example of the death announcement here, but there are also people who do not consciously leave messages for

2       Death transcendence is understood here as the general transformation from this life to another existence after death, which is according to Zygmunt Bauman (1992) the base for cultural progress. He argues that without the human consciousness of mortality, there would be no striving towards immortality and therefore no culture. Creating immortality in its broadest sense does not necessarily refer to traditionally religious concepts.

after death. In both cases, I will argue in this study that the identity of the deceased is for mourners an important base in conceptualizing ideas of life after death. The difference between actively investing in a postself or not is expressed in the influence that the dying are having on their funeral, which will be discussed later in more detail.

Questions that arise at this point are: why are people leaving messages for after death? Why do they invest in a postself? Is it because they want to be remembered in a certain way? Are they finishing unfinished business, such as thanking or teaching those whom they leave behind? Do they want to have control over things after they are physically not around anymore? Are feelings of guilt involved? To what extent do they get a glimpse of immortality? Creating an image for after death is a way of transcending death, but to what extent is it a way of creating a sense of (symbolic) immortality and to what extent is the postself related to literal concepts of immortality? Furthermore, what meaning has the postself for the mourners? Is it a form of memory of the deceased that is closely linked to the identity and legacy of the beloved one? Or are mourners using the characteristics of the deceased in order to conceptualize an afterlife?

Zygmunt Bauman (1992), the Polish sociologist, defines immortality as a way of "pushing back the moment of death, expending the life span" (Bauman, 1992; p. 5). According to Bauman, everything that humans make, build or create are strategies of symbolically transcending one's death. A sense of immortality is then created in a social, historical way, which has also been theorized by Robert Lifton (1976) and Eric Erikson (1980). In this study, immortality is understood from a cultural psychological perspective, meaning that the concept is investigated on the basis of attitudes and practices that refer to immortality in a certain cultural context.

The context of this study is contemporary secularizing society, more specifically the Netherlands. Institutionalized, religious worldviews convey ideas of immortality, such as the immortal soul, reincarnation or bodily resurrection. What's more, death has been identified as *the* most important source of religion (James, 1902; Malinowski, 1948/ 1925; Tylor, 1903/ 1871). However, in Dutch society, the role of traditional religiosity is far from clear. From the perspective of secular individuals, those who are not convinced members of a religious group but who do not necessarily reject spirituality, personal religiosity or notions of transcendence, what is the role of immortality when dealing with death? Besides religious views on immortality, there are also social constructions of immortality, which are not literal constructions that contain the notion of eternity, but rather nonliteral constructions of immortality that are supposed to be temporal, such as

memories, stories, material objects or biological continuity through children and grandchildren. In that sense mourners also create social representations of the deceased after death in order to keep the memory of the loved one alive.

The cemetery is a classic localized space where continuing relationships with the dead are preserved. The social identity of the deceased is expressed on the grave, such as the name, profession and important relations of the deceased (e.g., husband, father). The flowers and, in the Netherlands, also all sorts of personal objects show the public what kind of person is buried there. The grave is just one example, but there are all sorts of other strategies of keeping bonds with deceased loved ones: telling stories about the deceased, doing the activities one used to do together, having a memorial space at home, keeping personal objects, and using these objects, etc. (Gibson, 2008; Stroebe, 2004; Unruh, 1983). Death transcendence has thus a strong social dimension, which is expressed in symbolic actions that are related to the deceased. Moreover, rituals of death, dying and mourning are not only important in dealing with death and disposing the body, but they also express ideas of immortality.

Émile Durkheim defines the core of religious life in terms of beliefs and practices (Durkheim, 1995/ 1912, p. 36). He makes clear that both are interrelated. In rituals the beliefs that lie beneath the symbolic actions are highlighted, but so too are beliefs that influence what actions are performed. The notion that rituals are static and unchangeable has been rejected in the literature on the subject (Driver, 1998; Grimes, 2002, 2010; Turner, 2008/ 1969). Furthermore, in ritual studies the term 'ritualizing' is used increasingly in order to describe a more active approach towards creating new rituals. According to Ronald Grimes (2002) ritualizing refers to the making of ritual and consciously experimenting with ritual elements that have not been part of the standard ritual repertoire. Ritualization, however, is a 'softer' term referring to ritual, whereas rite is a more hard term (Grimes, 2002, p. 28) and refers to mostly unconscious, repetitive behavior, which is also identified in animals (Grimes, 2010, p. 34). Ritualization can form the basis for a rite, but does not do so necessarily. The term 're-invention' refers to the re-shaping and re-using of traditional rituals or ritual elements to satisfy the needs for personal expression in rituals. The changing perspective on rituals as dynamic and creative constructions of a symbolic reality can help us discover the changing concepts of immortality. The question is to what extent ritualizing and re-invention of death rites are related to personal conceptions of immortality? What is the role of the postself in ritualizing death in secular Dutch society?

## 1.1 Concepts of immortality in a secularizing society

In terms of church membership, The Netherlands is one of the most secularized countries in Europe (e.g., Achterberg et al., 2009; Felling, Peters, & Scheepers, 2000; de Graaf & te Grootenhuis, 2008; Halman & Daulans, 2006; Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Verweij, Ester, Nauta, 1997). Interestingly, beliefs in immortality and life after death are still prevalent and do not differ much from other European countries (Haraldsson, 2006). In 2008, 42 % of the Dutch population was said to be religiously unaffiliated, which means not being a member of a church or religious group (CBS, 2009, p. 7). Moreover, one in five people report going to church or mosque regularly (CBS, 2009, p. 14). From these statistics we can say that institutionalized religion has less of an impact on people's everyday lives, but we do not know whether these people actually don't believe in any form of transcendental meaning. The study of secularization measured by church membership and attendance only paints a one-dimensional picture and does not do justice to the complexity of the subject of contemporary religiosity and spirituality. From the nationwide long-term research 'God in the Netherlands' it was shown that while theism (the belief in God as a 'person') has declined in the period from 1966 to 2006 to 24 % of the population, 'somethingism' (the belief in something) and agnosticism increased (36 % and 26 % respectively in 2006) (Bernts, Dekker, & De Hart, 2007, p. 40). Atheism also increased and was counted among to 14 % of the participants. Interestingly, the growing variations in conceptions of a transcendent power are also visible among churches, most strongly among Catholics. In 2006, 55 % of Catholics reported believing in something and only 27 % claimed to believe in a theistic God (p. 42). Among Protestants these changes are also visible, but less obvious (34 % believes in something and 58 % in theistic God).

Some authors state that religion has to all extents and purposes become a private practice, which makes the study on contemporary religiosity even more difficult (Cochran, 1990). This study approaches contemporary religiosity from different perspectives on death, the most important transition in life. How do people give meaning to death in a secularizing society? Beliefs and practices around death are investigated here in order to understand contemporary notions of immortality. One important factor in giving meaning to life, which will be highlighted in this study, is the concept of identity. A person's identity is an important source of meaning in the face of death, which is expressed by relying on one's previous experiences, social relations, knowledge or one's religiosity.

From a large–scale study on meaning making in relation to different lifestyles in the Netherlands ($n$ = 2021) participants were first asked if they

consider themselves as religiously or spiritually 'set' and second in what group they count themselves (Kronjee & Lampert, 2006). One important group, next to 'non religious and non humanistic' and 'non-religious but humanistic', was the group 'unaffiliated spiritual' (26 %) (p. 176). This group consists of the religiously unaffiliated who are strongly spiritual, which is also reflected in their meaning making on the basis of transcendence. In contrast to other non-religious groups, the 'unaffiliated spiritual' give meaning to life based on notions of transcendence. Interestingly, among all groups, the most important dimension of meaning making was social and moral (49 %), followed by transcendent (38 %) and then hedonistic (17 %). These numbers show that social and moral norms are, even in an individualized society, more important than personal enjoyment.[3] In general, the group 'unaffiliated spiritual' is of general interest for this study on immortality in the context of a secularizing society because the members of the group could be expected to have interesting views on immortality.

Studies on immortality concepts have shown that these are quite equivocal in contemporary Western societies (Falkenhain & Handal, 2003) and that there has even been an increase in the belief in life after death during the 1990s' in the Netherlands (Becker, 2006, p. 8). However, it remains unclear to what extent these beliefs concern literal immortality and to what extent people refer to nonliteral concepts of posthumous existence. For example, according to various research projects conducted in the Netherlands, the belief in a soul ranges from 21 % (de Jong & Kreting, 2008)[4] to 40 % (Moha, Waart & Lampert, 2005)[5]. More generally, the belief in an afterlife varies between 33 % (SOCON, 2005)[6], 36 % (de Jong & Kreting, 2008), 54 % (Moha, Waart & Lampert, 2005) and 70 % in the group of migrants with an Islamic background (Moha, Waart & Lampert, 2005). The variations in percentages are due not only to differences in the samples, but also different methods, such as the formulation of the questions. In the Motivaction sample, where the percentages for belief in a soul and afterlife were higher than the other studies, the participants were younger than in the other samples (between 15 and 40 years of age).[7] There was also a gender effect on the idea of reunion

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3          Interestingly, when it comes to how people actually give form to meaning, hedonism scores higher than transcendence (22 % and 19 %respectively). Social and moral norms also score highest wth 50 %. The difference between the frame of meaning making and the actual form, suggests that altough people identify themselves strongly with transcendent notions of meaning, they do not always know how to give form to that in actual practice.
4          Ode aan de doden sample $n$ = 514
5          Motivaction sample $n$ = 978 (participants with Dutch background $n$ = 637 and participants with migration background from Islamic countries $n$ = 341)
6          SOCON sample $n$ = 1212
7          By investigating the SOCON data, it is shown that also here the younger age groups

with deceased loved ones: women tend to agree significantly more with this view on an afterlife (50 %) than men (30 %).[8]

Another interesting result from the KASKI research 'Ode to the dead' is that the belief in a spirit or soul was significantly higher among the religiously unaffiliated (71 %), than among Catholics (63 %) and Protestants (55 %) (de Jong & Kreting, 2008).[9] The soul seems to be more accepted for those who are no longer a member of a church. This shows that religiosity in the churches is also changing and that a variety of ideas of an afterlife are also found within the context of traditional religiosity. In the case of belief in a heaven, the trend was reversed with the lowest percentage among the religiously unaffiliated (17 %), then Catholics (50 %) and Protestants (62 %).[10] Finally, the study has shown that 39 % of the respondents were not sure whether they believe in an afterlife and a further 25 % answered 'no'.

Due to the diversity in immortality concepts in the Netherlands, it is not always clear whether people believe that after death one will literally live on in another life, or whether these ideas of posthumous continuity are understood in a metaphorical way. Previous research has shown that when people who believe in life after death are asked to describe how they imagine the afterlife, this seems to be a difficult task (Lester et al., 2001; Pevey, Jones & Yarber, 2008). Moreover, the majority does not know whether they actually believe in an afterlife. A typical sentence that one comes across at funerals is: *'she will live on in us'*. Do people here refer to a literal continuation of the deceased or do they refer to a continuation in their thoughts, memories and feelings? It remains unclear from these numbers what precisely the immortality concepts are among secular people. There are those who do not look for meaning in spirituality or religiosity, but the majority of those who are unaffiliated do believe in a general transcendence. Moreover, in secularizing countries their remains a 'fuzzy fidelity' (Storm, 2009) that refers to a significant group of people who are neither church members nor outspokenly unreligious. Although the role of the church has become less influential in some Western societies, religiosity has not necessarily disappeared, but rather changed (Knoblauch, 2009). It is unclear what specific beliefs in immortality are represented in contemporary Dutch society. More research is needed that focuses more explicitly on ideas of an

believe more in life after death. The same can be found in the 'Ode to the dead' sample. Within the youngest age group (18 to 29 years) the percentage for belief in a heaven was 59 %, whereas the average was 16 %. There is thus a tendency towards more belief in an afterlife within younger age groups!

8        $p < .05$. This more social perspective on the afterlife might be related to the importance that women give to relationships.

9        $p < .05$.

10        $p < .05$.

afterlife, especially among those who are religiously unaffiliated. A further question is what do people do when they are confronted with death? The aim of this study is to unravel contemporary views on immortality through the examination of practices. Rituals of dying, death and bereavement offer an interesting study field, as immortality concepts are expressed and formed in these practices around death. Moreover, rituals are performed in religious and secular contexts, which make a comparison possible between notions of immorality in these different ritual contexts.

## 1.2 Immortality in rituals of dying, death and bereavement

When a beloved one dies, for the survivors one life ends, but another begins without the loved one being around. When a member of society dies, the input, roles and tasks of that person need to be substituted. Nevertheless, the social borders between life and death are never really clear-cut, which is also the reason why death should be studied as a process, rather than an event (Hertz, 1960). Death creates a problem for individuals and society (Baumeister, 1991; Hertz, 1960): defining the beginnings and endings of life becomes more complex when people exist between social statuses such as 'biologically dead and socially alive' or 'socially dead and biologically alive' (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999; Peelen & Wojtkowiak, 2011). Rituals play a central role in the status transition of the deceased into the world of the dead and the living into another social status; e.g., 'widow' or 'widower' (van Gennep, 1960/ 1909; Turner, 2008/ 1969).

Dealing with dying, death and bereavement has for a long time inspired humans to create and perform rituals (Kastenbaum, 2004). Rituals provide us with symbolic actions that have meaning and that help us deal with the transition from life to death. In all cultures death is treated ritually. The classic theory of rites of passage by ethnologist Arnold van Gennep (1960/ 1909) describes three major phases that are found in almost all rituals. The phases of separation, transition and integration describe the status change of the individual (deceased) and the social community (mourners). Anthropologist Victor Turner, furthermore, conceptualized the second phase as 'liminality', referring to a 'betwixt and between' phase in which the social statuses of the deceased and the mourners are undefined (Turner, 2008/ 1969, p. 95). By the end of the liminal transition phase the social structure, such as the relations between the members of the community, returns to the ordinary, normal status. However, the mourners have gone through a transition that cannot be reversed (e.g., from 'wife' to 'widow' or from 'child' to 'adult'). Nevertheless, this status transition is by no means a standard procedure. When, for

example, parents loose their child, they will still feel as parents although their child is gone. Moreover, Van Gennep (1960/ 1909, p. 146) describes the transition phase in rituals of death as more autonomous than in other ritual stages. The German scholar Reiner Sörries (2005) observes that funeral undertakers have increasingly focused on this second transition phase, as they take care of everything from the moment of physical death. However, in this study I want to explore also the stages of dying and bereavement in order to analyze the concept of the postself before and after death. Barbara Meyerhoff (1982) describes, in her chapter on rites of passage, how the study of rituals clarifies human ideas on mortality, which is also why she argues for a psychological approach towards the study of rituals through investigation of the experiences of ritual participants (p. 118). The postself concept is a way of exploring the views mourners and the dying have of their own mortality and immortality. By studying rituals from the perspective of the postself, we can get a glimpse of what images people have of posthumous memory and possibly an afterlife.

The terms 'ritualizing' and 're-inventing' refer to the active involvement of participants with regard to rituals. Rituals become more efficacious and easier to identify with, at least for those who are not satisfied with the traditional rituals.[11] Ronald Grimes (2002) identifies the way in which ritualizing results from "intuition and imagination" (p. 29), "at least in the European American West" (p. 29). Ritualizing may, therefore, contribute to satisfying the individual needs of participants. However, ritualizing does not necessarily have to be based on completely new ritual elements in order to be 're-newing', but can result from the re-use or re-interpretation of old elements.

In contemporary Western societies rituals of death, dying and bereavement are characterized as strongly personalized and privatized, referring to a more personal embedding of the ritual (Garces-Foley, 2003; 2005; Laderman, 2003; Venbrux, Peelen & Altena, 2009). There are, for example, many choices to make when planning this final ritual (Bolt, Heessels, Peelen & Wojtkowak, 2007; Venbrux, Heessels & Bolt, 2008). The research presented here is part of the NWO-funded research Refiguring Death Rites, which focuses on contemporary ritualizing of death in the Netherlands.[12] The consumer oriented funeral industry that is flourishing in the Netherlands, as well as

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11      However, the changes in ritual might also turn into a failure when certain ritual elements are lacking or personal symbols are not chosen carefully. See, for example, Bolt, S. & Venbrux, E. (2010). Funerals without a corpse: Awkwardness in mortuary rituals for body donors. In A. Michaels et al. Ritual dynamics and the Science of Ritual, Vol II Body, Performance, Agency and Experience (pp. 221-233). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
12      www.nwo.nl

other Western countries, and the numerous choices therein often stimulate people to express their own individuality. The bereaved want more input in the ritual and, in addition, the dying are becoming more preoccupied with preparing their own funerals, such as in the death announcement described earlier (Wojtkowiak, 2010). In the context of contemporary secular society, to what extent is the ritualizing and personalizing of rituals related to more personal notions of immortality? Does this mean that notions of immortality in general have also become personalized? Whether they have or not, will be examined in this study.

## 1.3 Defining terms: what is immortality?

Immortality is a broad term referring to different forms of posthumous continuity. From a religious viewpoint, immortality refers to literal, transcendent afterlife; but in religious rituals there is also a social dimension (Assmann, 2009/1999). In institutionalized religious rituals, in order to bring peace to the deceased's spirit, ritual actions are prescribed (Hertz, 1960). However, in religious rituals the social identity of the deceased is also distinguished and preserved (Assmann, 2009/ 1999). The writing of the last will and testament, for instance, which is not only a material notion of death transcendence but has, moreover, the social layer of death continuity, has been since the Middle Ages part of the Christian preparation for death; and something done with the help of a spiritual leader (van Eijnaten & van Lieburg, 2006, p. 95). The Ars Moriendi movement also stimulated various rituals around the deathbed in order to be well prepared for death.

Traditionally, literal immortality (e.g., soul, resurrection) defines where the deceased is literally 'going' after death and is often linked to a spatial image of an afterlife (e.g., heaven, hell). Striving towards immortality is a process, rather than a distinctive event. In the same sense death is a process, a transition that is centralized around the funeral (Hertz, 1960). People strive towards immortality in order to escape mortality (Bauman, 1992; Becker, 1973; Wengle, 1984). When one is close to death, through old age or disease, the transition into the state of the 'dead' is a task for the mourners or the social community in general (Hertz, 1960). Constructing immortality is thus based on the perspective of those who are going to die and those who remember the dead.

In the 1970s, the American psychiatrist Robert Lifton introduced the term 'symbolic immortality', describing different ways of transcending death symbolically, not necessarily from a religious perspective (Lifton, 1976; Lifton & Olson, 1974). Lifton (1976) defines five different modes of symbolic

immortality that refer to a sense of connectedness to all times (past, present and future). Death transcendence can be found in another world, or in this world in terms of social and historical posthumous existence. Symbolic immortality can take on biological, creative, natural or theological forms.

Religious studies scholar, David Chidester refers to literal forms of immortality as 'mythic transcendence' (Chidester, 2002, p. 18). He describes different examples from different parts of the world as 'soul-like' posthumous transcendences, such as living on in the stars, in the world of the dead beneath earth or in heaven. One of the most common literal, transcendent concepts of immortality in Western Europe is the idea of a soul. The soul has many different forms, but generally refers to a spiritual embodiment that is linked to an individual person as source of life that leaves that person at death; this position is often considered as substance-dualism (Cain, 2009). In contemporary secular society literal concepts of immortality and other forms of transcendence (e.g., belief in a higher power) have decreased or changed together with the diminished role of institutionalized religion (Burris & Bailey, 2009; Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Knoblauch, 2009). They have given way to a variety of interpretations of personal death transcendence (Quartier, 2009a).

German sociologist Hubert Knoblauch (2009, p. 55) argues that in order to understand contemporary religiosity, we need not focus on the binary separation between *transcendent* and *immanent* or *sacred* and *profane*, but on the active form of *transcending*. Knoblauch defines this active form of transcendence as the core of contemporary religiosity. The term basically refers to 'going beyond'; which refers in turn to connecting or unifying with something that, although it lies outside one's own self, is not necessarily localized in another world. Moreover, the notion of transcending, rather than the dichotomy of transcendence versus immanence, is what defines contemporary religiosity and spirituality. Knoblauch states: "Die Transcendenz ist also weder die Grenze noch das Begrenzte" (p. 56). This underlines the fact that the notion of transcendence does not exclude but rather includes the individual within something outside one's own self. According to this view, social immortality is a way of transcending death. Furthermore, Knoblauch identifies two important features of contemporary subjective religiosity and spirituality: (1) the emphasis on the individual and (2) the importance of personal experiences of transcendence (Knoblauch, 2008, p. 144). Knoblauch makes clear that contemporary religiosity and spirituality are subjective and take on different forms that do not result from an institutionalized frame, but mostly refer to subjective experiences of transcending.

Another important theoretical model of death transcendence results from

the work of cultural studies scholar Aleida Assmann (2009/1999) who develops two dimensions of death memory. In her study of Ancient Greek literature she discusses the notions of *pietas* and *fama*. The first, *pietas,* describes the obligatory death cult of remembering the deceased by the community. The concept of *pietas* refers to religious rituals during which the dead are placed into the larger frame of collective remembrance. Beliefs in the afterlife occupy a central role in *pietas* as, for example, the spirits of the dead are kept in peace so that they do not return to the world of the living. The second, *fama*, is what she defines as the glorious memento of individuals after death, the immortalizing of the name of the deceased. The mourners remember the individual who is deceased. While *pietas* is embedded in a social and cultural structure and the obligation of the community to take care of the funeral and additional rituals, *fama* relies on the basis of individual achievements. Assmann, moreover, clarifies how *fama* represents the secular dimensions of death memory, while *pietas* represents the religious dimension. In this model she distinguishes afterlife and memory.

Assmann gives classical examples of *fama*, such as writers and poets whose works make them socially immortal or soldiers who die on the battlefield while defending their country. Soldiers who die on the battlefield are honored and become heroes. It should be noted that both *fama* and *pietas* are closely related to one another, at times intertwined, such as in the case of martyrs. For example, in the case of the death of soldiers the grave can be the individual remembrance of the soldiers' identity by the next of kin (*fama*) and at the same time the monument is the collective remembrance of the larger community (*pietas*). In contemporary societies, the relation between *pietas* and *fama* is very closely linked in the worldviews of terrorist groups, who are not only promised to become immortal in an afterlife, but also to receive social immortality as martyrs in this world through fame and glory in the eyes of the members of their fundamentalist group. Assmann's model of posthumous remembrance is interesting for this study on contemporary concepts of immortality because it distinguishes individual and collective forms of death transcendence. This raises the question of whether we are dealing with an afterlife or a memory in talking about the postself?

The postself concept defines death transcendence from the perspective of the individual (Shneidman 1973; 2008). It refers to constructions of a posthumous identity on the basis of personal investments such as work, children, last wills, testaments or organ transplantation (Shneidman, 2008). A sense of immortality is closely linked to identity, as the idea of becoming immortal presupposes being recognizable as the same person after death. Gaining social immortality is not necessarily an active strategy for the person

in question; a person's social identity is also remembered without any active effort in investing in a postself. Those who have significant relationships will be remembered after death, at least temporarily. The postself is defined by Shneidman as "who you are after you are dead" (Shneidman, 2008, p. 150). It is the image and reputation that you will leave behind after death. A sense of postself is more generally found in the idea of being remembered by others, but also more specifically by the fruits of one's own work: by one's children and grandchildren where not only a biological continuity is felt through passing on genes but also a social continuity through passing on life values. In this sense the postself resembles with the concept of 'generativity' defined by Erikson (1980).

According to developmental psychologist Erikson (1980), generativity is part of a person's (healthy) identity development. People from about the age of 40 begin to look back at their lives: what they have achieved and what they will leave behind after death. A sense of generativity leads to a satisfying feeling of identity in older age. Generativity and symbolic immortality include both the importance of feeling continuity with past, present and future. The difference is that symbolic immortality refers to a cultural, societal perspective, whereas Erikson's identity development theory begins from the perspective of the individual, as does the concept of the postself.

What is important here, is that the idea of a postself in relation to theories of identity development leads us to the understanding that identity formation does not end at death, but rather goes beyond it. The idea of being remembered by others, and most preferably in a positive and honorable way, is part of a person's satisfying identity development. Investing in a satisfying postself is one of the final tasks when being confronted with death, such as solving unfinished business with significant others. Social investments in the face of death are, however, inseparably connected to the idea of leaving a good name about the self (in other words, the postself). The postself can bridge the gap between identity and immortality because it creates continuity to a person's posthumous existence. It is important to note that the concept of immortality is not the same as that of eternity, although the two terms are closely related. Immortality means that you are born but that you cannot die. Eternity refers more generally to timelesness. Immortality can be eternal, such as images of an immortal soul; but immortality can also be symbolic, which refers to the sense of having a place in history, which does not necessarily establish actual eternity.

## 1.4 Transcending the boundaries of the self

Social theorist Hans Joas asks whether we can "live without the experience articulated in faith, in religion?" (Joas, 2008, p. 7). In order to give an answer to that he introduces the concept of 'self-transcendence', which refers to being pulled beyond the boundaries of one's self, similar to what Knoblauch (2009, p. 56) describes as the active form of transcending. Joas furthermore makes clear that self-transcendence can be experienced by feelings of an overwhelming connection with nature or with another person. Falling in love and being in love with another person are examples of 'losing' oneself and connecting with someone else. In order to transcend the self it is necessary to exceed the limitations of one's self-perspective and to connect with something or somebody outside the self. In addition, the experience of suffering can lead to a feeling of self-transcendence. In the same way as falling in love with another person, loosing a person through death can be experienced as a form of self-transcendence. Joas' definition of self-transcendence is similar to what Lifton and Olson (1974) define as the experiential mode of symbolic immortality. The feeling of transcending the boundaries of the self, through spiritual re-orientation, music, dance, sexual experience, giving birth, or the use of drugs can lead to a sense of 'timelessness', which is also a central assumption in achieving a sense of symbolic immortality. The sense of timelessness is a key factor for the experience of self-transcendence. The concept of self-transcendence can be also found in psychological literature on ageing and health care. It is linked here to positive emotions and thoughts, such as mental well being, wisdom and positive affections with the self and others (Levenson et al., 2005; Reed, 2009).

Imagining one's own death and what will be after you die is a form of exceeding the boundaries of one's own death. But this alone does not amount to the experience of self-transcendence. Rather than simply rational and cognitive thought, a strong emotional sensation is required for self-transcendence,. This is also why in rituals, which are emotionally compelling, experiences of self-transcendence can be found. Although rituals of death and bereavement in the Netherlands also have a strong verbal component, which represents thoughts and choices that were made in the preparation, the ritual strength lies in the symbolic, poetic or artistic component, which is also important. Rituals evoke and channel emotions. Linking the concept of self-transcendence to the postself in this study on rituals of dying, death and bereavement helps us better understand contemporary concepts of immortality in Dutch culture. Self-transcendence, as well as the postself, underlines the uniqueness of one's life experiences. The postself, which is originally a psychological concept, can evoke a sense of death transcendence

for those who are preparing their own death and those who are dealing with the death of a loved one. Remembering the deceased by talking, thinking or writing about him, can give a feeling of proximity to the deceased, which can be related to ideas of an afterlife or experiences of self-transcendence. The sense of connecting or communicating with a deceased loved one might be experienced as self-transcendence. In Knoblauch's terms (2009), transcendence also involves connecting with someone or something other than one's own self.

## 1.5 Research question

This study deals with notions of immortality in secularizing society. The postself is theorized as a central concept in this research. The postself has recently been studied with regard to the social and historical context (Kamerman, 2003), politics (Whooley, 2003; Nelson, 1980), sport achievements (Schmitt & Leonard, 1986), popular culture (Durkin, 2003; Kearl, 2010) and in the process of dying (Sandstorm, 2003). The aim of this research is to study the role of the postself in relation to notions of immortality in a secular context. Survivors claim *'uit het oog, maar niet uit het hart'*[13] and *'je zult voor altijd in ons voortleven'*[14], which suggests some sort of immortality of the deceased, but to what extent are they expressions of religious or social immortality?

The research question is, therefore: what is the role of the postself in contemporary conceptualizations of (literal and nonliteral) immortality around rituals of dying, death and bereavement in the Netherlands? Literal immortality is defined as encompassing different forms of an afterlife, where the deceased still has a literal existence, and often also a consciousness after death, such as in the notions of the soul, reincarnation or bodily resurrection. Nonliteral immortality refers here to social, historical or other symbolic, indirect representations of an existence of the deceased and will be approached in this study by the psychosocial concept of the postself. It is crucial to note that both concepts of immortality are established through transitions that are taking place around death, as defined in the theory of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909). A diagram of concepts of immortality as defined here is summarized in Figure 1.1. The general concept of immortality is conceptualized in two dimensions: literal and nonliteral. In parentheses the ritual expression is added: *pietas* for religious, institutionalized death cults and ideas of an afterlife and *fama* for the secular, individual remembrance

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13       'Out of sight, but not out of mind'
14       'You will forever live on in us'

and memory (Assmann, 2009/ 1999). In reality this distinction is not a clear-cut one, as literal and nonliteral immortality refer to extremes, which is sometimes difficult to identify in reality. However, the model is used here in order to approach the above formulated research question.

Immortality

Literal (pietas)　　　　Nonliteral (fama)

Soul　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Postself
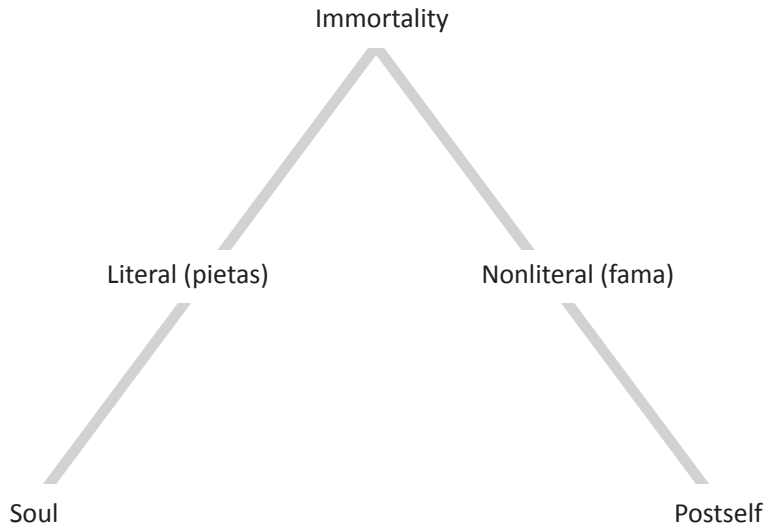
**Figure 1.1** Diagram of immortality concepts

In order to answer the research question the focuses is on (1) *attitudes towards immortality* that will be investigated by data from questionnaires and interviews; (2) *ritual expressions of immortality* resulting from ritual material such as funeral planning, mourning cards, funeral speeches, memorial spaces for the dead that was collected from participant observation; and (3) *experiences of status transitions*. The question 'how does one become dead?' is closely linked to the question 'how does one become immortal?' This is also why in the empirical chapters the focus will not only be on attitudes and ritual expressions, but also on the status transitions of the dying, the dead and the survivors.

Three ritual stages of death have been chosen in order to study the transition from 'self' to 'postself': (a) preparing one's own funeral, (b) the burial ritual and (c) private mourning practices. The transformation from the living to the dead is a process that has the following ritual stages: the dying process, funeral rites and mourning rites (Sörries, 2005). In order to investigate death transcendence and the question of notions of immortality, we need to examine the different 'stages' of death, which will be studied in different empirically focused chapters.

## 1.6 Research methods

*Procedure*

The research question focuses on beliefs and practices in relation to death; therefore, a mixed methods approach was chosen. In order to study attitudes as well as actions empirical data is used from both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Leech, Dellinger, Brannagan, & Tanaka, 2010). The more general attitudes among the Dutch population, such as towards religiosity and meaning making of death, are studied by survey data using a nationwide sample. Statistical analyses were conducted on the basis of the representative SOCON survey study in the Netherlands from 2005 ($n$ = 1212). These analyses focus on meaning making, death and religiosity in the Netherlands (Chapter 3). At the same time, a case was investigated with regard to the meaning of the postself after the diagnosis of an incurable disease. The researcher accompanied the person in the process of preparing for her own death between 2007 and 2009 (Chapter 4). In addition, the fieldwork consisted of two years spent participating in terminal home care, from 2007 to 2009, in which 18 terminal patients and their families were accompanied. Additional interviews with mourners and professionals from the funerary industry were conducted ($n$ = 15). After the first statistical analyses and field approach, the theory was formed in order to inform the data collection. For the investigation of ritual activity and the meaning of the postself, data was used from participant observations and additional source material collected from these observations. The participant observations took place during burials, as well as other activities, performed at two different cemeteries from 2008 to 2010.[15] The fieldwork material was collected during 30 observed burials and consists of field reports (e.g., field notes, observations, interviews) and collected source material (e.g., mourning cards, funeral scenarios, death notes) was analyzed by means of content analysis. The focus of the content analysis was on notions of immortality and the postself. In 2007, a follow-up study on the questionnaire was conducted in order to investigate the mourning practices in more detail (SOCON 2007, $n$ = 506) and another questionnaire was used that focuses on the material memory objects of the bereaved (Allerzielen Alom, 2009; $n$ = 432). The research design of this study is identified as equal and sequential towards the quantitative and qualitative data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The research steps are presented schematically in Figure 1.2.

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15      There were also additional observations at other cemeteries, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Theory
Death, religiosity, ritualising

Results

Quantitative
survey study

Qualitative case study &
participant observation

Qualitative
Participant
observation

Quantitative
Follow-up survey

Results

Theory
postself, literal - nonliteral,
immortality
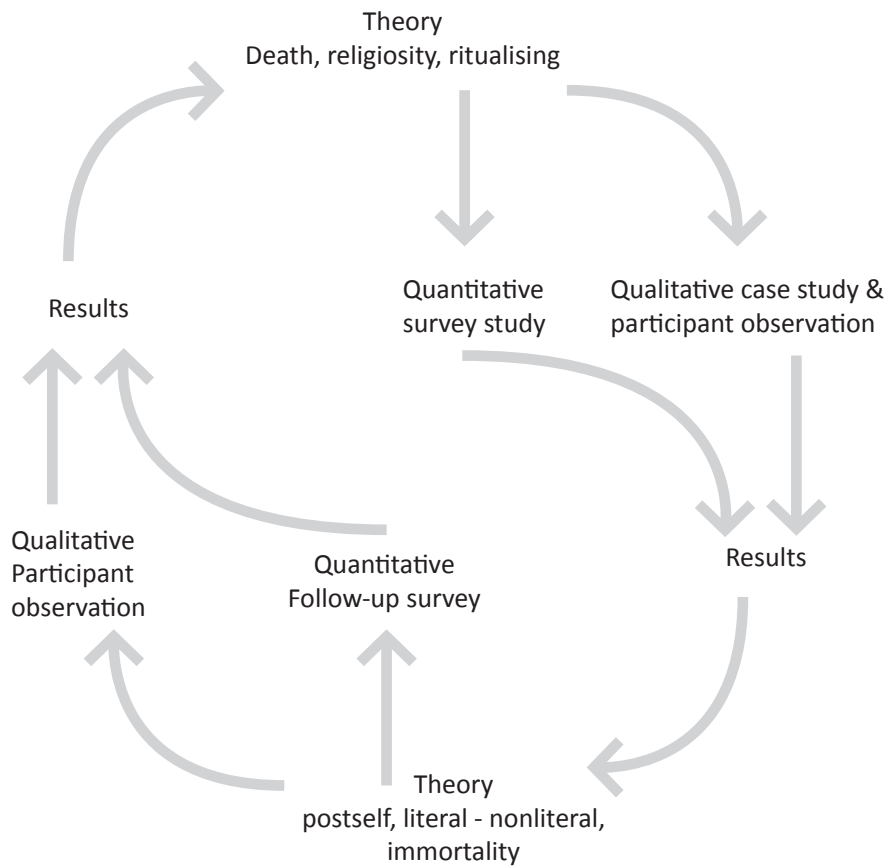
**Figure 1.2** Research steps of this study with mixed methods

*Participants*
The participants in this research are, in the quantitative study selected from two representative Dutch survey studies (SOCON, 2005; 2007) and, in the qualitative studies, chosen on the basis of their involvement with death: (1) because they are faced with an incurable disease or old age or (2) because of the death of a significant loved one. The research cases are rituals of death, dying and mourning. The focus is on secular people who are not institutionally a member of a church or religious group. Whether these people consider themselves spiritual or religious is analyzed by using the different methods. Comparisons are also made with participants who have a clear religious self-definition in order to distinguish the differences and similarities between concepts of immortality that result from a religious or secular worldview, or both.

## 1.7 Outline of this book

In the following chapters the relation between postself and notions of immortality in the context of rituals are dealt with on the basis of attitudes, actions and transitions in the different ritual stages of death (dying, death and bereavement). In Chapter 2 the central concept of this study, the postself, will be discussed in particular in relation to literal and nonliteral immortality. Attention will also be paid to other theories on the self and identity development. In Chapter 3 the cultural-historical context of this research will be discussed with emphasis on the changing perspectives on death and dying in Western societies and different ways of meaning making of life and death. In Chapter 4 the role of the postself before physical death is studied. The preparation and preoccupation with one's own death is examined with regard to the case of planning one's own funeral, which does not refer to the physical process of dying, but to the emotional and ritual preparation for one's own death. The postself is approached here from the perspective of those who are going to die. In Chapter 5 the perspective changes, as we move towards rituals after physical death. This means that attitudes, actions and transitions are studied here in the context of burial rituals: to what extent do the mourners preserve the postself of the deceased in the burial ritual and how is the postself related to notions of immortality? Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on the process of mourning after the funeral. This chapter deals with ritual in private practices and focuses on the case study of home memorials for the dead, which are becoming increasingly popular in the Netherlands. These private spaces for the dead reveal what concepts of immortality are present in the process of mourning. In the concluding chapter, Chapter 7, the results concerning the postself in relation to immortality are summarized. Moreover, the general role of religiosity in the context of secular society will be discussed in the light of the research results.

# Chapter 2
# The postself: a theoretical framework

## Introduction

The postself has been described in the literature as a person's psychological post continuation for an existence after death (Shneidman, 2008; 1973) or, in other words, the way an individual thinks about his or her image or reputation for after death. In this chapter I will describe four important points that are central to the theoretical understanding of the postself. First, I focus on the psychological definition that is given by Edwin Shneidman in his work on suicide. Second, I will describe similarities and differences between this and other concepts on the subject of posthumous continuity (Erikson, 1980; Lifton, 1976). Third, the model of the self by William James will be discussed and linked to the postself, which results in highlighting the underlying dimensions of the concept for the purpose of a working definition. The different forms of expressing the postself will be conceptualized in this research. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of the similarities and differences between nonliteral and literal immortality.

The postself will be conceptualized in this chapter for the following reasons. First, to underline the fact that the postself is more than 'merely' a psychological construction in the mind of those fantasizing about their posthumous reputation. The social component as well as the cultural embeddedness of the postself is of great importance in understanding the concept. One cannot imagine being remembered without the existence of the other. The cultural dimension is visible in the emphasis on individuality in the postself concept in the context of contemporary individualized culture: 'How would I want to be remembered?' What's more, the construction of posthumous identities is defined by what is valuable in a culture. The way one wants to be remembered is related to what is meant by being a 'good' and 'honorable' person that is worth being remembered in a certain cultural context.

Second, the definition of different dimensions of the concept makes its operation more transparent, which is of great importance for the following empirical chapters, especially as this study consists of mixed methods. Clarifying the concept helps us to analyze the various data.

Third, this study shows that the identity of the deceased is of big importance, which is also visible in the personalization of contemporary rituals of dying, death and bereavement. In the previous chapter the historical and cultural developments around death in the Netherlands were described and are characterized by personalization and individualization of death and dying. This chapter deals with the theoretical background of the postself and how it is related to symbolic and literal immortality. I argue that the postself can be approached from different dimensions, social, material and individual, and that it can be related to experiences of self-transcendence.

## 2.1 Shneidman's concept of the postself

Shneidman worked his entire career on the underlying mechanisms behind self-destructive behavior. His input on the study, treatment and prevention of suicide is found, among others, in the development of the concepts of 'psychache' and 'psychological autopsy' (Pompili, 2009; Wojtkowiak, 2009a). However, the postself has always been associated with positive effects on the psyche. Shneidman describes it as "in most instances beneficial" (Shneidman, 1973, p. 43). After having worked on suicidiology for more than 60 years, Shneidman (2008) writes, in his most recent book, that now at the age of 90 the reality of the postself is closer to him than ever before. When he earlier described the term in his books and articles, it was a concept; but now, facing death, it becomes real. He writes: "the postself is who you are after you are dead. It is your postmortem reputation, how you are remembered, your place in human history" (p. 150). He further defines different ways of posthumous continuity. The most obvious are (1) in the memories of others; then (2) an active investment in one's work, art, music, writings; (3) in wills and directives; (4) in suicide notes; (5) through your body (organ donation); (6) in the genes of one's children and grandchildren: and finally (7) more philosophically as existing in the cosmos. In this enumeration of possible 'postselves' lies a distinction between active investment in an posthumous existence (e.g., leaving creative works, a will, a suicide note) and those postselves one does not always actively influence, such as the memories of others or having grandchildren. This means that the postself is not necessarily a 'thing' that you plan or an active goal in life; it might be so for some people, but not for others. How others will remember us is only partly in our own hands.

However, postself related activities might be considered meaningful for those facing death.

Reflecting on who we are or who we want to be in the future is a process that takes place throughout life. People evaluate and discover new parts of their selves at all points of life, even in old age. New roles and challenges in older age include, for example, becoming a grandparent or discovering new interests and hobbies in retirement. This means that identity formation takes place throughout the whole life cycle (Erikson, 1980). The older people are, the more they realize what was established in their personal 'life-project' (e.g., self-development, work, romantic relationships, children and material achievements). Every person experiences and evaluates their own biography that determines their personal identity. Life-stories or narratives are therefore of great importance (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 2001). By telling stories about others and ourselves we decide what can meaningfully be an explicit part of our identity. At the same time, telling life-stories also shapes one's personal identity. Therefore the process of identity formation is in constant interaction with the environment.

When people are confronted with death the process of identity formation is interrupted. Roy Baumeister (1991) describes death as a threat to a person's unique identity. He describes the relationship between death and individuality as follows:

> Death is closely linked to individuality. Death calls attention to oneself as an individual. [...] First, death demarks the boundaries of the self, insofar as death removes your self and nothing else from the world. In other words, what is removed from the world by your death is precisely the sum of total of you. Second, the history of your life becomes complete at death, so it is possible to see exactly what you have amounted to and accomplished. Third, your death is irredeemably your own, and no one else can really die in your place (Baumeister, 1991, p.277).

In this quotation, he makes clear that no one can die instead of someone else, because ultimately everybody has to face his or her own death. At the same time, death makes one's life complete. Death is an important force in the creation of identity and continuity throughout life, as it challenges our unique individuality. Suicide is there seen as the most radical form of self-destruction, as one removes one's 'whole' self from the world.

When a person is dying, not only is his or her physical existence ending, but

also his or her social existence. The identity of the bereaved is also changing with death. When parents loose a child, or a husband his wife, the identity that rests on the basis of that relationship ends with physical death. Symbolic representations of the deceased are strategies for preserving the bond with the deceased, such as following the wishes of the deceased, honoring his or her legacy and even literally communicating with the deceased through a medium or prayer. The symbolic representations can take on secular and religious forms; in the psychological literature it is defined as 'continued attachment' (Stroebe, 2004). In the symbolic representation of the deceased, also beliefs in and actions towards literal and nonliteral immortality are also involved.

## 2.2 Identity in the face of death: some other concepts

Death creates not only feelings of sadness and loss, but also distress for the identity in question. The approach of studying death from an identity perspective seems to be fruitful, as it reflects the fundamental problem of being human: the loss of self and the loss of significant relationships. After having used the term 'identity' several times, a more concrete definition is needed in order to continue this conceptualization. What constitutes personal identity? The Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura gives a description that summarizes the most important functions of personal identity:

> Identity is preserved in memories that give temporal
> coherence to life, in the connectedness of human
> relationships and one's work over time, and in continuance
> of belief and value commitments that link the present to the
> past and shape the future. (Albert Bandura, 2008, p. 91-92)

The most important point to note from this passage is that identity gives coherence to life and creates a sense of continuity. Past, present and future are connected in a satisfied feeling of identity: 'I am still the same person that I was in the past and I will remain the same person in the future'. The function of memory in identity formation is also significant. On the basis of what we remember about others and ourselves we are able to create a self-image in the present. Another important feature of Bandura's definition is the acknowledgement of the importance of relationships in identity formation. Without the other we have no framework to define ourselves or to give meaning to certain events. Even when one places oneself outside the circle of other people, being an outsider is only possible in relation to others.

The term 'social identity' refers to the image that others have of us.

Identity formation takes place throughout life and is built on relationships, memories, and temporal coherence. When one is getting older, in middle adulthood, one starts not only to reveal new goals, but also to look back at one's own biography and the things that have been achieved so far. The well-known 'mid-life crisis' is a phenomenon that appears when middle-aged adults are not satisfied with the lives that they have lived so far. Erikson (1980) refers to 'generativity' as the concerns of adults about what they have accomplished during life and what will be transferred to the next generation. Generativity is, in the first place, the status one can achieve after solving a crisis before moving closer towards death and the final developmental stage: integrity versus despair. Furthermore, generativity refers also to finding meaning in something that will continue for generations. Erikson explicitly states that reaching generativity leads to a satisfied feeling of identity formation in old age. The evaluation of one's life as being as good and as satisfying as it is and the things in life that are accomplished lead to a deeper feeling of satisfaction with one's life (e.g., having raised children, worked productively, helped others or having contributed something to society).

The closer we move towards death, the more we evaluate our whole existence. The last developmental phase before death is, according to Erikson, centralized around creating a sense of integrity. This means accepting one's own biography and finally finding a meaning in life and death. It is important to the subject of identity in old age not to forget the meaning of death in terms of integrity and despair; the preoccupation with generativity is only one developmental task in moving closer towards death (Thomas, 1995). Moreover, from research it has been shown that with increasing age, people accept death more and have less fear of death (Wong, Reker & Geser, 1994).

While Erikson focuses on the social impact of generativity and Shneidman focuses on the psychological processes towards a postself, Lifton speaks of 'symbolic immortality' as a more general connection of the individual with society (Lifton & Olson, 1974; Lifton, 1976). Lifton (1976) starts his argumentation on death and continuity from the stereotypical and limited views on death that resulted from mass killings, such as the holocaust or the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. Lifton uses these extreme examples in order to understand ordinary strategies for dealing with death. In a sense, I am doing something similar by using the concept of the postself that resulted from studies on suicide to explain identity formations in dealing with more 'ordinary' deaths.

Symbolic immortality was originally defined as the symbolization of a person's ties with history and a feeling of connectedness between the past,

present and future (Lifton, 1976; Lifton & Olson, 1974). In Lifton's model, feelings of symbolic immortality are related to continuity after death, but are based on a collective perspective ('the culture or society that I am part of and that I helped to shape, such as through my work or my children, will survive my own death'). In contrast to the notion of an individual that is part of some larger collective that will outlive its members, the postself specifically departs from an *individual* perspective ('me and my life, work and children will be remembered after death'). Thus, while symbolic immortality focuses on being part of something that is bigger than the self (and that will succeed the self), the postself is about the continuation of the individual self after death (living on in the memory of others). The postself might therefore be described as an intra-individual form of symbolic immortality that highlights a psychosocial view on imagining one's death: how will significant others remember me after death?

Lifton's emphasis on historical patterns in the concerns of an existence after death, gives his theory of symbolic immortality a broader view on immortality. Symbolic immortality is a more general concept of being connected to the world, a theory of belief systems. Lifton speaks of five modes of symbolic immortality that are interrelated: (1) biological (e.g., offspring), (2) nature (e.g., the 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' principle), (3) theological (e.g., the concept of soul or reincarnation), (4) creative (e.g., fruits of your labor) and (5) transcendental experience (e.g., 'losing oneself' in a mystic experience).

Roy Baumeister (1991) defines secular immortality, as well as all other forms of immortality, as an illusion (pp. 282ff.). Moreover, social immortality is only a temporary phenomenon in contrast to literal immortality. An ordinary person will only be remembered for about 70 years after his or her death, one lifetime. Each person is remembered by those people who knew him during life; those who are born after his or her death will not have any memories about that person unless the accomplishments during life were so great that they became part of the history of a certain social community. Although Baumeister's analysis cannot be neglected and the postself certainly has an expiration date[16], the concept gives meaning and sense for those preparing their death or those dealing with the death of a loved one.

The changes in cultural patterns, such as the growing impact of Darwin's theory of evolution of the species in the 19th and 20th centuries, lead to a shift from the theological mode of a literal afterlife to a more natural and biological mode (Lifton, 1976). In the course of the 20th century secularization

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16      I want to thank Prof. Tony Walter for suggesting this term.

increasingly penetrated also the private sphere in many Western societies. What people actually believe is difficult to determine, measure or conceptualize, as religion has been largely removed from the public space.[17] This is also why I speak of religiosity, instead of religion, in this study. I want to emphasize how this study deals with attitudes and actions that are related to religiosity, such as the belief in transcendence, but do not necessarily result from institutionalized religion. Today, some authors speak of post-secularism already being defined as showing more individual spiritual diversity and neutrality towards religion (Keenan, 2002).

## 2.3 Dimensions of the postself[18]: material, social and individual

So far, the postself has been compared to theories of identity development and the notions of symbolic immortality. This section deals with different theories on the self and death and how these are linked to the concept of the postself. David Unruh describes different strategies of identity preservation of the bereaved *and* the dying (Unruh, 1983). He interviewed dying people as well as the bereaved. For Unruh, identity preservation is defined by different ways of keeping the identity of the deceased alive. Such strategies involve, for example, calling upon good memories, reinterpreting the negative habits of the deceased and continuing the activities previously done together. In addition, the bereaved tend to sanctify certain objects in order to maintain the deceased's identity. The bedroom of a dead child left untouched by parents illustrates this kind of sanctification. Photographs picturing the deceased, when dealing with grief or cherishing the memory of the person in question, can be turned into objects of 'worship' (Gibson, 2004; 2008). Interestingly, the dying also leave clues for the survivors, which reflects the desire to be remembered in a certain way, such as letters, notes, last wills and testaments or journals. Unruh explains: "when people think they are dying, they begin documenting pieces of their personal history through autobiographies, diary entries, and stories which leave portions of themselves with survivors" (Unruh, 1983, p. 342). In the next chapter, this documentation of the postself

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17    Ironically, the political discussion on religious clothing of migrants in Western European countries, such as headscarves, moves religion back into the public life.
18    The postself might also be referred to as 'after self' or 'after identity' or 'post identity', but to maintain a unity with previous literature I will stick with the term that Shneidman uses. The term 'self' does not always cover the dynamics of identity as a 'process'. At this point, I would also like to thank Prof. Glenn Most for his feedback on this issue, although he preferred the other terms, because 'postself' sounded too much like bringing your self to the 'post office'. I appreciate his comment, but remain committed to the postself as other authors have been.

will be discussed in the case of planning one's own funeral.

Unruh's examples of identity preservation strategies have close similarities with the conceptualization of the postself. I want to stress here that after death, identity is approached from two perspectives: the person who wants to be remembered and those who remember that person; the way people fantasize about how to be remembered and the way others actually remember the identity of the deceased. Therefore, we need to make a conceptual clarification by distinguishing (1) the creator of the postself (the person who leaves clues for a posthumous existence) and (2) those who react to the postself (the survivors who keep the postself 'alive'). Considering the factor of time in this distinction, it follows that the postself is constructed *before* death (i.e., in the mind of the person who is going to die) and *after* death (i.e., in the mind and actions of the survivors).

William James, the pioneer in psychological literature on the self, defines three dimensions of the 'empirical self' or 'me' that he describes in his classic work *The Principles of Psychology* (James, 1891, p. 291). The 'me' is characterized as the part of the self that comes to mind when we reflect on ourselves, when we see ourselves as 'object'. The 'I' is the active part of the self, when one is interacting with others without consciously reflecting on oneself. James writes: "our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are" (James, 1891, p. 291). Within this introduction James makes clear that the self is not a 'thing' within the individual, but that there is more to this complex concept. His examples are interestingly very similar to what we have seen earlier in the literature on the postself. The three parts of the self according to James are: the material, the social and the spiritual.

"The body is the innermost part of our material Self in each of us" (James, 1891, p. 292). Next to the body, our clothes, our family, our friends and our home are identified as part of the material self. These material objects are of great importance to us and they also show and define who we are. The act of dividing carefully the personal belongings after a person's death symbolizes the importance of these objects for the person and the importance of the continuity of these objects after death (Gibson, 2008). People live on in the things that belonged to the deceased, which makes them part of their postself.

The second part in James' model is the social self. The social self refers to the recognition one receives from others, the image that other people have of us and how that influences our self-image. Furthermore, James argues that every person has as many social selves as there are individuals that have an image of us. Different people influence us differently as they have different impressions of us, ranking from a life-long inter-relationship, such as with our parents or with a partner, to temporary bonding with colleagues or friends.

Finally, the spiritual self describes the most intimate part of us. At moments when people realize that they subjectively think about themselves as thinkers, when people pay attention to the thought as such and not as much to the content of the thought, James speaks of a spiritual self (p. 295). The spiritual self is the private image people have about themselves, their thoughts and feelings about themselves. It should be made clear that this distinction does not suggest an exclusion of the other dimensions of the self. Moreover, the material, social and spiritual selves are in constant interaction, as has been discussed previously on the subject of identity formation.

For this study the postself is conceptualized using James' model of the dimensions of the self. The material postself can be understood as the body of the deceased and his or her personal belongings. The social postself is the way the bereaved will remember the deceased. However, the final dimension, the spiritual self, will not be used here in the way James uses it. After physical death, it is difficult to speak of a conscious inner self, except when referring to concepts of literal immortality. This dimension of the postself will be defined as the individual postself. The term refers to the thoughts, typical sayings, lessons or other messages that will be left behind by the dying and that express his or her individuality. Take, for example, a suicide note. This is in the first instance a tangible, material representation of the deceased (material postself); but the content of the letter, the words and thoughts that are left behind by the deceased, represent the individual postself that the deceased wanted to leave behind. The reactions to that letter will define the social postself of the deceased. It is important to note, again, that these dimensions do not exclude one another but that they are intended to nuance the concept and to help in the following analysis.

In defining the relationship between self and postself in metaphor, I would argue that the self is like a diary, in which we describe and evaluate all our personal experiences, feelings, thoughts, relationships, goals, wishes, desires and knowledge. The postself is like an autobiography, which is a personal document but which is also shared with other people and creates an image to remain after death. The autobiography can be written before one's own death, such as in the case of planning one's own funeral, but once it is published the social environment creates its own image of the person on the basis of that autobiography, such as in the funeral ritual. Over the course of time the image of the deceased will change, the memories of the autobiography will perhaps be not be so fresh anymore and can therefore alter the image, such as in the process of mourning.

## 2.4 Ritual, religiosity and the postself

So far, I have discussed the concepts of identity and the self in relation to the postself. This study investigates the postself in the context of rituals of dying, death and bereavement. Rituals create temporal symbolic realities, where the deceased, as well as the mourners have a place. Rituals canalize identities and beliefs. The role of the postself in contemporary notions of immortality can thus be easily found in contemporary rituals. In the cultural context of the Netherlands, where ritual creativity and individualism are important props in the performance and development of rituals, the personal approach of the postself in the study of immortality should prove fruitful.

Theories on death rituals show similar dimensions, such as the material, social and individual or spiritual postself, such as in the work of Robert Hertz (1960). Hertz, who was one of Durkheim's students, writes in his seminal essay on death rituals of the Dayak in Borneo that in the period between physical death and final burial (which in this case can take months or even years) there are three important 'instances' that play a role in the transition from 'living' to 'dead': (1) the body, (2) the soul and (3) the survivors. The soul of the deceased represents the deceased, which can be compared to the person's postself in this study. Anthropologists Metcalf and Huntington (2006/ 1991) evaluate Hertz's arguments schematically and propose that the three key elements in the study of death rites all interact with one another. These interactions lead to different explanations, such as when mourners deal with the corpse and there are different rites that determine how the interactions should look. Moreover, anthropologist Mary Douglas stresses the importance of the body in human interactions and argues that people have different 'bodies' instead of 'selves'. For her, next to the physical body, there is the social body that is involved in interactions and relations (Douglas, 1973). We can conclude that the three dimensional model of material, social and spiritual matters in relation to human consciousness and social interactions can also be found in the works of other scholars who do not explicitly focus on the self (Douglas, 1973; Hertz, 1960; Metcalf & Huntington, 2006/ 1991).

The diagram from the introduction is schematized in Figure 2.1 with the additional dimensions of the postself discussed above. It should be noted that the soul also has the above defined dimensions, but that in this study the focus is explicitly on the postself, which is why the conceptualization of the underlying dimensions of the soul will be spared for another study.

The further conceptualization of the postself for this study is shown in the matrix in Table 2.1. The material, social and individual dimension of the postself are related to the nonliteral and literal notions of immortality. That the postself has nonliteral expressions of immortality, which are therefore

expressions of memory, is implied by the definition of the concept. It is the way you are remembered by others after death. The notion of the postself possibly also has literal connotations, as will be discussed. The matrix in Table 2.1, which represents the dimension of immortality in relation to the postself studied here, is approached from two perspectives in this study: that of the dying and that of the mourners. The content of the matrix will be investigated here.

Immortality

Literal (pietas)          Nonliteral (fama)

Soul                                           Postself

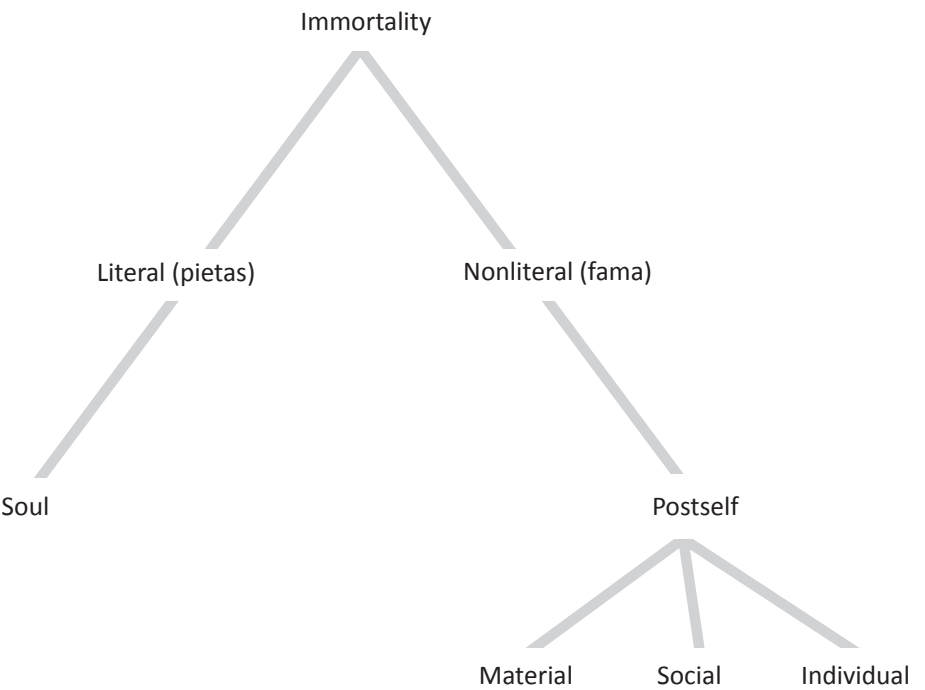                              Material      Social      Individual

**Figure 2.1** Diagram of immortality concepts with additional dimentions of postself

**Table 2.1** Matrix of postself dimensions in relation to nonliteral and literal immortality

|  | Nonliteral | Literal |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Material |  |  |
| Social |  |  |
| Individual |  |  |

## 2.5 The postself in relation to literal and nonliteral immortality

Symbolic interpretations of immortality lie outside traditional religious patterns, but do not necessarily exclude them (Lifton, 1976). This means that religious concepts of immortality have literal and nonliteral references, but psychosocial concepts are restricted to symbolic expressions of a person's identity (at least that is how these concepts have been defined so far). Shneidman writes about the 'immortality impact' of the postself as follows: "it may not be immortality - like Mozart or Lincoln - but it is an extension beyond the date on one's tombstone" (Shneidman, 2008, p. 152). In this quotation Shneidman pinpoints the central research question of this study: to what extent is the postself a construction of immortality? Shneidman has always been clear that the postself is a purely psychological concept, not to be confused with literal conceptions of an afterlife. However, immortality concepts resulting from religious and secular worldviews have in common that they both refer to a symbolic death transcendence of the self. As Routledge and Arndt rightly state: "While religious worldviews afford a sense of literal immortality with their promise of an afterlife, both religious and secular worldviews offer a sense of symbolic immortality as they facilitate ways to construe the self as part of a larger symbolic entity that will transcend physical death" (Routledge & Arndt, 2008, p. 38). Transcending the self in a symbolic sense is also found in both literal and nonliteral immortality concepts. However, transcending the self into another existence where the self takes on another form is only identified in literal immortality concepts; e.g., in the form of a soul.

Ralph Hood (2002), a pioneer in the field of psychology of religion, argues that the concept of the self can be distinguished as a reflexive self and transcendent self that do not exclude one another, but that can both be studied empirically. He also re-introduces the 'soulful' self as a necessity in the study of psychology of religion. The postself, discussed so far, has more features of a reflexive form of self, as it is based on cognitive and emotional reflections on one's biography, achievements and so on. Shneidman once wrote that the postself is about "how much you care" (Shneidman, 21 Mei 2008, email communication). However, there are also arguments towards a more transcendent postself concept, as it includes a symbolic transcendence of death. In addition, the postself is not based simply on cognition, but also emotion, which is important in the experience of self-transcendence (Joas, 2008). The experience of the postself as being part of history and the connectedness with past and future, such as in Lifton's symbolic immortality, could be experienced as self-transcendence. The question as to what extent

the postself is related to death transcendence and literal immortality will be analyzed in the course of this study.

In psychology of religion one of the central questions is whether after death beliefs are a reaction to the death of a loved one or just part of the meaning making system (Benore & Park, 2004). Benore and Park (2004) argue that the belief in an afterlife, as well as continued attachment with the deceased, is not caused by the experience of the death of a loved one but is part of a person's global meaning system. This means that belief in death transcendence and continuing bonds are present before the actual experience of death and are then activated. The results of Chapter 3 will reinforce their arguments, as I found a significant relation between the experience of the death of a loved one and meaning making among Protestants and personal methods of meaning making. The results show that Protestants would then rely more on their religious background, which is already part of their religious identity.

Margaret Stroebe (2004) distinguishes religious continued attachment (e.g., praying for the soul of the deceased) from secular continued attachment (e.g., telling stories about the deceased). In short, secular continued attachment refers to keeping the memory of the deceased alive, such as by re-constructing the postself. In the first stance, the postself would therefore fit in the secular strategies of continued attachment. The postself is in the first instance created without belief in an afterlife; however it does not exclude it. The religiously affiliated also make use of 'secular', psychosocial strategies of posthumous continuity by remembering the identity of the deceased. People can consider themselves as secular by not being a member of a church, but can firmly believe in the concept of the soul, as has been shown in the introduction. The terms 'religious' and 'secular' are difficult to define when approaching the field. What makes a ritual religious or secular? Is it the location, the majority of the participants, the ritual leader, or the religious self-definition of the deceased? One can rather speak of religiosity in relation to rituals and the postself, which generally refers to the meaning and sense making that is based on the reference to a symbolic reality that can be transcendent.[19]

In a series of experiments with different age groups in the US and Spain, psychologist Jesse Bering and his colleagues studied different concepts of an afterlife among children (Bering, 2006; Bering, Hernandez-Blasi & Bjorkluud, 2005). The results were striking and they are worth discussing here briefly. Reading a story to the children in which an anthropomorphic mouse has been eaten by a crocodile provided the set up for the experiments. The participant children, as well as control groups of adults, were asked whether the mouse

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19      My thank goes to Prof. Peter Nissen for discussing this issue with me and suggesting this definition.

still had psychological (e.g., emotions), psychobiological (e.g., hunger, thirst) or biological experiences (e.g., brain functions). Interestingly, older children ascribed fewer functions to the dead mouse than younger children. It seems that younger children between the ages of five and six are more likely to attribute psychological experiences to dead agents than older children between eight and ten and eleven and twelve years, which speaks against the hypothesis that the belief in an afterlife is only culturally dependent.

Moreover, the study was replicated in Spain where two types of schools were compared: a Catholic and a secular school (Bering, Hernandez-Blasi & Bjorkluud, 2005). The results showed that in both groups the assumption of the cessation of all functions of the dead mouse increased with age, with the psychological being the first and the biological being the last. But among the Catholic children there was a later cessation than among the secular children. This shows that although the growing cognitive functions of children influence the disbelief in certain aspects of an afterlife, there is still an influence of the cultural and religious background. The authors furthermore explain that in the case of older, religiously educated children, it is difficult to be confronted with a personal belief and therefore their doubts are less radical than those of secular children. These results show that beliefs in an afterlife are not just the consequence of cultural and religious developments but are, for example, related to cognitive functions, with older children being less convinced of an afterlife.

These studies suggest that children make the distinction between psychological death and biological death, even at young age. Similar assumptions have also been found in other research on adults (Burris & Bailey, 2009; Chidester, 2002; Walter, 1996a). Afterlife beliefs connected to the body such as bodily resurrection were less represented than concepts of an immaterial soul or spiritual embodiment (Burris & Bailey, 2009). The discussion of different theoretical models in relation to the postself shows that there are different dimensions of posthumous existence that need to be studied, such as the material, social and individual. The dead body and the personal belongings of the deceased, for example, represent the material dimension. Using Burris and Bailey's (2009) typology, the postself does not fit spiritual embodiment and nor the bodily resurrection criteria, but lies somewhere between nonliteral and literal immortality.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the postself was discussed in relation to the concepts of identity and the self. Moreover, the relation between literal and nonliteral

immortality concepts has been discussed. This relation is especially present in the notion of the symbolic transcendence of the self that is contained in both concepts. However, there are also differences that have to be kept in mind. Literal immortality suggests an actual afterlife, a 'real' existence after death. Nonliteral immortality is basically referring to symbolic and social representations of the self after death. In the following chapters, the relation between the two will be investigated in the study on contemporary rituals of dying, death and bereavement. The role of the postself will be studied at different ritual stages of death (dying, funeral and mourning). For that purpose, different dimensions of the postself were clarified to make the analyses more clear, although it should be noted that these do not exclude one another! The transition between 'living' and 'dead' is never really clear-cut and has to be approached on different layers.

# Chapter 3
# Death and meaning making in contemporary Dutch society[20]

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on the socio-cultural context of this study on rituals of dying, death and bereavement in the Netherlands. In order to understand contemporary notions of immortality and the role of the postself, we need to take a closer look at cultural and historical developments in relation to death and religiosity in Western societies and especially the Netherlands. From a historical perspective, the Darwinian revolution is considered a central turning point that lead to a more psychological approach towards death and dying, in contrast to the centuries-long domination of the theological approach (Ariès, 1981; Becker, 1973; Lifton, 1976). Moreover, the role of the self in the light of individualization needs to be discussed here in order to understand contemporary forms of giving meaning to death. The self has been identified as a major authority in dealing with death in 'postmodern' society (Giddens, 1991; Walter, 1996b). This chapter elaborates on the growing impact of individualism on the meaning making of death and the changing role of traditional religiosity in the Netherlands. I will illustrate how socio-cultural changes in the Netherlands have influenced the perspective of the individual on death and dying. Therefore, I will firstly discuss the historical context of this study and secondly present recent results from a nationwide survey study on death and meaning making in the Netherlands. Finally, I want to discuss some theoretical implications of these changing perspectives on notions of the self.

Concepts of immortality are related to more general developments in society such as the secularization, individualization and professionalization of death (Walter, 2008). Moreover, views on an afterlife are related to changing

perspectives on religiosity in contemporary society. This chapter deals with changing attitudes towards, death, identity and immortality more generally. The findings of the survey study SOCON (2005) will be discussed later in this chapter. The question of this chapter is: which changing perspectives towards death and religiosity are related to notions of immortality and the postself in contemporary Dutch society? This chapter is the first step in the research cycle that was presented in the introduction.

## 3.1 Historical and cultural context of death

From the early Middle Ages until about the 18th century the experience of death in Western Europe was described as accepting death ('the tame death') and attitudes towards death as "a naïve and spontaneous acceptance of destiny and nature" (Ariès, 1981, p. 29). Until about the end of the 19th century, death was a public event. The dying process was accompanied by groups of visitors and when physical death occurred, the community was informed by the sound of the church bells ringing, the view of closed curtains in the home of the deceased or other signs outside the front door. Everybody was able to visit and pay respects to the dying person or the dead body. Death was a social event in which not only the closest family took part but also the whole community. This openness towards death changed in the second half of the 19th century and death became increasingly more private (Franke, 1984). The growing consciousness of health implications such as a hygienic environment and the developing medicine in the 18th century did not recommend having so many people gathered around the deathbed.

Societal and medical progresses in the 19th and 20th centuries lead to changes around death and dying in Western Europe. We can speak of a physical and symbolic separation between the living and the dead due to increasing the hygiene and medical awareness (Howarth, 1996, p. 14f.). The funeral undertaker has, in the course of the 20th century, come to play a central role in taking care of the dead body and the practices around the funeral (Howarth, 1996; Kok, 2005). In this sense the growing funeral industry contributed to the professionalization and commercialization of death and dying.

Patricia Jalland (2006) describes how the changes in dealings with death in Australia were caused by two major phenomena: war and medicine. The experiences of WWII lead to a form of silent grief together with the medicalization of death resulting in a 'denial of death'. The 'denial of death' (Becker, 1973) is often used when describing Western attitudes towards death and dying and basically states that death is not part of people's

everyday lives anymore, but takes place in the hospital and behind closed doors. German sociologist Nobert Elias (2002/ 1982) describes in his book *Über die Einsamkeit der Sterbenden in unseren Tagen* that dying in contemporary (Western) society does not begin with the physical deterioration caused by illness or old age, but with the social dying of those who are not actively participating in society (anymore). Moreover, he argues that death is not so much the problem, but rather the knowledge of death. In the course of the development of civilization, death and dying have been moved behind closed doors. Funeral directors quickly take the dead body away and the next of kin do not always see the dead body. Death has moved away from the everyday life of the house to the hospital or nursing home. The introduction of the notion of the 'pornography of death' in Western societies in the first half of the 20th century by Geoffrey Gorer lead to an increasing interest in death studies from within the social sciences (Gorer, 1955). With this term, Gorer points towards restricted and closed views on death, similar to views on sexuality. Death as well as sex was 'banned' out of people's lives. One should not talk about death or sexuality.

Together with the medical developments, the psychological attitudes towards death also changed. The process of mourning is not supposed to take too long and should not be expressed too much. The bereaved should move on with their lives. The attitudes towards death in modern society are referred to as 'invisible death' (Ariès, 1981). Some speak of 'death denial' (Becker, 1973) while others prefer the term 'death avoidance' (May, 1982) or "die 'Verdrängung' des Todes" in a psychological and social sense (Elias, 2002/ 1982, p. 16ff.). Furthermore the decline in church membership after WWII and the influence of the church were related to a decrease in religious rituals of death and dying, which lead to more uncertainty or even rejection of religious concepts of an afterlife (Wouters, 2002). At the beginning of the 21st century, we see a growing consciousness and awareness of the subject of death in Western countries from different corners of society. Medical discussions around euthanasia, palliative care or terminal sedation are continuing and political debates on the 'war on terror' have become part of our global reality.

The literature on the subject of denial of death continued until the mid 1980s (Zimmermann & Rodin, 2004). In the course of the 1980s the confrontation with death was growing, such as the increasing awareness of AIDS, which caused death to especially younger populations. Earlier, during the 1960s and 1970s, the hospice movement and the development of palliative care moved from a clinical perspective on death towards a more 'human' view. The first hospice in the UK was founded in 1967. In the Netherlands the first hospice opened its doors in 1988, in Nieuwkoop. One of the consequences of

this more holistic approach towards the patient was that more attention was paid towards the psychological, social and spiritual issues around death and dying. The patient should be treated, as a person with physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs.

In the course of the last century the development of medical technologies strongly influenced the way we perceive the beginnings and endings of life (Lizza, 2009). Discussions around abortion, artificial insemination, genetic manipulation, euthanasia, brain death, organ transplantation, assisted suicide and progressing illnesses such as dementia and Alzheimer have changed public opinion on the borders between life and death. After how many weeks of pregnancy can we speak of a person? How much is a life worth when the life expectancy is less than three months and against which costs? Some say that the revolution in neuroscience and biotechnology has moved us into the 'post human' century (Fukuyama, 2002). Bioethical discussions are penetrating increasingly into the decision-making processes in health care, law making and those dealing directly with the borders of life and death. What now constitutes the 'death-criterion'? What components of a person's former life must be passed so that we can speak of death? What components of a person must be still present in order to speak of a life?

In Western societies we experienced the 'death denial' (Ariès, 1981) and the 'terror of death' (Becker, 1973) in the last century. But what about today: the beginning of the 21st century? We have passed the first decade of the new millennium already, but have we passed the issues around death? Not at all. The discussions are more intense than ever. The increasing visibility of opinions around the borders of life and death means that they occupy a central place in the new century. The information exchange between politicians, professionals, scientists and concerned persons is more prominent than ever. This is also due to the fact that today information exchange is much easier than it was ten years ago. The 'ordinary' person is more involved in discussing what is right and wrong on Internet blogs, forums, YouTube and Twitter. The Netherlands has the new Internet network: '*Uitvaart TV*' (Funeral TV), where the public can watch funerals of famous and not so famous people online. The most intimate moments are shown, such as personal speeches, the last goodbye at the grave and survivors who are breaking out in tears. Popular TV shows such as 'Over my dead body' or 'What I wanted to tell you' show terminal patients, especially of young age, in their last phase of life. The TV show 'The big donor show' from the Dutch channel BNN, in which a terminally ill women would give her kidney away to one of the contestants, received huge media attention throughout the world, even before it has been aired. Although at the end of the show it was revealed that it was all a hoax,

the makers won an Emmy, the most important television award in the United States, for bringing the subject of organ donation to public attention.

Hubert Knoblauch (2009) describes dealing with death in media and public sphere as one distinguished example of popular religiosity. The subject of near-death experiences reaches many listeners and is fascinating the masses through the many books on the topic. Knoblauch furthermore explains that the taboo on death until about the 1970s in Western societies is changing as we experience the 'popular death' in television and the media (p. 255). One example from the Netherlands is the hit book by Pim van Lommel *Endless consciousness*, which was a bestseller. Other examples include the many famous mediums that are doing their work on TV, not only connecting with the spirits of the deceased, but at the same time also with babies and animals.

Death seems to be increasingly present in public debate, not even to mention in pop culture. Each episode of TV series such as 'Six Feet Under', 'Bones' or 'Cold Case' are centered on dead bodies. In 'Dexter', we sympathize with a serial killer who develops his own personal killing ritual. But is this over-presence of discussing death and dying just 'hot smoke' around the fire, or have people's attitudes actually changed? Has the taboo on death passed, or is it just hidden deep in the multimedia society? When people are actually dealing with death, are they still that open and fascinated? Actual death is more difficult than media death. People who are in mourning are not necessarily represented by the topics in the media. Collective symbols of mourning miss the subtle fact that mourning cannot always be identified by the outside world. There is no behavioral 'guidance' on how to deal with death and dying.

British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that in (post)modern societies we can observe processes of sequestration. The term refers to a growing gap between the real life experiences around death, violence, illness, criminality or sexuality and the mediated experiences that appear in the media (p. 168-69). The question whether the presence of death in the media leads to a re-introduction of death in people's everyday lives is, according to Giddens, not true, as mediated death leads to even more sequestration.

In the Netherlands, as well as in other European countries, the growing ageing population will lead to an increase in death rates in the future (van Steen & Pellenbarg, 2006). In addition, in contemporary strategies of dealing with death in the Netherlands the role of traditional religious beliefs and practices has become less prominent. However, the role of personal religiosity is not necessarily less important, as the human confrontation with death demands interpretation. The study field of religiosity and spirituality has become very complex; it is difficult now to define what is 'religious' or

'spiritual'. In the case of rituals, there can be many references to death transcendence that are expressed in different, non-churchly ways. For example, the release of balloons at funerals, wishing the deceased a 'good journey' or using words and symbols such as 'we are all part of one entity', are examples from 'secular' rituals but that can also be found in 'religious' rituals. The terms 'secular' and 'religious' are in quotations marks because there is no such thing as a strictly secular or strictly religious death ritual anymore. Or better yet, the terms 'secular' and 'religious' can be considered the two extremities of a continuum of unquantifiable gradations between secular and religious rituals.

## 3.2 Social death and the loneliness of the dying

Within the last century the context of death and dying has changed rapidly in the Netherlands as well as in other Western European countries. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) discusses funeral and commemorative rites as social practises that give immortality to those who are physically dead. He writes: "Thanks to social rituals, all members were immortal, yet some were clearly more immortal than others" (p. 53). Although funeral rites and commemorative practices make the dead socially alive, they do not guarantee social immortality. Some are remembered more than others, and this depends on the quality and quantity of significant relationships and the impact that one has on others. Furthermore, Bauman argues that funeral rites separate biological death from social death, which underlines the fuzzy borders between life and death. Death is a status transition, as discussed earlier, which has to be studied as a process, rather than as an event (Hertz, 1960). Immortality is also not a consistent state, but rather present and absent in certain contexts. Rituals create such contexts of the presence of the dead. For example, social immortality can be more present at certain days of the year (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries of deaths), or when mourners are confronted with another death in their environment memories of the deceased can be triggered (De Jong & Kreting, 2008). Sometimes the bereaved let go of relationships with the deceased when they become involved in new relationships in their lives. There is thus a difference between social and physical death. The concept of social death has often been discussed in the literature in relation to cultural developments in Western societies (Elias, 2002/ 1982, Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999). This term basically refers to the idea the a person can be socially dead before being physically dead through being absent from the social community. People often speak of social death in the case of older people or chronically ill. In the process of dying we can also identify factors

that reveal the social death of the dying (Wojtkowiak, 2009b).

In the previous sections, attitudes towards death have been discussed, but there are also important developments in the context of dying that influence how people conceptualize death. Three main developments are described here: (1) the place and period of dying, (2) the social embeddedness of the dying and (3) the meaning making of dying and especially the role of religiosity.

First of all, dying at home was very common until the beginning of the 20th century in Western Europe. With increasing medicalization and professionalization dying in a hospital became highly popular (Ariès, 1981). Nowadays, dying at home has re-gained popularity in the Netherlands. This is partly influenced by the improvements in palliative care since the 1980s, which is defined as treatment of a patient without the prospect of healing, and focuses on treating the symptoms and keeping the life quality as high as possible (WHO, 2009). The term 'palliative' differs from the term 'terminal' in the sense that the second refers to a life expectancy of less than three to six months. Next to the hospice movement, there was a growth in the national network for homecare for the terminally ill in the Netherlands from the 1970s onwards. The further development of terminal home care with professionals and volunteers brought important changes to the context of dying in the Netherlands. Today, one in three people with a chronic disease dies at home in the Netherlands (NIVEL, 2007). The wish to die at home is strongly represented in the Dutch population: from a national survey was revealed that 73 % has the preference of dying at home instead of the hospital (IVA, 2005). Meanwhile, around 7000 volunteers take care of almost 6000 terminal patients each year (Bart & van der Eijnden-van Raaij, 2009). This means that about 26 % of patients who die at home has help from volunteers in the last phase.

On the one hand, dying at home is becoming prominent in the Netherlands again; on the other, the professionalization around the care of the patient is still at a high level. With the increasing medical possibilities in the Netherlands, as in other Western European countries, the dying process has become a long trajectory (Enck, 2003). The 'dying act' has become the 'dying process' (Enck, 2003, p. 457) and can take between three to six months in case of a terminal diagnosis or even years in the case of incurable illness.

Other problematic subjects accompany the public debate on euthanasia on choices in the process of dying: terminal dehydration and assisted suicide (Pool, 2004). The Dutch term '*versterving*' (terminal dehydration) received a lot of attention in the media in 1997 after the curious case of the almost death of a patient in a nursing home. The family sued the nursing staff for attempted

murder because they 'denied' food and nutrition to the patient, who suffered from dementia. Most physicians, however, claim that reducing and finally denying food and water to the patient in the dying process is a natural reaction. The fact that *versterving* is originally a religious term addressing ritual fasting among monks makes this discussion even more difficult. The term suggests that terminal starvation is a consciously or even religiously chosen behaviour, although from a physical perspective, *versterving* is part of the natural dying process.

A second development around the dying process in the Netherlands is the decreased presence of the social environment around the dying person. Accompanying the dying is more fragmented. Before developments of urbanization and mobilization the dying process was framed within the family and the community, including neighbours, the church and the village (Ariès, 2003; Eijnatten & Lieburg, 2006). In contemporary Dutch society, families and friends live spread over the country and do not always manage to be there every day to take care of the dying. Traditionally, in the Catholic Church, the priest visited the dying for a last confession, prayer or sanctification of the body (Eijnatten & Lieburg, 2006). Most of the time, a last will and testament was also put together with the help of the priest (Eijnatten & Lieburg, 2006, p. 203). The Catholic tradition knows many rituals of death and dying that are related to ideas of immortality that help the soul to find its way towards heaven and to finally escape purgatory. In the Protestant tradition, religious leaders seemed to be less involved, as they could not influence the destination of the deceased after death (Eijnatten & Lieburg, 2006). More generally, religious rituals and practices marked the transformation from life to death. Nowadays, in the Netherlands, the role of church officials has become less important, which leads us to the third major change in the process of dying.

In line with processes of secularisation, religion is not necessarily a part of people's lives and therefore not always part of the dying process. There are no common rituals, practises or behaviours the dying and their families can rely on. There is no bigger frame to place the dying trajectory into, which consequentially implies that making meaning of death is based on personal, private beliefs. These beliefs imply questions of an afterlife and the existence of a higher power, but also in general to give meaning to death and dying. Questions about 'what will happen to me after I die?' include thinking about one's own concepts of immortality and posthumous reputation.

Interestingly, in the case of migrants from Islamic countries in the Netherlands, specifically from Turkey and Morocco, we see a different situation. The changes around dying described above are in these contexts

not that obvious. In the Moroccan and Turkish communities, taking care of the dying and later the dead body is of great importance and even a duty that is also embedded in the Islamic tradition (Brahami, 2007). From a religious viewpoint prayer and the care of the dying for 24 hours ritualize the dying process. Interestingly, families from a Moroccan or Turkish cultural background seldom choose to die at home. In a report on terminal home care under migrants from a Moroccan or Turkish origin, it was shown that families are not always informed about the possibilities to receive professional and voluntary terminal home care (De Graaff, Van Hasselt & Francke, 2005). Furthermore, those families who did participate in the study revealed that most family members were positively surprised by the warmth and friendliness of the professionals that visited them at home. (None of the families involved volunteers in the task of taking care of the dying.) Difficulties that are identified here are the language barriers between the nursing staff and the dying and the feeling that one is not properly taking care of the dying when professionals are involved in the home. In the hospital it seems more a medical necessity for the dying to be taken care of by professionals and therefore it is interpreted less as a choice. These complex interpretations show how complicated cultural differences are in healthcare and the care of the dying.

In general, when describing the dying process in the Netherlands for non-migrants, dying at home is the ideal situation and one third manages to do so. Nevertheless, family and friends do not always constantly surround the dying and those who are religiously unaffiliated do not have a ritual repertoire to make use of. Dying at home is "far from idyllic" (Kastenbaum, 2000, p. 267), as families have to deal emotionally with the dying progress by themselves. "The loss of a unique and valued relationship is one thing. Watching a person die is something else" (Kastenbaum, 2000, p. 267). In light of the changing perspectives of death and dying, how do people give meaning to death nowadays?


## 3.3 Personal, transcendent or denial of the meaning of death?

Death asks for meaning, which traditionally was the preserve of traditional religiosity. But in contemporary secular society, the role of traditional religiosity and the social community has become less involved in the meaning making of death and dying. Meaning making can be defined as a process that has beneficial results on attitudes towards life and the search for an explanation for loss (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksma & Larson, 1998). Traditional

religiosity has been the most obvious way of giving meaning to death, as death is understood as a passage to another life within a given belief system. However, there are variations as to how different religious traditions treat death and how meaning is defined. Secular people are expected to have their personal forms of meaning making instead of building on the meaning that is provided by traditional religiosity.

Research on funeral practices in the Netherlands has shown that Catholic funerals are strongly personalized, leaving space for the bereaved to express their personal relationship with the deceased (Quartier, 2007; Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, 2010). Protestant approaches towards death, although also influenced by individualism, are characterized more strongly by tradition (Lucke, Gilbert & Barrett, 2006). For example, Protestants view their religious identity as primarily based on their relationship with God and less on the social aspects of the religious community, which is also expressed in their various ways of dealing with death (Cohen & Hall, 2009). Moreover, Catholics seem to show more mourning concerns than Protestants, which might be due to the fact that in Catholicism a more exuberant mourning tradition is practiced (Cohen & Hall, 2009). Protestants seem to cope with stress in the case of organ transplantation more on the basis of their religious identification, and this strategy has been shown to be more effective (Tix & Frazier, 1998). Other research shows significant differences between Catholics and Protestants in coping with life's stress events in a religious way, with Protestants relying much more on religious convictions (Park, Cohen & Herb, 1990).

In a recent literature review on meaning making, it is shown that after a stressful event, such as death, people tend to adjust their global meaning system (Park, 2010). Some examples of such adjustment include changing their beliefs or goals and reconstructing their own identity, perceptions of growth or feeling that sense has been 'made'. Moreover, it is shown that the majority of people who went through a crisis situation (e.g., death, disease) asked or searched for meaning. For example, a study on complicated grief and meaning revealed that 89 % of the bereaved participants noted having actively searched for meaning (Tolstikova, Fleming & Chartier, 2005). Bereavement is often considered a psychosocial transition, suggesting that there is some sort of change after experiencing the death of a loved one (Parkes, 1971, 1988). Some authors describe different phases of bereavement from an individual and social level, which refer to the experience of different emotions, from shock to depression; but also to the change of social structures, through the participation in the funeral ritual for example (Turner, 2008/ 1969; Yorick, 1973). Therefore, the experience of death in the close environment might lead to changes in attitudes towards life and death. In general, the literature

shows that bereavement is a process in which people reflect on different aspects of life that are related to those people's meaning making systems. But how is religious affiliation related to dealing with death in terms of meaning making in the Netherlands? Does death "run the robustest of us down" (James, 1902, p. 63), or have people found alternative ways of dealing with the death of a loved one?

The following pages investigate whether religious background and the experience of the death of a loved one are related to the meaning making of life and death. The term 'meaning making' refers to a wide range of beliefs, goals, well being and satisfaction, and will for the time being be described in three dimensions: personal meaning, transcendent meaning and denial of meaning, which will be elaborated on in more detail later. How then is religious affiliation and the experience of a death of a loved one related to meaning making in the Netherlands? Is there a relation between meaning making and the experience of the death of a loved one? Previous literature has shown that there are differences between religious groups, such as Catholics and Protestants, in dealing with death (e.g., Cohen & Hall, 2009; Lucke et al., 2006, Park et al., 1990). one would therefore expect that the relations between meaning making and the experience of death are different between different religious affiliations (Catholic, Protestant and unaffiliated).

*Hypotheses*

(1) Personal meaning making, as well as denial of meaning, is expected to be highest among the religiously unaffiliated. Among religious groups, such as Catholics and Protestants, transcendent meaning making is expected to play a bigger role in the assumptions that religious participants lean more on their religious background (e.g., relation with God, belief in afterlife) when defining meaning. On the basis of previous literature, Catholics are expected to find more meaning in a personal way than Protestants, as Protestants have been shown to have a stronger religious identity on the basis of their faith and tradition.

(2) The experience of the death of a loved one is expected to be related to meaning making in the following way. Among the different religious groups, the meaning making that is generally the most strongly represented will be further relied upon when a death is experienced. In other words, the unaffiliated will exhibit stronger personal meaning making or denial of meaning in relation to death, whereas Protestants and Catholics will show increased transcendent meaning. For Catholics, however, on the basis of previous literature on dealing with death, we might also expect an increase in personal meaning making, which is related to the processes of

the personalization of Catholic rituals and identity in contemporary Dutch society (Quartier, 2007; 2009b).

## 3.4 Methods, data and results

This chapter deals with the socio-cultural context of the study field in the Netherlands, which is also why the first part of this study is suplemented with data from a nationwide representative survey. This research design allows for an initial, general view on the relation between meaning making, death and religiosity. The current data are derived from a Dutch survey on socio-cultural developments in the Netherlands (SOCON, 2005), conducted by researchers from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Radboud University Nijmegen. This long-term survey consists of different questions regarding various social and cultural issues in the Netherlands and has been conducted since 1979 (Felling, 2004). The respondents ($n$ = 1212) were selected by their postal code. 47 % were male and 53 % were female. Mean age was 50 years ($SD$ = 14), with a range from 20 to 72 years. 60 % of the participants did not consider themselves as members of a church, 20 % said to be Catholic, 15 % Protestant and 5 % other.[21]

A principal component analysis was conducted on the items that were used to distinguish different forms of meaning (see Appendix Table 3.5). The analysis resulted in three factors (Cronbach's alphas in parentheses). The factor names were chosen on the basis of the items that are reported in the Appendix. Originally the labels where 'inner world' and 'Christian' meaning making, but it was decided to refer to these scales as 'personal' and 'transcendent'. The items from the personal scale refer to a meaning making that is found in this world, but more strongly which has to be found in one's own self. Moreover, the notion of transcendence is relevant in and outside the churches, which is why the term transcendent meaning allows us to investigate religiosity from a broader perspective than Christian church membership.

> (1) Personal meaning of life and death (.70): 'you have to deal
> with grief and sorrow by yourself' and 'death is a natural
> resting point when life has been lived',

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21      The Muslim population is underrepresented in this sample: approximately 1.6 %. This is lower than the average in the Dutch population (about 5 %). Therefore participants describing themselves as Muslim were unfortunately not included in the analysis. The numbers of respondents from other religious affiliations, such as Buddhists, Hindus or Jews, are also too small to be included in the analysis.

(2) Transcendent meaning of life and death (.88): 'death is a passage to another life' and 'death has only meaning when you believe in God' and

(3) Denial of meaning of life and death (.74): 'death has no meaning at all' and 'after death everything is over'.

The first factor, 'personal meaning', defines meaning on the basis of personal convictions. Moreover, it refers to meaning that is found in this world, rather than in 'another' world; we might speak of an immanent approach towards meaning. 'Transcendent meaning' represents an institutionalized religious belief system (in this case Christian), by referring to God and an afterlife as sources of meaning. The fact that this factor is operationalized by a Christian worldview is restricting for the generalization of the results, but was not an influence on the analysis, as other religious groups, such as Muslims or Buddhists were also underrepresented in the sample and were not included in the current analyses. The third factor, 'denial of meaning', represents the attitudes that there is no meaning to life, death and suffering. The answers ranked from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). The grand means were personal meaning $M$ = 4.0, $SD$ = 0.6, transcendent meaning $M$ = 2.5, $SD$ = 0.7 and denial of meaning $M$ = 2.4, $SD$ = 0.7. In the section *'Innovations in Mortuary Rites'* participants were asked if they had experienced the death of a loved one. 46 % of the participants reported having lost a significant person.

## 3.5 Religious identification and meaning making

The grand means of the different variables of meaning making divided by religious affiliation in Figure 3.1 show that personal meaning making was highest in all religious groups, compared to the other two forms of meaning. This means that in general the Dutch are strongly secularized concerning meaning making, not only regarding the majority of the religiously unaffiliated who prefer a personal meaning or even denial of meaning above transcendent meaning; those who consider themselves as Catholic or Protestant also rely more on the self as source of meaning. This is partially in contrast with the first hypothesis, as Protestants were expected to rely more on a transcendent, traditional meaning. Catholics did not differ much from the religiously unaffiliated in the different dimensions of meaning making, which is in line with previous research on the personalization of Catholic funerals in the Netherlands (Quartier, 2007). Moreover, the results show that the changes in contemporary religiosity in the Netherlands are not only due to

secularization, but also, and even stronger, to individualization, also within the churches. They show that meaning making becomes more immanent also for those who are members of a church. Protestant participants varied the most from the other groups. However, they also agreed more than others with transcendent meaning and least with denial of meaning. This suggests that Protestants are most likely to find meaning in their religious faith, which also fits with previous research (Cohan & Hall, 2009; Lucke, Gilbert & Barrey, 2006; Park, Cohen & Herb, 1990; Tix & Frazier, 1998).
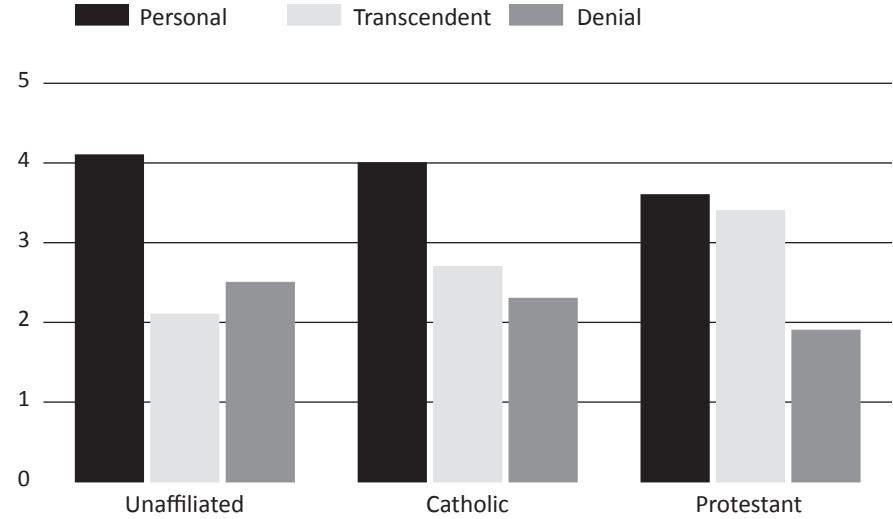


**Figure 3.1** Means on meaning making (personal, transcendent, denial of meaning) divided by religious affiliation (see Appendix Table 3.1)

The second hypothesis, namely that different religious groups have different meaning making strategies in relation to death (unaffiliated: stronger personal meaning and denial of meaning; Protestants and Catholics: stronger transcendent meaning), was only partially supported (see Figure 3.2). There was a significant interaction between the death of a loved one and religious affiliation for personal meaning only. This means that Protestants who have lost a loved one distance themselves from the individualistic approach to meaning making. We cannot say that transcendent meaning becomes more important as there was no significant effect, but it remains as important as before the experience of death. This finding suggests that Protestants, when having experienced the death of a loved one (and thus in need of meaning), look less within themselves (and would consequently turn more to their faith). Catholics and religiously unaffiliated respondents who

had experienced the death of a loved one did not differ in personal meaning, but scored slightly, but insignificantly, higher than Protestants. This finding can be explained by the fact that Protestants built their religious identity to a larger extent on their relationship with God and their faith (Cohan & Hall, 2009; Park, Cohen & Herb, 1990; Tix & Frazier, 1998). This is also reflected in Figure 3.1 where Protestants score significantly higher on transcendent meaning.
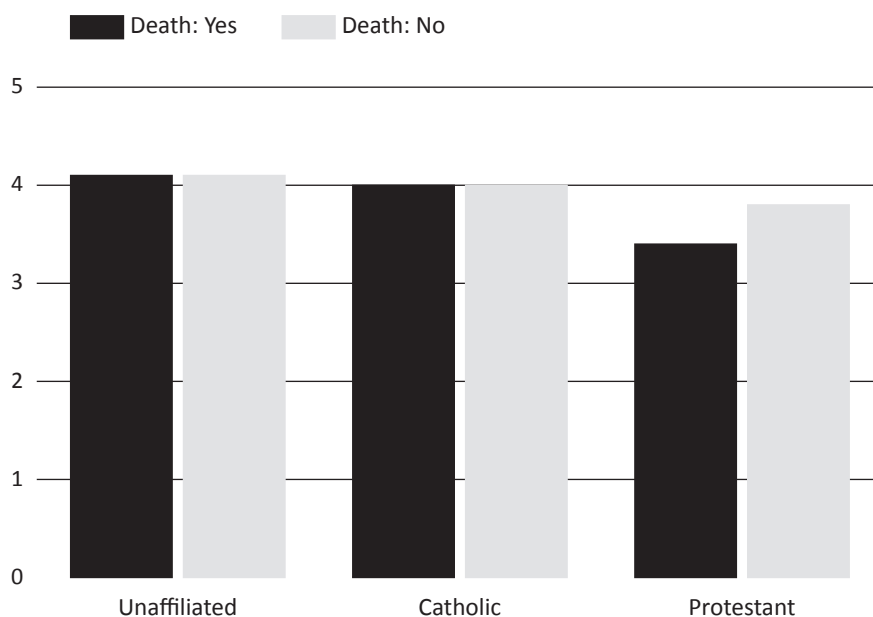


**Figure 3.2** Means on personal meaning making divided by religious affiliation and the experience of the death of loved one (see Appendix Table 3.2)

Transcendent meaning and denial of meaning were not related to the experience of death but to religious affiliation. These dimensions of meaning making are both based on a conviction that either includes the belief in an afterlife and higher power (transcendent) or an explicit disbelief in the meaning of life and death, which is perhaps why both concepts are not related to the experience of death. Personal meaning making in that sense might be described as more 'neutral' and applicable both to a religious identity as well as to a secular identity. This is underlined by the fact that personal meaning was represented the highest among all groups. Personal meaning does not presuppose a deeper conviction or clear interpretation of death, but is centered on giving individual meaning to death. This type of meaning making seems to fit quite well in an individualized society such as

the Netherlands.

It should be noted that the variable 'death of a loved one' is a broad category, because the sort and intensity of the relationship with the deceased might influence the search for meaning. Another intermediate variable, which was not included in the measures, is the time period in which the death of the loved one has occurred. Participants who have recently lost a loved one might be more active in dealing with meaning making and might be therefore more influenced by the death. Perhaps the design of this survey study was an influence on the insignificant results on meaning making, such as the fact that the question about the death of a loved one appeared at the end of the questionnaire. Furthermore, for those who have lost a loved one a long time ago, or who did not have a strong relationship with the deceased, these effects might be biased. The effects of death on meaning (Park, 2010) might be temporary effects, difficult to measure in large-scale surveys; indeed, the death of a loved one is just one of many questions. Meaning making is not a constant variable but alters between different contexts, which makes it difficult to measure. This is also why in the following chapters I will present data conducted from fieldwork with people who are dealing with death, such as those planning their own funerals (Chapter 4), the bereaved participating in burials (Chapter 5) and people who maintain private commemorative practices for deceased loved ones at home (Chapter 6).

## 3.6 Personal spirituality, the self and death

The results of the survey study have shown that when it comes to the relation between meaning making and death in the Netherlands, a personal, inner meaning is most widespread. Earlier, I discussed the declining role of institutionalized religion in the Netherlands and other Western societies, which is in line with the results of the survey regarding the strong focus on personal meaning in relation to death. However, it is still unclear to what extent personal spirituality, or even personal religiosity, is important when people are actually dealing with death. Spirituality and religiosity in contemporary Western societies has been defined as 'fuzzy fidelity' (Storm, 2009); some also speak of a 'spiritual society' (Knoblauch, 2009). When it comes to death, spirituality in general has been considered as positively involved (Daaleman & Dobbs, 2010; Thomas & Retsas, 1999; Thorson & Powell, 1990). The relation between religiosity and attitudes towards death has positive as well as negative correlations (Park & Cohen, 1993). A strong intrinsic religiosity can, on the one hand, lead to more personal growth in the mourning process, but, on the other, can also lead to more distress.

Furthermore, there seems to be evidence that people who are strong believers in an afterlife *and* people who have a strong disbelief in an afterlife, both fear of death less than people who are uncertain about their beliefs in an afterlife (Wink & Scott, 2005; Wong et al. 1994).

The concept of the self has been extensively discussed in the social sciences, humanities and philosophy, and has also been studied from several different perspectives. In psychology, the major subjects of study are the role of self-esteem, self-awareness and self-presentation in relation to different behaviors and attitudes. William James discusses, in his classic work, the notion of the 'spiritual self'; which refers to the inner world of an individual, the most private and intimate emotions and thoughts (James, 1891).

In the second half of the 20th century the focus has mainly shifted to the role of self-actualization in contemporary Western societies (Baumeister, 1987). The issues around identity crises have become a central in the academic world and in society as a whole (Erikson, 1968). Death by suicide has been defined as the most obvious form of self-destructive behavior and has been considered as a flight from self-awareness (Baumeister, 1990).

More recently, Ralph Hood discusses the need for the study of the 'soulful self' (Hood, 2002). Hood argues that by studying different 'parts' of the self we are moving further away from the answer as to what the purpose of our self-identity is. Moreover, he argues that the many empirical and conceptual studies on the self have neglected one another and need to be compared. For this purpose, he introduces the dimensions of the reflective self and the transcendent self. By focusing on both, we can study the self from a psychosocial perspective, which helps us reflect on others and ourselves as well as a transcendent entity that is very closely related to deep emotions of connectedness with other people, nature or a deity.

Anthony Giddens too discusses the role of self-identity in contemporary Western societies and he defines self-identity not on the basis of behavior and actions but instead by focusing on the importance of narratives and biographies (Giddens, 1991, pp. 53-54). This basically means that the stories people tell, say something about those people. Self-identity is therefore a constant evaluation of one's life. The postself is in this sense the final evaluation of one's life.

The role of personal spirituality and religiosity in relation to death is important to keep in mind in this study on the concepts of immortality and the postself. Spirituality is a broad term, but is often closely linked to the self; for example, in the following: "Spirituality [...] has been broadly interpreted as ways of discovering and understanding the self and relating to others and that which is sacred" (Daaleman & Dobbs, 2010, p. 225). Other authors

stress the importance of personal growth in spirituality, or the intrapersonal, interpersonal and/or transpersonal experiences (Thomas & Retas, 1999). A sense of symbolic immortality, the feeling of being connected with history, increases with older age and is positively correlated with purpose in life and negatively with death anxiety (Drolet, 1990; Thorson & Powell, 1990).

The role of the self is of great importance in the search for personal spirituality, personal growth and purpose in life. Some authors argue that in contemporary Western society people have moved towards a more holistic approach to death and dying (O'Gorman, 1998). This refers to a changed perspective away from a mainly clinical view of the dead and dying person and towards psychological and spiritual needs.

## 3.7 Conclusion

The results of this chapter on the cultural-historical background of the study on death and immortality in the Netherlands have shown that in contemporary society personal meaning is prominent among all religious affiliations and those who do not consider themselves as religious. Processes of individualization lead to more focus on the individual and less on a transcendent worldview. This is in line with research on beliefs in a higher power, which shows that believe a theistic God has significantly declined in the last 40 years and the belief in an undefined something has increased (Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007). The results underline the approach of this research through the conceptualization of an individual approach to immortality, referred to as the postself. Furthermore, the results show that there are still variations between religious groups on the amount of transcendent interpretations of life and death; more specifically between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants generally rely more on transcendent meaning than Catholics. These results concur with previous research on Catholic funeral rituals (Quartier, 2007).

After the experience of a death, personal meaning making decreases among Protestants. The relation between meaning making and religiosity asks for more focus on the variations between religious groups, as well as a deeper approach towards a study of the religiously unaffiliated. More generally, the results suggest that in the Netherlands there is a strong focus on personal, immanent forms of meaning making and less on transcendent meaning making. However, it remains unclear from these results to what extent personal and transcendent forms of meaning making are important when people are actually dealing with death, such as in the process of dying or in the process of bereavement.

In this chapter, socio-historic developments, related to the changing perspectives on death and dying, were discussed in order to describe the cultural context of this study on contemporary concepts of immortality in the Netherlands. The following societal developments are important to keep in mind: (1) the privatization of death in 20th century (e.g., death outside the public view), (2) the professionalization of death and dying (e.g., medicalization of death and dying, palliative care, preservation of dead body, new form of embalming, the booming business of funeral undertakers, development of products around death), (3) the individualization of death (e.g., more focus on individual wishes) and (4) the secularization of death (e.g., religion has become a private matter, beliefs have become vague, there is more diversity between religious groups).

# Chapter 4
# The postself in the process of funeralizing[22]

## Introduction

This chapter deals with the role of the postself and notions of immortality in the preparation for one's own death. When people are confronted with their own mortality, such as in the case of a terminal diagnosis, the physical decline is just one aspect that is difficult to accept. There is also a psychological and emotional challenge to the merits at the end of one's biography, which has been defined as the 'loss of the self' (Bury, 1982; Charmaz, 1983; Howarth, 2007). The physical end of existence is connected to the end of one's identity. From the perspective of identity psychology, death is more accepted when a sense of integrity is achieved (Erikson, 1980). Looking back at one's life and evaluating one's own life experiences, relationships and the fruits of one's labor as satisfactory, makes death more bearable. From a historical perspective the dying process was ritualized by churchly rituals and prayer (Nissen, 1998). The *Ars Moriendi* movement promoted a good death by, for example, taking care of the spiritual needs and testament of the dying. There are numerous liturgical forms of structuring the dying process, but many prayers focus on the departure of the soul. However, when investigating the dying process in contemporary Dutch society, many of these rituals have been found to have disappeared, leaving the deathbed a lonely place (Elias, 2002/ 1982).

In this chapter, I investigate a new form of ritualizing the preparation of one's own death. The case of study is the planning of one's own funeral before actual death, here referred to as *funeralizing*. The collected field material of self-planned funerals was analyzed by open coding into motivations, experiences and postself notions (Bernard, 2006). The data consisted of

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22      This chapter is a modified version of the paper: Living through ritual in the face of death. In A. Michaels et al. Ritual dynamics and the Science of Ritual, Vol II, Body, Performance, Agency and Experience (2010), (pp. 263-276). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

interviews, funeral scenarios, mourning cards, and texts that were written or chosen for the funeral. In this chapter, I want to show that in terms of emotional and psychological experiences, the process of funeralizing is seen as a transition. Glaser and Strauss (1965) argue that the dying process is a non-scheduled status passage. This means that the dying person is in an in-between stage that lies between 'living' and 'dead', but that there is no clear status transition. In contemporary Dutch society, however, we can observe a new ritualizing stage: the planning of one's own funeral.

Planning one's own funeral is an interesting study case as it questions the theory of dying as non-scheduled status passage. The planning of the funeral, referred to here as funeralizing, shows how people respond to their death by (1) creating a sense of identity in the present by focusing on their postself for after death and (2) by creating a status transition through reflecting on one's postself. The planning of the funeral gives structure to the unstructured dying process and is a strategy of documentation of the self (identity preservation) for after death (Unruh, 1983). The question that I want to answer here is: what is the meaning of the postself in the process of dying and to what extent can we see notions of immortality therein? Moreover, I want to ask here to what extent we can speak of a status transition from 'living' to 'dead' in the process of dying. In short, is funeralizing a rite of passage?

The data used in this chapter comes from different sources. I started my fieldwork in terminal home care in December 2007. The observations, conversations and workshops and courses that I had during home care brought me closer to the medical, physical and social issues around dying in the Netherlands. The body is an important mediator in the dying process at home (Wojtkowiak, 2009b). Over a period of two years, I have accompanied 18 patients and their families in the final phase. During that period, I also met one person through an acquaintance who suggested the topic of this chapter. I followed her for more than two years in the process of funeralizing. I have also interviewed a couple on the subject of their own funeral planning, and this will be introduced later in the chapter. Moreover, I received from several bereaved people different examples of funeral planning (n = 10) that resulted in different source material, such as funeral descriptions, funeral scenarios, mourning cards and last words that were left for the funeral. The data in this chapter comes from multiple sources, which I have approached from the concept of the postself. What dimensions are visible in the process of funeralizing (social, material and individual)? Is the process of funeralizing related to constructions of literal and nonliteral immortality? To what extent is the planning of one's own funeral a way of ritualizing one's own death? I used these key questions in the analysis of the rich data. In the following

sections I will first present some general results from other research on funeral planning in the Netherlands, before moving on to the more specific discussion of several illustrative cases. I will end this chapter with a discussion of the meaning of the postself in funeralizing and the notion of immortality in the process of dying.

## 4.1 Funeralizing in the Netherlands

The case study for the present question is the planning of one's own funeral, which in the Netherlands is becoming increasingly popular. I will use the term funeralizing in order to refer to all activities that are related to the planning of one's own funeral. The term is inspired by Grimes' (2002) ritualizing, because it involves conscious decision making processes and experimenting with ritual elements, but it is specifically focused on the funeral and does not include the performative dimension that is taking place at the real funeral.

In the Dutch survey research *'Ode to the dead'* it was shown that 57 % of the participants have either written their wishes for the funeral on paper or discussed it with a friend or family member (de Jong & Kreting, 2008).[23] Among the religiously unaffiliated participants, 47 % had discussed it with a friend or family member, while 66 % of the Catholics and Protestants had discussed their wishes with a clergyman.[24] Furthermore, 69 % of the Dutch adult population already has insurance for their funeral where the most important wishes are recorded (van Keulen & Kloosterboer, 2009) (see Table 4.1). This number is stable as of 2000. Funeral insurance in the Netherlands is not only a financial security, but involves making decisions about the manner and place of body disposal, the type of coffin, music and mourning card, just to name a few from a palette of ideas. In addition, 46 % of the Dutch population has told significant others their wishes and 6 % has a filled in form for their funeral (Yarden, 2008).[25] Furthermore, a majority of the Dutch, 75 %, does not think that you can be too young to think about your funeral (with exception of participants between 18 to 25 years of age). These numbers suggest that in the Netherlands, it is very common to be aware of one's own funeral and to be ahead of time in making the most important decisions. In some cases, such as the ones discussed in this chapter, the funeral preparations are very detailed. In addition to these more rational parts of the funeral planning, the process is also an emotional journal of dealing with the illness, death and the search

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23      *n* = 514
24      7 % of the participants said that they want a ritual guide, most of them religiously unaffiliated.
25      Yarden, 2008, *n* = 901.

for one's own identity to be expressed at the funeral.

When we take a look at the specific wishes around the funeral we see, in Table 4.1, that music, the approval of laughter at the funeral and the atmosphere at the ceremony are important for those who have wishes regarding their funeral. Interestingly, of those who choose for burial, 65 % has already chosen the place to be buried. Moreover, 90 % of people who have chosen their means of body disposal (burial, cremation or donation to science) has also told that to their loved ones. These statistics show that in the Netherlands, some topics such as the means of body disposal or the place of burial are things that people are taking care of ahead of time.

**Table 4.1** Choices around own funeral based on TNS NIPO research by Keulen & Kloosterboer, 2009[1]

|  | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Funeral insurance | 69 |
| Told family/ friend (those who know what kind of body disposal) | 90 |
| Does not consider themselves too young to think about funeral | 75 |
| Insurance in order not to be burden for family | 45 |
| People who have wishes around funeral[2] | 33 |
| Music[2] | 76 |
| Ceremony[2] | 45 |
| Food and drinks[2] | 30 |
| General atmosphere[2] | 29 |
| Laughter is ok[2] | 53 |

*Note.* [1] $n$ = 900, [2]data from 2006, $n$ = 826

Next to the above discussed individual factors that are related to contemporary funeralizing in the Netherlands, there are also influences from the professional side. Most funeral undertakers stimulate the planning of one's own funeral by advertising on television or in newspapers and information flyers that are sent to people above 25 years of age. "Inspire our world, even after your death", one radio commercial for adding charity to the last will and testament says. Furthermore, there are many tests on the Internet and information flyers from funeral undertakers to explore what kind of 'funeral type' one is. "I want to be remembered the way I am" is a heading on the cover of such a magazine.[26] At the end of the magazine one can fill in the official form to describe the wishes for the funeral. Next to

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26      Monuta Magazine 'Eindeloos', ('Endless'), 2009.

one's name and place of residence, there are fourteen questions about what kind of person you are, how you want to be remembered and what kind of atmosphere you want for the funeral. The funeral industry clearly focuses on people documenting their postselves before death. The question is, what is the meaning of these postself activities for those preparing their own funeral? The magazine also tells us that 90 % of the Dutch wants to be remembered.[27] This impressive number suggests that almost everybody is concerned about his or her postself, but unfortunately it is not specified in this magazine in which context this question was asked and what the sample was. We need to find out what the meaning of funeralizing, and specifically the role of the postself, in these activities is. To what extent are people constructing a sense of immortality by planning their own funeral?

## 4.2 Preparing for one's own death

After having discussed these more general developments in the Dutch funeral culture around the planning of one's own funeral, I want to focus more deeply on one case in order to illustrate the process of funeralizing more in detail. The meaning of the postself and notions of immortality in the process of dying is investigated in the interviews and conversations that I had with Els and her letter of funeral preparation that was kindly given to me. I accompanied her for more than two years, which allowed me to get to know her on a personal level. Her funeral letter begins as follows:

> I will not succeed in writing something sensible about my
> last trip, so therefore I have made this effort. I would prefer
> to be able to decide things together with you [daughter], but
> I understand that this would be a little bit too much. You are
> right that I have to make clear what I want without taking
> everybody into consideration. Still, this is what fits me; I
> would like to make it right for everybody.

The funeral preparation begins by addressing the most important person in her life, her daughter. She also reflects on her own identity, by saying that this is what is typical for her, trying to make it right for everybody. One time we met, we listened to the CD that she put together for her funeral. "The fun is to listen to it now, later I won't have the chance to do it", she says laughing. She designed her own mourning card, which has a symbolic layer. The text says "bye bye life", which is inspired by the movie 'All That Jazz'. She has

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27    NS NIPO funeral research 2008. In. Monuta Magazine 'Eindeloos', ('Endless'), 2009.

chosen the text in order to express her own life experiences of letting go and saying goodbye to loved ones. In her 70s, the most important moments of bidding farewell were her divorce and the suicide of her son a few years ago. The chronic illness and ultimate death of her mother was her first approach in ritualizing a funeral. She, for example, also designed the mourning card for her mother's funeral. She also reflects on these past experiences in her own funeral planning:

> It would be nice if you could, together with the lady from
> the funeral home, fuss over me a little bit [refers to making
> ready for the funeral] perhaps with my music. This did
> me good with my mother then. It might be good for you if
> you brought someone who you trust, such as one of your
> friends. Most importantly, I especially don't want you to be
> burdened.

For Els the funeral planning is important in order to not be a burden for her daughter and to help her with the choices that have to be made. She wants to give her some guidance for the funeral, without removing the space for her own input. Therefore, she mentions several times in her very detailed funeral descriptions that her daughter can make her own choices. The process of funeralizing thus has an important social dimensions, in the sense that relationships from the past are evaluated and integrated into the funeral and, moreover, that the future mourners are kept in mind in the funeral planning. In this way, the dying person is creating a social postself for the funeral.

## 4.3 Creating a sense of individual immortality

Another important topic in the study on funeral preparations is the question on notions of immortality. When people are dealing with how they want to be represented after death, to what extent are people referring to immortality? Moreover, to what extent do people mention nonliteral and literal notions of immortality? One of the main messages that Els wants to leave behind is her life motto: 'to know is to understand and to understand is to forgive'. She has clear ideas on the social image that she wants to leave behind for after death (nonliteral immortality). However, when it comes to literal immortality, or more concretely the question of an afterlife, she explained to me that she does not believe in the traditional notion of a soul or the resurrection of the body. She has distanced herself from the Catholic tradition in the sense that

she does not believe in these religious concepts anymore.

I have asked her at several occasions if and what she believes happens after death, but she would not give me a clear answer, something that I have experienced more than once during my fieldwork. At some point she said that she rather believes in some sort of energy that will be integrated as a whole after death, but that even this is not a clear-cut concept for her. This approach towards an idea of an afterlife can be labeled as a holistic perspective, which is often found in new religious and spiritual movements. More generally, conceptions of immortality are not simply defined by those dealing with death and dying, especially for those who do not have a clear religious identification. From the perspective of the ritualizing process, it is perhaps also easier for those who are planning the funeral to leave space for a more precise description of immortality, than for those who have to perform it. The dying have to give meaning to death themselves, but the mourners have to perform this meaning in front of the social community. Let us take a look at the funerals that were planned by people who had a clear religious self-definition and where traditional immortality concepts were embedded in a religious context, on the one hand, *and* people who have distanced them from all religious beliefs in any form of literal immortality, on the other.[28]

Funeral preparations are also found among religious rituals. For example, Beth, a 73-year-old widow, who considered herself Catholic, planned her funeral ritual together with her priest. She discussed the prayers and songs that were to be used during the ritual. In her religious funeral ritual, personal poems and songs that were chosen by the deceased were also performed, but the references to immortality in this ritual were clearly traditionally religious referring to literal death transcendence. For example, in part of the poem that she chose it was said: "now you are reunited with them". In addition, in the traditional song 'In paradise' is it said: "may the angels guide you to paradise". Furthermore, on the death announcement it was written: "on the day of her death she was reunited with her loved ones". These immortality conceptions express the belief in a literal afterlife in which the deceased is reunited with other deceased loved ones. In funeral planning we see many personal choices that the dying person made together with the spiritual leader.

Another example is Anna, who made very clear that she does not believe in any form of afterlife and presents a more atheistic perspective on death. She grew up in a Catholic family but departed from her faith, as she writes in her last words that should be read during her funeral. She used to believe in God as a higher power, but during an incurable illness she reflected on and read a

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28      I am grateful to Ricky de Jong for providing me with this ritual material.

lot about death and eventually came to the following conclusion:

> During my illness and through thinking and reading about
> death, I came to the conclusion that DEAD is DEAD for me.
> When I am dead, it is over for me. Dying is for me over and
> out, it is a real goodbye from my life and my whole existence.

She furthermore explained that the more she thought about being gone forever, the more she felt peaceful and could fall asleep at night. "Death is a natural event for me", Anna writes in her last words. Interestingly the other speeches that were performed during her funeral ceremony also did not refer to any notions of immortality. Even the funeral director, who normally gives a more general speech about death and the meaning of it, wrote a speech that said "we do not know if there is an afterlife" and "we cannot prove it, so we should not even try to". But at the end of the speech the funeral director also said that we couldn't prove that there is no afterlife and that, therefore, we do not know. The funeral generally represented the message of the deceased that there is no afterlife. Her views on immortality were represented, leaving room for non-literal immorality left in a symbolic legacy and rejecting literal immortality in the various speeches. However, the funeral director did leave space for the survivors to frame the death according to their own beliefs.

A good friend of Anna also prepared her funeral with much care. She also distanced herself from the Catholic tradition, but she did not see death as clear-cut as Anna. She used a story from the popular Dutch storyteller Toon Tellegen in her funeral to answer the question of immortality. The story is called 'Do you think that we will ever end?' It deals with a squirrel and an ant that talk about 'endings'; they discuss all the things in life that come to an end. In closing, however, the squirrel says that finally he doubts that they will end. This is a more open interpretation of what happens after death. It is not clear if she truly believed that death is not the end, but the chosen story leaves the mourners with a positive feeling about it. For her funeral she wrote: "I think and not more, I am there, perhaps. Goodbye, see you, perhaps." Also this part of her 'goodbye poem' leaves room for interpretation of a possible belief in literal immortality. She opens the discussion over whether she will be there after death. The 'perhaps' highlights that she does not know for sure.

The following poem was written by a terminal patient for her funeral and connects literal and nonliteral notions of immortality. She writes of how she will be in the wind after her ashes will be spread in nature:

> My time is up, I have to go [...] But I want to ask one last

thing, do not bury me whole, but spread the ashes [...] And if
you ever long for me, walk in the wind and I will caress your
cheeks.

The question 'what will happen after I die?' is not easy to answer for people
who do not identify with religious concepts of immortality. Moreover, the
funeral ceremony of Anna took place in a church and she was buried in a
Roman-Catholic cemetery out of respect to her parents. A funeral in a church
in the Netherlands does not necessarily mean that one can expect also
traditional, literal after life beliefs in the ceremony.

The religious or spiritual identification in Els' case is difficult to define.
Sometimes she describes things, such as the afterlife, as being comparable
to the light of the sun, but at other times she is not that sure anymore. This
illustrates how complex the subject of immortality is, even for those dealing
very consciously with their own death. Traditionally, "religion should
come to our rescue" (James, 1902, p. 63), but in contemporary Dutch society
conceptions of immortality are more complex and sometimes even unclear.
Moreover from the case of Anna, we have seen that facing death can also lead
to the conviction that death is the end and that this atheistic view on death
can also give comfort and a positive feeling in this last phase.

Death demands meaning and rituals are the tools used for finding that
meaning (Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909; Hertz, 1960: 1907; Turner, 2008/ 1969). The
use of ritual language, by preparing one's own funeral, can give meaning
to this uncertain 'last journey' that is for many people in the Netherlands
undefined. Furthermore, ritual provides a place and a language for emotions
that are difficult to verbalize. In the case of dying, the inevitable death can
result in loneliness of the dying and incomprehension by others (Elias, 2002/
1982). The use of ritualizing in the process of dying, gives temporal coherence
to our finite existence. This means that preparing one's own funeral can help
finish the life project, at least symbolically. Funeral preparation is the final
act of taking care of the loved ones and expressing one's identity.


## 4.4 Transitions in the process of funeralizing

Els started to plan her funeral immediately after she received the diagnosis
'incurable'. She started her 'death project', as she refers to it, in order to be
prepared. "Then you are ready, and you can go back to the regularities of
everyday life" she told me during one of our first conversations. She made
clear to me that after having prepared everything for the funeral, she felt
ready for death and no longer afraid. Her description of the process of funeral

arrangements suggests that some sort of transition has taken place in her mind.

Another example illustrates the psychological processes related to preparing one's own funeral. A woman in her 60s wrote her funeral description as follows:

> It is still a strange sensation to read about myself, when it is said that I will not be there anymore. Such as 'we will lay her down in a cherry wood veneered coffin, with wooden handles and unbleached cotton on the inside (type X).' Apparently there are also other types. [...] I find that I should leave space for the survivors to interpret my last journey.

She makes clear that it is a strange feeling to read about her when being dead. She even quotes from the formal funeral description of the funeral undertaker. Although her funeral is already prepared in very much detail, such as the 'cherry wood coffin', she makes clear that she wants to leave room for the survivors' own involvement. Her reflection on her preparation of the funeral describes the sensation of 'being dead'. It feels as if she is partly already in the world of the dead.

*"Will you lie in my grave with me?"*
In the previous cases the role of social relations in dealing with one's own funeral preparation was accentuated. Those who are planning their own funeral are taking care of the arrangements so that their loved ones are not obliged to carry out these tasks. Next to these more practical implications, it is also a way of leaving a symbolic legacy for after death. It is an emotional transition when imagining one's own death. For those who are actually dealing with disease, the image of their own death is very much a reality. However, people who are not terminally ill also take care of their funeral arrangements. What's more, we can also observe emotional transition that can be experienced together with a significant other.

Dick and Henny have been together for a couple of years. Both have been married before, but they found one another through their shared passion for tarots. Last year Dick decided to take care of his funeral arrangements on the basis of rational, financial considerations. He wanted to spend his money for his own burial, so that the money would be well invested and that his children did not have to take care of everything when he is finally gone. They have been living together for a while, but it was not until one particular Friday evening that Dick asked the question that defined their future together. He

asked: "will you lie in my grave with me?" Henny's answer was yes and from that moment on they started to plan their burials together. They picked a grave, a stone and the text, which is already written on the gravestone at the cemetery. But with this question, the decision was also made to unify as registered partners. The question was also the proposal to spend their future together as a couple.

The most intimate and special moment of their funeral preparation was when they had to decide which text should appear on the gravestone. Dick explains:

> The grave is already finished; only the end-date needs to be put on it. We have already made the text for the stone and that was really special. We felt as if we were timeless, you are taking care of something after your own death. [...] So we came up with the text that in our sense is really 'us' and that is really intimate.

Part of the text for the stone is: "Partners in love. Conscious and pure love". This text refers to their love for each other and their love for tarots. Henny adds to Dick's description:

> But it was also really strange. Just as he says, we felt out of time. And it ended after the text was finished. For example when we were trying on the shroud (*lijkwade*) in which we want to be buried, we did not have this strange feeling. But then the body is still there. When you are looking at your own grave, this is a strange sensation.

Henny and Dick describe this feeling of timelessness as positive and strange. Now they can remember the feeling, but they have not felt it again since the text for the gravestone was finished. Moreover, they have later also used this text in their partnership ceremony.

This story shows how two transitions have taken place within the preparations of the funeral. They have both experienced the feeling of timelessness or living out of time and they are unified as registered partners within the planning of the funeral. The ritual preparations evoked a feeling of what was earlier referred to as self-transcendence (Joas, 2008).

A sense of self-transcendence is achieved when loosing the boundaries of one's own self in relation to love and death. The story of Dick and Henny shows how this feeling of timelessness has unified them in their love and at the same

time prepared them for their death. These notions of self-transcendence and transition suggests that we can speak here of a double rite of passage (Peelen, 2009). Death and the union of two people were experienced in the same time and by the use of the same ritual repertoire.

In the data presented above we have seen different motivations for planning one's own funeral, which are summarized in Table 4.2. The planning of one's own funeral has different motivations that involve thoughts such as not wanting to be a burden for others, wanting to take care of the finances and preparing for death in the case of a terminal disease. Moreover, in the cases described above we have seen different dimensions of the postself that are part of the funeral planning, such as the writing of a last will and testament or codicil where the material belongings are divided, the constant reflection on what others would think about the chosen ritual elements and the individual wishes and preferences (e.g., a special song for the funeral, a favorite poem). The dimensions of the postself become very prominent during the actual planning. The ritual elements that are chosen are constantly evaluated by one's own postself. In the process of funeralizing there is room for individual, social and material dimensions. Moreover, the interpretations of the interviewees, presented in the table, reveal how people experience the planning of their own death ritual. The interpretations have strong emotional baggage, such as the weirdness of realizing that one will be dead when the planned actions will be performed and the feeling of transition that is taking place in preparing the funeral. The experiences are a way of evaluating the process of funeralizing (*"how do I feel now?"*) which can be important in preparing for one's own death. Next to the practical implication of the funeral planning, it becomes an emotional journey in which one's identity is evaluated and a sense of continuity can be created in combining the past biography with the present and future.

**Table 4.2** Themes emerging from collected data on funeral preparations

| Motivations |
| --- |
| Practical and financial |
| Social (not being burden for others) |
| Individual (feeling prepared to die) |
| Postself |
| Material (testament) |
| Social (taking others into account of planning) |
| Individual (wishes, preferences, past experiences) |
| Experiences |
| Strange sensation of being death |
| Feeling of timelessness |
| Transition (returing back to everyday life, unification with partner) |

Moreover, the planning of your own funeral asks for a deeper understanding of the ritual dimensions of separation, transition and integration in rituals (Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909; Sörries, 2005). Glaser and Strauss (1965) define the dying process as a "non-scheduled status passage" (p.48), meaning that in the state of dying the person is not dead yet and not fully alive. The dying are in a liminal space, which in terms of ritual theory is referred to as 'liminality' (Turner, 2008/ 1969). But when the dying, or even the living, are already dealing with their funeral it seems that they are already transitioning themselves from living to dead. This is also shown in the descriptions of feelings of timelessness and the idea of having returned to everyday life after the funeralizing was finished. The analysis suggests that there is a psychological transition from 'living' to 'dead'. Those who are funeralizing their own death identify with 'being dead' and think about 'being dead' when planning the funeral ritual. This transition is sometimes shared by the social environment, when the dying person is in a physically bad condition and the illness is progressing (Wojtkowiak, 2010; 2009b); but in other cases, such as with the daughter of Els, the social environment is not necessarily included in this process.

When the deceased planned the funeral, survivors have to integrate these wishes in the performance of the funeral, which gives the ritual another dimension. The question whether the funeral is a rite of exclusion (Bauman, 1992, p. 24) or transition and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909, p. 146) is not to be answered easily. Van Gennep (1960/ 1909) identifies the complexity of rites of passage in the last chapter of his classic work on the subject: "to demonstrate that it is really a rite of separation, transition, or incorporation

[...] would require several volumes, since almost any rite may be interpreted in several ways" (Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909, p. 166). But the dimension of incorporation becomes more central in the death rite when the funeral is performed in the 'spirit' of the deceased, or better, in view of the postself of the deceased. A typical expression during funerals is "she would have wanted it that way", which shows the interrelation between the living and the dead within one funeral. The deceased is socially prominent in the funeral ritual, without necessary referring to a literal posthumous existence.

The transition or self-transcendence in the process of funeral planning can also take on a different turn. For Els, the period between the diagnosis of incurable illness when the prospect of living was very short and now, four years later, is quiet a long time to prepare for your death. One of the last times that I spoke with her, she told me:

> It is enough already; I have spent too many years preparing
> for my own death, learning to let go. I was prepared to die,
> but I was not prepared to experience how it is to really
> become old and to deal with the difficulties of old age. But
> now I have to begin my new project: becoming old. It is
> altogether a strange experience.

She describes here the psychological process that she went through by preparing her death. She made clear that she felt ready to die, because she knew that her loved ones did not have to take care of everything. Although the illness is progressing, she now experiences the physical 'deficiencies' of old age. She even once said in a joking mood: "maybe I should throw my whole death project away, now that I am not going die." She laughed.

## 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the planning of one's own funeral is a way of constructing a postself for after death. These postself oriented actions are not isolated from the social environment. What's more, the most important motivation for people to prepare their own funeral is to take care of their loved ones, even after death. The planning of one's own funeral in the Netherlands asks for the personal wishes for the funeral and the expression of individuality (Baumeister, 1991). The funeral professionals, who know precisely what is on the market and what the opportunities are, often stimulate finding a way to express individuality through the funeral.

The discussed cases showed that the planning of the funeral is also

experienced as an emotional transition. Some refer to it as a feeling of timelessness, others distinguish the end of the ritualizing process as the feeling of returning back to everyday life. Those who are actually dealing with an incurable disease, describe how they feel ready to die after the preparation is finished. This shows that this, in the first instance, is a practical way of preparing one's own death can become a meaningful event for those preparing their own death. The concept of 'transcending' (Knoblauch, 2009) defines the outliving of the borders of the own self and feeling part of something bigger than the self. Dealing with one's funeral arrangements can lead to a feeling of transcending death. However, in the cases analyzed here, the transition in the preparation of one's own death was not interpreted as something transcendent or religious. The role of religiosity in the planning of one's own funeral is mainly found among those who are certain of an afterlife that is expressed in a religious tradition. Those who are not sure about whether they believe in an afterlife stay within the border of nonliteral immortality concepts by using symbolic representations of the self.

It was also shown in this chapter that the general use of immortality concepts varies between literal concepts of a continued existence and the belief in annihilation. For the believers, in either literal immortality or annihilation, both are comforting for those preparing their own death. It seems that it is more important how convinced people are about an afterlife concept, than what the content of their belief is (literal or nonliteral).

In the funeral descriptions of people with a clear religious identification, literal immortality concepts, such as reunion with loved ones or the concept of heaven, are represented. In the preparations of those who do not clearly believe in literal immortality, the postself has purely social and symbolic expressions. More generally, it can be concluded that funeral preparations are not related to a certain group of immortality concepts, but can be found among believers as well as nonbelievers or those who are uncertain. However, what kind of immortality is chosen to be expressed in the funeral is primarily based on the personal conviction of the person constructing the postself. This is in line with the focus discussed in Chapter 3 on personal meaning making in the Netherlands.

Finally, the discussed cases showed the importance of significant relations in the funeral planning. In that sense the social postself is also part of the preparation of one's own death. People imagine how others will remember them after their death. In all funeral arrangements there was space left for the personal wishes and interpretations of their significant loved ones. In the different postself oriented actions, such as the chosen music, texts and poems, not only individuality but also important social relationships were expressed.

# Chapter 5
# The postself in burial rituals:
# Reflecting on Robert Hertz' theory

## Introduction

This chapter deals with notions of immortality and the postself in the context of funeral rituals and, more specifically, with the attitudes, actions and transitions involved in contemporary burials. Robert Hertz (1960) discusses how the ritual treatment of the human body after death is more than a simple act of hygiene. Rather, it is a moral obligation for mourners. If the body is not disposed of correctly the mourners are haunted by the soul of the deceased. Furthermore, he states that in burial rituals there are three important transitive parts: (1) the soul or spirit, (2) the dead body and (3) the mourners, which are interrelated (Hertz, 1960; Metcalf & Huntington, 2006/ 1991). Hertz argues that what happens to the body is important for the state of the soul *and* the mourners. I want to explore this triangular relation in more detail in the context of contemporary society. In this chapter, I argue that in contemporary Dutch society the relations between the three transitive parts of Hertz's model are more nuanced than the manner in which he presents them. The relations have become more complex due to the developments of secularization, individualization and personalization of death rites and attitudes around death and dying described above.

Funerals are defined as rites of transition (Hertz, 1960), 'acts of exclusion' (Bauman, 1992, p. 24) or a combination of transition and the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead (Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909, p. 146), depending on how broad or how narrow one determines which rituals are part of the funeral. In their analysis of Durkheim's symbol theory, Janssen and Verheggen (1997) discuss the transition of the dead body in the funeral as an important moment of the creation of cultural symbolism. The living body is, according to the authors, the only symbol that refers to itself ('this and that'); but the dead body, after being ritually disposed of, becomes a symbol for the person ('this for that'). The body of the deceased is an important

representation of the deceased, and thus has a central role in creating the deceased's postself.

Douglas Davies states that "the way the deceased are disposed of thus reflects not only their previous status in life but also how they will continue to relate to the living after having left this world" (Davies, 2006, p. 228). In this quotation, Davies makes clear that the memory of the deceased is closely related to the way the deceased is disposed of. The social identity of the deceased is thus reflected in the way the final ritual is performed (e.g., the texts chosen, the participants). This means that the way the deceased is represented in the funeral not only reflects what his or her relationship to the mourners is, but also how the deceased will continue to be remembered after the funeral. In other words, the postself is of great importance for the mourners in the context of the funeral and beyond. In this chapter, I focus on contemporary burial rituals and the question of to what extent mourners and the dead who have left funeral descriptions create concepts of immortality? How is the postself related to notions of immortality in the context of burials? In this sense, this chapter focuses on the social and material postself. The dead body is a direct material representation of the deceased and has a central role in the status transition thereof.

In the Netherlands, the ritual repertoire around the funeral is growing. Funeral undertakers advertise the newest products on flyers, websites, newspapers, television commercials and the increasingly popular funeral fairs (Bolt et al., 2007). Moreover, in contemporary Dutch society, there is also increasing space for the personal involvement of the deceased, as more and more people are becoming preoccupied with planning their own funeral (Wojtkowiak, 2010). In order to investigate the thesis of this chapter, whether we can observe a softening of Hertz's argument in contemporary Dutch society, I will present two studies: (1) a representative survey study on meaning making in relation to burial rites[29] and (2) the results of a field study on actual burials. The first study focuses more on attitudes to life after death, while the second focuses more on concrete ritual actions that express notions of immortality. The first study highlights more general statements on the relation between meaning making of death, notions of immortality and burial rites. In the second study, the focus is more explicitly on the role of the postself in relation to notions of immortality in the context of different burials ($n$ = 30). The methods used in the second study are participant observation and content analysis of the ritual elements of burial, which resulted in 113 segments that refer to the postself or immortality. The segments were selected on the basis of whether they included references to

29      The same data sample as in Chapter 3.

the deceased postself or more general references towards literal or nonliteral forms of immortality, such as personal mourning cards, funeral descriptions, death announcements, poems, speeches or other texts used in the burial ritual. The combination of these two different methods allows us to take a look at more general developments in Dutch society in relation to body disposal and to analyze more deeply the construction of the memory of the deceased in actual burial rituals.

## 5.1 Hertz' theory and contemporary burial rituals

Funeral rites are centralized around saying goodbye to the deceased and the disposal of the physical body as long as there is a body to be disposed of. When there is no body to be disposed of, such as in the case of missing bodies or the growing interest in body donation to science in the Netherlands, mourners look for alternative ways to ritually say farewell to the deceased loved one and for a material substitute for the missing body (Bolt &Venbrux, 2010).

Hertz' scheme and the additional dimensions of the postself that were discussed in chapter 2 are summarized in Figure 5.1. The destination of the soul is related to the (ritual) treatment of the dead body and the mourners' state of mind is dependent on what happens to the soul. Moreover, the mourners are connected to the body as they have to dispose of it correctly so that the soul can find its final resting place. If not, the lost spirit of the deceased will haunt the mourners. Hertz argues that death "has specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective representation" (Hertz, 1960, p. 28). The study of burial rituals is a good case in approaching this collective representation of death. This is the moment when the postself of the deceased and notions of immortality are consciously chosen and presented in a semi-public setting.
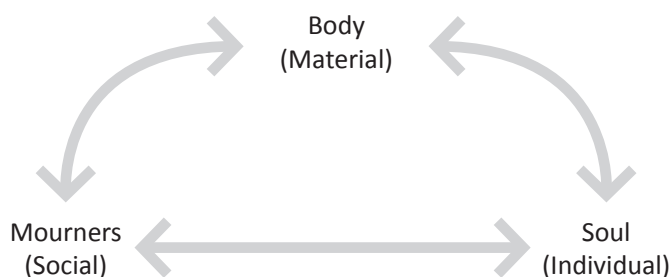


**Figure 5.1** Hertz' scheme and the dimensions of postself

The most obvious difference between Hertz' argument and the dimensions of the postself presented here lies in the spiritual dimension, here referred to as the soul, which is not included in the definition of the postself. The deceased and his or her important relationships are represented by the mourners in the funeral ceremony (social) in a personal way such as through the stories that are chosen and told during the ceremony, the text for the mourning card and death announcement, the photographs as visual images of the deceased's identity. These ritual elements where the postself of the deceased is a central subject will be remembered by the mourners and are therefore important for the mourning process. Furthermore the dead body is the direct material representation of the deceased, in contrast with the personal belongings of the deceased which are more indirect representations of the deceased, but which will become more important in the later stage of mourning (Chapter 6). More generally, the funeral is the most public event of the rituals of death studied here. It is the moment where mourners share their emotions and thoughts with the social community.

Robert Hertz's theory resulted from his study of the Dayak in Borneo. When we translate Hertz's argument into contemporary secular society, the relations between the three parts become more complex. First of all, ideas of an afterlife, such as the soul, have become more diverse or even vague (Becker & De Hart, 2006; Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007; De Jong & Kreting, 2008). To what extent is the soul still defined as a literal immortality concept referring to an eternal afterlife? To what extent do people believe in a more symbolic representation of the soul in their hearts and thoughts? As we have seen, many people are not always sure what they believe in. The soul in contemporary Dutch society has become a metaphor for different interpretations of immortality, and not necessarily a religious–transcendent one. In addition, rituals of death are found to be increasingly diverse, personalized and less traditional in terms of collective practices and beliefs in an afterlife (Graces-Foley, 2002; Graces-Foley & Holcomb, 2006; Quartier, 2007, Venbrux, Peelen & Altena, 2009; Wojtkowiak, Rutjens, & Venbrux, 2010). Personalization refers here to the increased impact of personal input on the content and performance of rituals. Families are strongly involved in the funeral preparation and performance but now the deceased too are leaving detailed funeral preparations, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In contemporary Dutch society, there are various possibilities around funerals and the ritual treatment of the body. There are countless choices in Dutch funeral culture of how to give form to this final ritual and how to dispose of the body (Venbrux, Heessels & Bolt, 2008; Venbrux, 2007). Cremation is widely popular in the Netherlands (Heessels, 2010) and body

donation to science is also increasing (Bolt et. al, 2010). The ritualizing of death and bereavement has become a booming industry in the Netherlands, represented by the increasing number of professionals and competitive funeral businesses (Bolt, Heessels, Peelen & Wojtkowiak, 2007). Making the funeral as unique and as special as possible has become a common value in ritually treating the body for disposal. The variations in rituals of death and afterlife beliefs discussed here also reflect the variations among the group of mourners, which is the third part of Hertz' model. Families or even partners who share their lives together can have very different views on immortality, somewhere in-between the literal and nonliteral.

The question of this chapter is: what is the role of the postself in ritualizing contemporary burials and in constructing immortality in the Netherlands? The focus here is specifically on burial rituals because in the case of burial, the social transition from the state of the living to the state of the dead is the most clear. The burial is the last vivid memory of the deceased; it is the moment when the mourners say farewell to their deceased loved ones. The grave is the place where the body, the direct material representation of the deceased, is disposed of and will have its final resting place.[30] The transition of death has its peak in the burial ritual.

With regard to Hertz' model of burial rites, I argue that in contemporary Dutch burial rituals we can see a softer version of the interrelation between body, soul and mourners. The model is less sharp than it is defined in the work of Hertz because, first of all, concepts of immortality are fuzzier than in traditional societies. The literal notion of the soul moving into another world is more of an exception. There are many in-between ideas, which can also change over the course of time, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Second, the body can be treated in many ritual ways (e.g., burial, cremation, donation to science); there is not one prescribed way to dispose of the body. The choices around the funeral are many and are stimulated by the funeral industry. Third, the attitudes and actions of mourners can be very different. The ties within the social community are less than in more traditional societies. Some people are convinced atheists, while others are looking for personal religiosity when dealing with death. In this chapter,

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30    An exception to this is the case of re-burial. See the work of Meike Heessels for research on that topic: e.g., Heessels, M. & Venbrux, E. (2009). Secondary burial in the Netherlands: Rites, rights and motivations. Mortality, 14(2), 119-132. Moreover, it should be noted that in the Netherlands, most graves are temporary for a period of 10 or 20 years. However, when I worked in cemeteries, it was explained to me that emptying the graves is considered when there is no more space at the cemetery (e.g., sooner in bigger cities). In addition, the graves that are emptied first are the 'general' graves where more people are buried in one grave. Moreover, there are specific laws about the procedures of emptying graves, which are constituted in the Burial and Cremation Act of 1991.

I argue that the postself and the corresponding actions and objects (e.g., expressing the identity of the deceased within ritual elements) not only help in understanding the complex relationship between the three transitive parts of Hertz's argument (body, soul and mourners), but are also closely related to the softening of these relations. This means that the focus on the deceased postself in contemporary burial rituals is used here as an instrument in defining immortality and creating ritual actions that are in line with the personal objective of immortality.

## 5.2 Contemporary body disposal in relation to meaning making in the Netherlands

According to Hertz, afterlife beliefs are related to the ritual performances around the body. In contemporary Dutch society, perspectives and beliefs around death and dying are changing (see Chapter 3). The question is whether this is related to changes in the actions around death? In the light of the re-invention of rites of passage (Grimes, 2002), a growing body of studies focuses on processes of personalization of funeral rites in Western societies, such as the Netherlands (e.g., Cook & Walter, 2005; Graces-Foley, 2006, 2002; Quartier, 2007; Venbrux, Peelen, & Altena, 2009). Numerous explanations are formulated in relation to the increased focus on personal expression in rituals such as secularization, privatization and professionalization of death in contemporary Western society (Walter, 2008). As a result of the diminished role of institutionalized religion in people's everyday lives, personal interpretations are crucial in defining the meaning of life and death (Wojtkowiak, Rutjens & Venbrux, 2010). Processes of individualization in Dutch society are related to changing perspectives on the role of religious beliefs and practices (Felling, Peters, & Scheepers, 2000). Individualization is also related to more diversity in meaning making and an increase in worldly interpretations of meaning making. Moreover, the personalization of funeral rites is accompanied by an emphasis on individuality and the significant relationships that are expressed in these rituals. In the terminology developed by Aleida Assmann, we see a focus on *fama* in contemporary rituals of death. The developments around funeral rites in the Netherlands described here are also expected to be related to personal, nonliteral concepts of immortality. Moreover, there is much more diversity in attitudes and practices around death outside of and within the churches.

From a study on afterlife beliefs and religious affiliation in the U.S. it was shown that religious background is related to variations in concepts of an afterlife. Protestants and Muslims, for example, agree more on bodily

resurrection than other religiously affiliated groups, and Buddhists and Hindus more on reincarnation (Burris & Bailey, 2009). A surprising result was that annihilation (the belief in the end of existence after death), which scored highest among convinced atheists, was conceptually opposed to bodily resurrection, but not to spiritual embodiment. This means that concepts of spiritual embodiment, such as a spiritual existence, are theoretically speaking not the opposite of annihilation. One can conclude from these results that atheists, who believe that death is the end of existence, refuse the belief in bodily resurrection more than they do the belief in a kind of spiritual existence. This might be partly explained by the fact that the soul is an immaterial concept, without a body, which leaves space for more interpretations, whereas bodily resurrection implies that the body will come back to life on Judgment Day. Moreover, the belief in a soul has strong agreement among the religiously unaffiliated (e.g., De Jong & Kreting, 2008).

In order to understand the relation between the physical, social and spiritual embodiment and contemporary burial rites, we need first to investigate more generally the attitudes towards death and religiosity in relation to different forms of body disposal. The choices for different forms of body disposal are to be studied here in relation to different forms of meaning making (burial, cremation and donation to science). Survey data is presented to give a more general, demographic overview of the relations between the body in funerals and ideas of immortality. To this end, several questions were asked in the survey study SOCON ($n$ = 1212). One of the questions was what kind of body disposal participants prefer. The possible answers were burial (34 %), cremation (34 %), body donation to science (12 %), leave the decision to survivors (16 %), not thought about it yet (6 %) and other (3 %).[31] Table 5.1 presents the highest responses in relation to religious affiliation. It can be seen from the percentages that the religiously unaffiliated mostly chose cremation (43 %), and respectively for burial (25 %), survivors (19 %) and body donation (13 %). Catholics chose more for burial (35 %), cremation (30 %), survivors (20 %) and body donation (15 %). Finally, Protestants mostly chose burial (65 %), cremation (19 %) and are less likely to decide for leaving the decision to survivors (10 %) or body donation (6 %). From these first results we can conclude that the choice for burial is mostly found among the religiously affiliated. Within the group of religiously affiliated, Protestants prefer burial more often and their attitudes are more traditional compared to those of

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31      In the following analyses the smallest percentages ('not thought about it' and 'other') were left out. Moreover, smaller groups of religiously affiliated, such as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews were also omitted from the analyses, as the small number of respondents underrepresented the population.

Catholics (see Chapter 3, but also Burris & Bailey, 2009).

**Table 5.1** Percentages (*n*) of body disposal based on religious affiliation (cross-tabs analysis)

|  | Unaffiliated | Catholic | Protestant |
|---|---|---|---|
| Burial | 25 (142) | 35 (68) | 65 (105) |
| Cremation | 43 (242) | 30 (57) | 19 (30) |
| Donation | 13 (77) | 15 (29) | 6 (9) |
| Survivors | 19 (106) | 20 (39) | 10 (17) |
| Total | 100 (567) | 100 (193) | 100 (161) |

*Note. n* = 964, The means within columns and across rows differ significantly (*p* < .001).

Further to this, the relation between burial and attitudes towards death were analyzed in more detail. The choice for burial and religious affiliation were studied in relation to different forms of meaning making: (1) personal meaning, (2) transcendent meaning and (3) denial or no meaning. Personal meaning refers to an inner world and an individual approach towards death ("you have to give meaning to death yourself"). Personal meaning represents an immanent, secular search for the meaning of death in this world. Transcendent meaning focuses on strategies of meaning making in another world and in relation to God, such as "death is the passage to another life". Finally, denial of meaning states that there is a denial of the meaning of death ("death is the end of our existence"). Religious affiliation was included here, because it is related to the different choices for body disposal (Table 5.1). The research design is presented in Figure 5.2: choice for body disposal (burial, cremation, donation, survivors) by religious affiliation (unaffiliated, Catholic, Protestant) in relation to different forms of meaning making (personal, transcendent, denial of meaning).
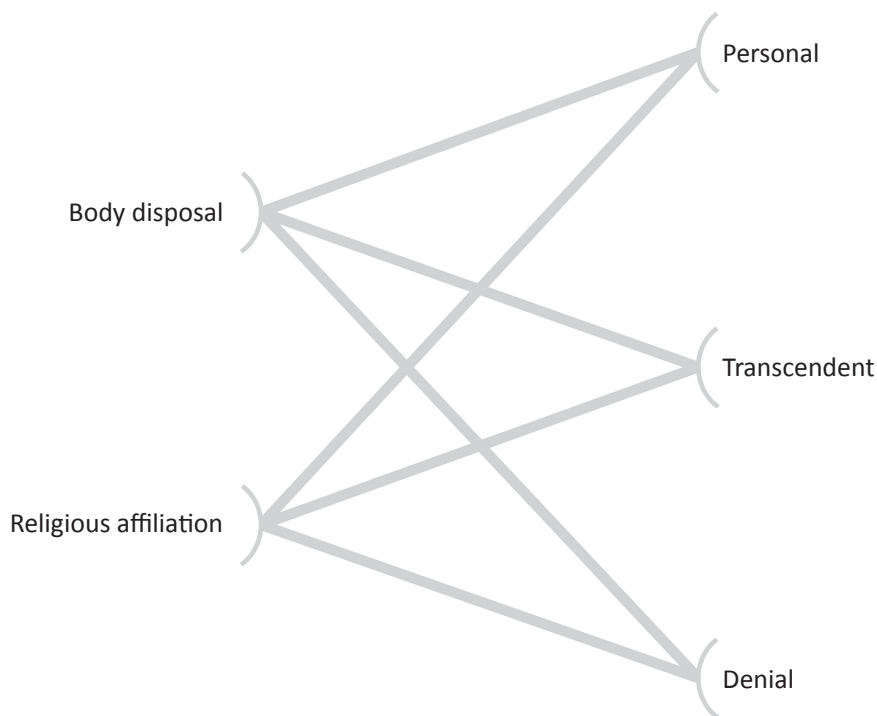
**Figure 5.2** Relations between choice for body disposal (burial, cremation, donation) and religious affiliation (Unaffiliated, Catholic, Protestant) on personal, transcendent and denial of meaning

The analysis of the survey data is presented in Figures 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 and shows that personal meaning is generally the most popular, followed by transcendent meaning and denial of meaning.[32] As we know from the earlier analysis, in Chapter 3, personal meaning generally meets with most agreement among all groups. Transcendent meaning lies somewhere in the middle and is mostly represented among Protestants. Denial of meaning is generally the least represented and is found significantly more among the religiously unaffiliated. In Figure 5.3 we can see that the religiously unaffiliated who chose for burial differ only slightly from participants who chose other forms of body disposal on the basis of personal meaning, transcendent meaning or denial of meaning. This means that people who do not consider themselves as religiously affiliated generally agree most with a personal meaning, regardless of the choice for body disposal. Among Catholics the differences between the choice for burial and other forms of

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32      For a detailed description of the analysis and all statistical effects please see the Appendix.

body disposal are more visible. Participants who chose for burial generally agree more with transcendent and less with personal meaning. The highest variation between different choices for body disposal in relation to personal meaning is found among Protestants. Transcendent interpretations, such as the belief in literal immortality and meaning in relation to God, are higher for Protestants who chose for burial than for those who chose for cremation or donation.

## Personal Meaning



**Figure 5.3** Means of two-way interaction of religious affiliation and way of body disposal on personal meaning

## Transcendent meaning



**Figure 5.4** Means of two-way interaction of religious affiliation and way of body disposal on transcendent meaning

## Denial of meaning



**Figure 5.5** Means of two-way interaction of religious affiliation and way of body disposal on denial of meaning
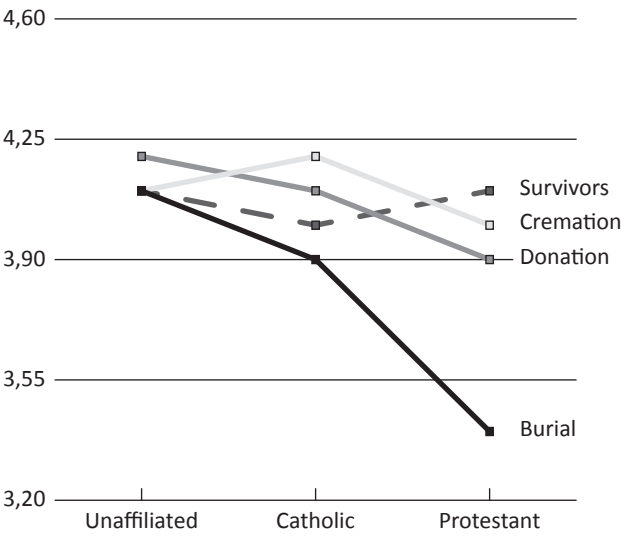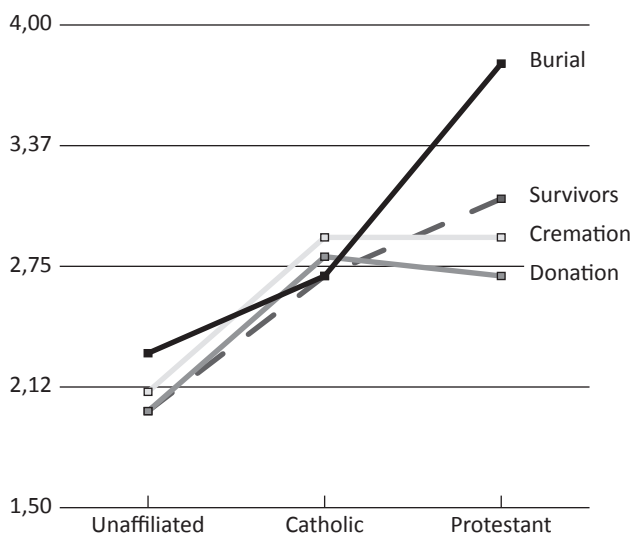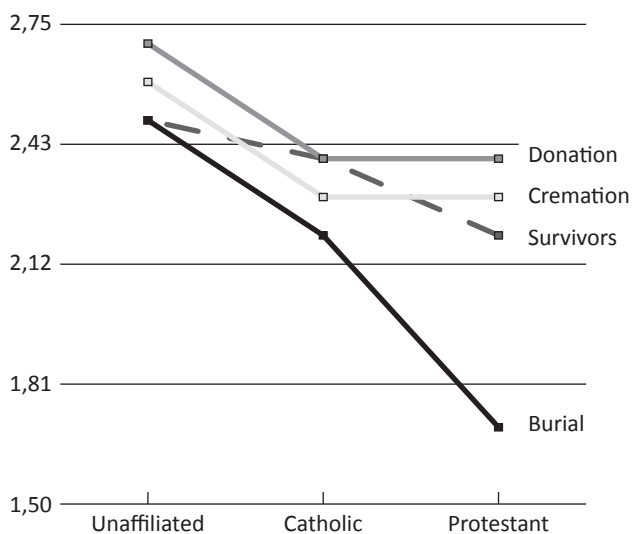
The analysis of meaning making in relation to different choices for body disposal has shown that there is generally more agreement on nonliteral forms of meaning making, within all forms of body disposal. Catholics and Protestants also agree more with personal meaning making than with transcendent meaning, which is to be expected given their religious tradition. Hubert Knoblauch (2009) argues that religiosity does not necessarily need to be defined in terms of transcendence but rather in terms of 'transcending', which refers to an active form of transcendence ('Hinüberschreiten' or 'Überschreiten', p. 55). This concept is similar to what Hans Joas describes as self-transcendence (Joas, 2008). The concepts of transcending and self-transcendence might help us explain the general focus on personal meaning among all religious groups. The religiously affiliated, as well as unaffiliated, can find meaning in transcending the boundaries of their own self and in feeling connected to something else. This 'something' can be God or a higher power, the deceased or the world as a whole. Therefore, a sense of transcending does not exclude notions of transcendence. In this sense also a personal approach towards meaning in life does not necessarily exclude religiosity but can go hand in hand with finding a personal meaning that lies between a traditionally religious and a strictly secular meaning. This interpretation is also found in the results of this study, when taking a look at correlations between the different forms of meaning making (see Appendix Table 3.4). Personal meaning generally correlates negatively with transcendent meaning and positively with no meaning. However, among Catholics these relations are reversed, which suggests that among Catholic respondents transcendent meaning and personal meaning can go hand in hand; but in the more tradition oriented group of Protestants, where there is generally more focus on transcendent meaning, personal meaning is less important.

But what do these results tell us about Hertz's model and the hypothesis that in contemporary Dutch society the model is more nuanced? First of all, we see a general approach towards personal meaning making, also among the religious affiliations. Furthermore, the choice for a certain body disposal is not free from religious affiliation, which suggests that Hertz's model is not falsified by the survey data: the treatment of the body is related to certain conceptions of an afterlife. However, the model needs to be more nuanced on the basis of a greater diversity among mourners. This does not mean that Hertz's model is not completely untrue for the Dutch situation: it can be useful in the context of close and strict religious communities. The relation between immortality and the treatment of the body is, however, varied among different denominations in the Netherlands, and among the religiously

unaffiliated especially there are minor differences between different ways of how the body is treated. The different choices for body disposal were mostly related to different attitudes towards death among Protestants. Moreover, the relations between the various forms of meaning making are different between the groups.

## 5.3 The grave as final resting place?

Hertz (1960) furthermore describes how in the burial rituals of the Dayak, there is a second burial. The corpse is kept temporarily in one place before it is moved to its final resting place. During the period that the body is in this temporary place, the soul also remains on earth (Hertz, 1960, p. 34). Recent research by Meike Heessels has shown that secondary burial (reburial of the remains) is not that unusual in the Netherlands (Heessels & Venbrux, 2009). However, it is not clear to what extent the reburial is related to concrete afterlife beliefs. From Heessels' research it was shown that reburial is motivated on personal considerations such as "for the sake of proximity" with the deceased (Heessels & Venbrux, 2009; p. 130). How is the decision making for burial and the idea of the grave as the 'final' resting place represented in contemporary Dutch society? In the Netherlands, grave rights make it possible for families to choose between different 'types' of graves, such as common graves (Dutch: *algemeen graf*) where more people are buried and which can be re-used after a minimum of ten years. These types of graves are especially popular in the bigger cities (40 – 50 % according to LOB National Organization for Cemeteries), where the prices for other types of graves are much higher. Furthermore, there are graves with exclusive rights, where the owner(s) can decide who will be buried in the grave in the future. These types of graves are for a period of twenty years (or longer). Graves with indefinite rights can be found in some cemeteries, which is needed especially when citizens from an Islamic background want to bury their deceased loved ones in that cemetery (Wojtkowiak & Wiegers, 2008).[33]

In the Netherlands, 52 % of the people who choose for burial claims to be influenced by their religious background (Keulen & Kloosterboer, 2009). Compared to cremation, which is 20 %, this percentage suggests that people

33      Within the Islamic as well as Jewish traditions an eternal grave rest is of great importance. This is related to the strong belief in bodily resurrection. The difference between Jewish and Islamic burial rituals in the Netherlands is that Synagogues own their own cemeteries that they can manage according to their tradition, whereas Mosques have to buy parts of municipal cemeteries that are managed by the community. This sometimes creates a problem for the guarantee of eternal grave rest, which is also one of the reasons why many migrants from Turkey and Morocco prefer to bury in their home land.

who choose for burial are relying more on their religious identity than people who choose for cremation. However, when taking a closer look at the reasons that are given for a religious burial, 38 % says that it is just the done thing (*'hoort er gewoon bij'*) and only 13 % thinks that a religious burial is related to the prospect of literal immortality. Furthermore, only 10 % is sure that they want a religious leader in the churchly burial. These nuances of the influence of religious background on the choice for burial shows that within the choice for burial, tradition is more important than actual religious belief in an afterlife.

Moreover, 65 % of those who choose for burial have already thought about the place where they want to be buried (Keulen & Kloosterboer, 2009). The choice for burial is thus related to the concern for the place where the body should be buried. Comparing this high percentage with those who prefer a religious burial in hope of an outlook on eternal life, it shows that for those who choose for burial it is more important to know where they will be buried than the idea of where the 'soul' will go after death. In other words, the symbolic representation for after death is more important here than the literal concept of immortality. In terms of embodiment, we can say that physical embodiment is more important than spiritual embodiment for those who choose for burial.

But how do the bereaved experience the grave as final resting place for their deceased loved ones? In the study 'Ode to the dead'[34], it was revealed that only 2 % of the bereaved visits the grave often, 7 % regularly, 26 % sometimes and the majority, 65 %, seldom or never (de Jong & Kreting, 2008). These percentages suggest that for the bereaved, the place of burial is less important than for those who are choosing their own burial place. This means that the physical embodiment or material postself in terms of the dead body is more important for those choosing for burial than for those who remember their buried loved ones. Moreover, for the bereaved there is not much difference between remembering deceased who were cremated or buried (Davies, 2002, p. 176). From research in the UK it was shown that 86 % of participants thought that there was no difference between burial and cremation "as far as their memory of the deceased was concerned" (Davies, 2002, p. 176). Davies calls this result 'surprising' and notes here the importance of memory in the domestic area as one possible explanation (which will be discussed in the next chapter). This may be due to the fact that cremation offers various options that are similar to those for burial (Kellaher, Prendengast, & Hockey, 2005), such as an urn grave or other memorial objects (Heessels, 2010).

Mourners seem to give less value to the specific form of body disposal with

34        *n* = 514.

regard to the memory of the deceased because the decision is left to the 'to-be-deceased' before death. The contrast between the dying and mourners in how much they care about creating a material postself for after death and deciding what kind of body disposal and, in the case of burial, the place of burial is very much present in the Netherlands. Only 6 % of the Dutch population has not yet thought about the form of body disposal.[35] The grave is more important, it seems, for those who are choosing the place of burial than for the bereaved. Moreover, the role of religiosity remains complex, as people have different reasons for preferring a religious burial, commonly not the notion of literal immortality. This leads us back to the question of whether we can observe a softening of Hertz' model of the transition in contemporary burial rituals in Dutch society? It has been shown so far that the mourners as a group have become more diverse and that their ideas of an afterlife are not necessarily related to traditional religious notions of literal immortality. Moreover, the ritual treatment of the body and concepts of an afterlife are not directly related anymore. The choices around how to dispose the body and how to give form to the final ritual are in line with the growing individualism in the Netherlands.

## 5.4 Constructing immortality and the postself in burial rituals

The social community (the mourners) has a central role in the burial ritual. The burial is mostly performed in the presence of the community, unless the family chooses for burial in a small private circle ('*in besloten kring*'). Therefore, representations of the postself of the deceased have a strong social dimension, which is expressed in the words and symbols chosen for the funeral and that are presented to the funeral community. The photograph that was chosen for the cover of this thesis shows the decay of a grave and therefore the decay of the postself. This is in contrast with what the mourners are 'supposed' to do, almost a paradox to the idea of a postself. However this shows, as pointed out before in Chapter 2, that the postself has an expiration date.  In traditional societies, more attention is paid to the journey of the deceased (Davies, 2006). Although the journey of the deceased is not as clearly defined in contemporary Dutch society as in traditional religious communities, the role of the deceased in the performance of the ritual is of great importance. In the Netherlands mourners want to express the deceased's uniqueness and identity.

From the previous section we have seen that for the religiously unaffiliated

35        SOCON, *n* = 1212.

there is less variation in attitudes towards meaning of life and death between the choices for different forms of body disposal. In this part of the study, I want to focus more specifically on actual burial rituals. When people are actually confronted with the death of a beloved one, how is the deceased's 'journey' described in contemporary funeral ceremonies? The underlying question of this part of the study is: what is the role of the postself in the construction of literal and nonliteral immortality in contemporary burial rituals in the Netherlands?

*Methods*

The method chosen for this section is a qualitative analysis of notions of immortality in contemporary burial rituals. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation and interviews with professionals at two cemeteries from March 2008 until July 2010, during which I was able to look behind the scenes what happens before, during and after burials and also to learn more about the professional side of burials (e.g., why in some cases it is impossible to have the family present when the coffin is put down into the grave, what are the cemetery rules for choosing a gravestone, what about eternal grave resting places?). Some things are simply pragmatic and are therefore not related to attitudes towards immortality or the relation between the mourners and the body. I have collected source material from different burials that I either visited or that I participated in during the fieldwork at the cemeteries (one former Catholic, now municipal, and one former Protestant, now private). Although the fieldwork was generally much broader, content analysis was conducted of the collected data from 30 Dutch burials (Bernard, 2006), described in an observation scheme (see Appendix Table 5.6), and the collected source material. An observation scheme was used that was filled in by the researcher after the burials. The observation scheme was developed on the basis of ritual components described by Grimes (1999). The analyzed ritual components are: (1) actions, (2) spaces, (3) objects, (4) figures and roles, (5) language and texts and (6) beliefs. The last was primarily approached by references towards literal and nonliteral immortality. The analysis focuses mainly on notions of the postself and immortality, which is also why most segments are part of the texts that were used in the burials; it is more easy to observe notions of immortality in texts rather than in objects or spaces. In some cases, it was revealed during the ceremony why certain objects where chosen, and mostly how they related to the deceased. In these cases the objects and spaces were included in the analysis.

The source material consisted of narratives, speeches, mourning cards, death announcements, songs and other texts used during the burial rituals.

The analysis resulted in 113 segments that refer to the deceased's postself or to notions of immortality. In some cases there is also a symbol chosen that reflects the 'theme' of the burial that often had a link with the deceased person's biography. Sometimes private messages in forms of a letter or envelope are put in or on the coffin before the it put in the soil, but these private messages were closed to the eyes of the public and therefore do not form a part of this study. As a result of this, the study on immortality and the postself through the analysis of source material and observations from burials reveals the public representation of the postself in the funerals and not the private thoughts and ideas about an afterlife.

The mean age of the deceased was 63, with a range from 44 to 92. About half of the deceased were female. From the perspective of the closest family the relation with the deceased was in all burials either that of a parent or a partner.[36] The burial ceremonies took place in either a church or the hall of the cemetery (or sometimes in both). The length of the ceremonies was between 30 and 90 minutes. It is not easy to define the religious character of the burials, as some burials took place in a church but had hardly any religious symbols, texts or actions. The choice for a churchly burial does not necessarily reflect a 'complete' religious self-definition and belief in religious concepts of an afterlife. In order to identify notions of religiosity in the burials, I analyzed the content and meaning of immortality. What kind of language and symbols are used during the ritual? Are there ritual actions performed that have a religious character (e.g., sanctification of the body) or that refer to transcendence more in general?

A regular burial ceremony that is not a traditional religious ceremony, often consists of an opening speech (performed mostly by the funeral director, spiritual leader or family member), followed by a number of personal speeches about the deceased, a poem or other lyrical text, a number of music pieces and a final speech (normally by the same person as the opening). The use of the favorite music of the deceased is very common at Dutch burials (also among more liberal churches, although in some religious communities this is becoming a topic of discussion). In the Netherlands there are several websites on the Internet where you can take a look at a funeral top 10 for inspiration.[37] After the ceremony, the coffin is carried outside, followed by the closest family and friends. Other participants are often asked to wait and to follow after the family. When participants are gathered behind the

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36       I also participated in the burials of two stillborn children, but these were excluded from the analysis as these are extraordinary cases and are discussed elsewhere (Peelen, 2009; Peelen & Wojtkowiak, 2011).
37       Website of funeral company: http://www.dela.nl/rondom_overlijden/uitvaart_top_50

coffin the final burial procession begins (*'begrafenisstoet'*). When the ritual audience arrives at the grave there often follows a short comment by the funeral director, spiritual leader or family member. Not all families wish to be present when the coffin is put into the ground.[38] Although some cemetery directors advise families to do so. A former cemetery manager, Michiel Pronk, explained to me that the following: "I normally do not intervene in the wishes of the family, but especially in the case of the death of a child, I advise the parents to stay until the coffin is put down. This is the most difficult moment for parents. Some mothers might later sense the feeling of having left their child behind." There is also advice from professionals regarding the ritual process.

The fieldwork material (source material, observation scheme, additional interviews with professionals) was categorized according to four burial trends and will each be discussed in more detail below. The categorization resulted from investigating the collected source material and fieldwork observations. The focus was on references to the postself and notions of immortality. In the diversity of the observed burials it was noted that there are differences in how the postself is represented in the burial rituals. In some we see a clear social, nonliteral representation, such as in the *In Memoriam* (the biography of the deceased), while in others the postself of the deceased was linked with notions of a more literal immortality.

On the basis of the role of the postself in these burials, which also suggested the degree of personalization of the observed burials (the personal elements in the ritual) I distinguish the following burial trends: (1) secular, (2) religious, (3) cross-over, and (4) intercultural. These trends not only refer to the ritual context (e.g., the place of the burial ceremony, the figures involved in the performance), but are also basically defined by the input of the deceased and the direct family on the different ritual components. It is important to note that this research does not claim to classify solid categories, but instead to illustrate different patterns of contemporary burial rituals in the Netherlands. The term 'trends' was chosen here as it identifies different developments, without suggesting that we are dealing with normative clusters. The trends (secular, religious, cross-over and intercultural) are each illustrated by one or more exemplary cases from the field. The last trend represents a special area of study for several reasons. First of all, intercultural burials deal with more than one cultural background, the home culture of migrants and the culture where migrants are living (Wojtkowiak & Wiegers, 2008). A migration

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38      I understood from professionals at different cemeteries that families from an Islamic background wish to be present when the coffin is covered with soil whereas the religiously unaffiliated, Catholics or Protestants normally do not want to be present.

context, it is suggested, will to lead to more ritual creativity, because mourners have to adjust to a context that does not represent their normal practices. Catherine Bell (1997) elaborates on how the social context of a ritual is not a background for the ritual, but interferes with how the ritual is performed (p. 216 ff.). Mitchell (1999) states that especially those people who are situated in a marginalized, intergenerational or intercultural context are capable of adapting rituals. In the following pages, the focus is on Islamic burials, as in the Netherlands the presence of Islam is a development of recent decades.

*The secular trend*

> I think that the belief in an afterlife, in a heaven where we
> would be completely happy, in 'something' that is still to
> come, reflects our fear of death. [Text written by the deceased
> in a secular burial]

The secular trend describes burials where there are only vaguely or no references at all to literal immortality. A purely secular burial includes no expressions of transcendence. Moreover, these burials are strongly personalized in the sense that family and friends have full control over ritual elements. The deceased has often left his wishes for the burial and mourners perform these wishes and fill in the space that is left for them. For example, flowers are a common choice for the funeral (68 %), while 85 % says that the dress of the ritual audience does not matter.[39]

A typical secular burial is the case of a 66-year-old man who died of a heart attack. The funeral ceremony took place in the hall of the cemetery. Interestingly there was no ritual leader, such as a funeral director or ritual guide, who ushered the participants through the burial ceremony. In the secular trend there can be a funeral undertaker who welcomes the participants or ends the ceremony, but who, further to this, does not say anything about the deceased or not much about death in general. The funeral undertaker has a subordinate task to fulfill. The wife of the deceased introduced every speaker shortly by name and what their relationship was to the deceased. This minimal input of the ritual 'leader', without any more general remarks on death and its meaning, gave the impression that this was a strictly social gathering with no references towards transcendence. The social postself is most important here, as the main focus of the relationships with the deceased came through in the speeches.

The texts and stories during the ceremony were written or chosen by

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39      MEMO research for Yarden, 2008, *n* = 901

people who knew the deceased and who described their relationship with the deceased to the ritual audience. Moreover the deceased and mourners decided which music was played or performed during the burial ceremony. In this burial, there was neither a general speech about the meaning of death among the different speeches and songs, nor at the beginning or end of the ceremony. There was no speaker who gave some sort of summary, interpretation or 'advice' on death. Furthermore, what was distinctive in this burial ceremony was that there were no references towards literal immortality or transcendence in any way. The deceased was represented by social relations referring to memories about the deceased or more generally his or her identity.

Another example that was also mentioned in the previous chapter is that of Anna whose burial took place in a Catholic Church and cemetery. However, during the entire ceremony there was not one reference to any form of literal immortality. The choice for the Catholic context was based on respect for her deceased parents. What's more, Anna left the following text that was read during the funeral service:

> [...] I do not want to refer in this service to a heaven, to
> happiness, to a God. When I thought about death, turning
> from one side to the other, with eyes wide open, daring
> to look at the fact that I am going to die and that with
> that it will be over for me for eternity, I always became
> more peaceful and I fell asleep and did not have any more
> questions.

Anna is very clear about her disbelief in any form of an afterlife, even though the service and the final burial took place in a religious building. What is interesting in this part of the text is that she finds peace and rest in the idea that everything will be over for her. Her idea of an afterlife is that there is no afterlife, which gives her comfort in preparing for death.

There are more examples of similar secular burials where the deceased has a lot of control over the chosen ritual elements together with the family, but where there is uncertainty about an afterlife. This is reflected in a line from a poem chosen by the deceased (see Chapter 4): "I think and not more, I am there perhaps. Goodbye, see you, perhaps." Repeating the word 'perhaps' in relation to the idea that she might be somewhere ('there') expresses uncertainty about any form of literal immortality.

In the secular trend, the postself of the deceased dominates the ritual components such as the texts and songs. The material dimension of the

postself can for example be expressed in a painting of the deceased that is put on the mourning card. The ritual is from beginning to end personal and there is no visible religious influence. Sometimes there are, however, references to transcendent elements in the form of poems, short stories or song lyrics. The secular burial mostly takes place in a profane space, such as the hall of the cemetery (or the hall of a crematorium in case of cremation), but can in some exceptions also take place in a churchly building such as in the case of Anna.

Ritual components such as the actions, the place of the burial, the objects used, the figures and roles and the language and sounds are provided by the survivors. Even though people choose to recite existing poems, stories or song lyrics, the survivors still are in charge of the texts. Here the postself often has a purely immanent, social expression; it refers to the memory of the deceased but can in some examples, such as with the 'last' trip, refer to some form of transcendent existence of the dead. The difference when compared to traditional concepts of literal immortality is that these are personal references expressing an individual viewpoint, instead of a collectively shared conception. Besides, it is not clear whether the performer actually 'believes' that the deceased will receive the message.

*The religious trend*

> Always looking for the source, from there take care of the
> ones you loved. Now you are reunited with them. You were
> the last one who could tell stories about those who were dear
> to us. For many you where the source. [Text from the death
> announcement of a religious burial]

The religious trend can be observed in burials when the deceased and the ritual audience have a clear religious self-definition or when the deceased is part of a close-knit religious community. The religious burial ceremony has a churchly liturgy that is performed in the church and is followed by the burial at the cemetery. The observed burials that were categorized as religious followed a Christian liturgy that was presided by a minister and not by a funeral undertaker.

In religious burials, we find a clear distinction between postself elements (e.g., *In Memoriam*, the life story on the mourning card) and references towards literal immortality (e.g., life after death, soul, spirit). The reason for this is that we are dealing with ritual leaders who stay close to the religious tradition and with a clear religious message about an afterlife. There is less room in the ritual for personal ideas on immortality expressed, for example, in the

speeches of family members. However, more generally the funeral culture in the Netherlands is quite open compared to more orthodox communities and processes of individualization and secularization are generally more visible among religious groups, though not equally among all groups. Therefore, notions of the postself can also be present in the religious burial ceremony, which is then represented by the *In Memoriam* or the distribution of a mourning card which can contain personal elements (e.g., quotation from the deceased, photograph, personally chosen poem). What is important in the religious burial trend is that literal immortality conceptions are clearly distinguished from symbolic immortality conceptions. The postself representations are purely psychosocial. Literal immortality is found in the following examples from contemporary burials: "she is now reunited with her loved ones", "may the angels accompany you to paradise" and "the deceased will live, the deceased will rise". These examples are from burial ceremonies performed in churches with a clear religious character.[40]

Sometimes there are two ceremonies, one performed at the church following a religious liturgy and another more personal ceremony, which is often shorter then the first, performed at the cemetery (or crematorium in case of cremation). In that case the second ceremony leaves space for personal attitudes of immortality and more postself oriented actions. However, in the strictly religious burial ceremony, literal immortality is the frame of reference.

It should be noted that even in the most religious burial ceremony, which was observed in the case of a nun, there is room for individual requests. The community that she was part of brought the nun to her final resting place in the cemetery, but the bereaved nuns did not want to see the coffin being put in the ground because they thought this image would be too disturbing. It is important to know that in this burial the grave was deeper than normal as in the grave space of this community three bodies are buried in one grave, instead of two. The participants, however, wanted to throw earth on the coffin as final goodbye, which is mostly done when the coffin is already put into the ground, not standing above the grave. When participants started to throw earth on the coffin, this was a strange sight. The coffin was still standing above ground and the flowers were still on top of it. Some people threw the earth a little bit too enthusiastic, which gave the idea of throwing

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40      Note that this does not mean that the participants cannot have private beliefs that are mixed or vague when referring to a connection between the postself and literal immortality. It means, instead, that these are not visible in the ritual performance. After the burial ceremony, when mourners are intimately together, topics or questions about the deceased's 'journey' or 'destination' might be discussed. It just doesn't occur within the context of the religious burial.

the earth at the coffin, rather than on the coffin with the gentle gesture of covering it. This example shows how ritual adaptation on the basis of personal requests of the ritual community can change common ritual gestures even in a traditional religious community. However, this ritual adaptation did not directly relate to the afterlife beliefs of the nuns. The expressions of literal immortality were represented in the collective prayers, singing and the use of religious symbols, such as the cross, during the ceremony.

There are also examples of personalizing burials within religious ceremonies, such as people who choose Biblical passages, religious songs and prayers for the funeral. However, these personal elements were not related to conceptions of immortality. Notions of immortality in these types of burials are clearly literal and mostly result from a religious background. The postself has in these cases a purely social representative function: it reflects the identity of the deceased.

*The cross-over trend*

> I am not gone, I am not dead, I am just here, be it in another
> form, in a different way [Text by the deceased in a cross-over
> burial]

Burials that are categorized within the 'cross-over' trend are identified here as having notions of immortality that are between transcendence and immanence, like the one depicted in the quote above. Cross-over burials can contain elements of both institutionalized religious and secular rituals. The ritual repertoire is neither completely religious, nor completely secular. This is also visible in the represented notions of immortality, which are often a mix of nonliteral and literal elements. Burials representing this trend can take place either in a religious building (e.g., church, chapel) or a secular building (hall at the cemetery).

The cross-over burial ceremonies analyzed here all took place in churches or chapels. However the ritual leaders involved are known for their openness in ritualizing the burial ceremony. In the cross-over trend, a ritual leader, as well as family members, perform the ritual. In most cases, the ritual leader speaks at the beginning and at the end of the ceremony and in-between there is space for family and friends to tell of their relationships with the deceased. The music chosen for these burial patterns is brought on CD, as in the secular burial, or is performed live by acquaintances of the deceased. In the cross-over burial we often see a personal symbol that is used throughout the burial

(Quartier, 2009c).[41]

Because the rituals involved were very similar in many aspects and also because they differed in terms of the religious self-definition of the deceased I have chosen two burials from the fieldwork conducted as exemplary cases. Both deceased were women in their 50s who died of an incurable disease and were mothers of adolescent children. Both burial ceremonies took place in the same chapel and contained a mix of religious symbols and language, such as commendation of the body and collective prayer (which was not performed by the whole ritual community), but also personal elements, such as stories, poems and photographs. What separated the burials was that one of the women defined herself as Catholic with a belief in the spirit (which was also told during the ceremony) while the other did not. The later had a special love for Mary, as she said herself, but this did not contain specific literal immortality conceptions (which was not expressed during the ceremony either). Moreover, not Mary but a crone was chosen as personal symbol for the ritual. Crone was her last name, and also in her house the crone symbol was very present in different objects, such as photo frames, diaries, and paintings. In addition, the family company also carries the family name. In this burial, the personal symbol had individual references to the deceased postself ("she was a princess"), and to the social heritage of the family. Her family identity was an important part in defining her notion of social, nonliteral immortality, as was underlined several times during the ceremony. She was also buried in the family grave, which was not in the town were she lived, but were she originally came from.[42]

In the second burial, where the deceased had a Catholic self-definition, a personal symbol was also used throughout the whole burial ritual. In this case it was a globe and it was explained during the ceremony that she loved to travel and that "she loved the world and the world loved her". Some families manage to use a personal symbol throughout whole funeral, which then makes it very strong and recognizable. The globe, for example, was present throughout the ceremony (e.g., in the language used, but also physically on the coffin), on the mourning card and, later, on the grave itself. The symbol used in this burial has thus a material and social dimension. Notions of transcendence in this burial was represented by references towards an afterlife and a spirit, which was related to the religious self-definition of

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41      This may also be the case in the secular burial.
42      From research by MEMO commissioned by funeral company YARDEN in 2008 ($n$ = 901) it was shown that 25 % wants to be buried or cremated near their hometown, 29 % wants to be buried or cremated near the town that there are currently living and 38 % did not have an opinion on the issue. Furthermore, women tend to give more meaning to family traditions (57 %) than men (47 %).

the deceased and her family. However, the personal symbol gave continuity throughout the ritual, different images of the deceased were present during the different speeches. The social postself was visible in the way people were speaking of the deceased. For example, the title 'princess' or in expressions such as "she loved the world and the world loved her".

The individual postself in a cross-over burial can be observed in, for example, a poem that is written by the deceased. The poem can be printed on the mourning card and read during the ceremony. These texts can refer to literal forms of immortality, when the location of the deceased after death is clearly defined, such as being part of nature (e.g., the wind or the sun) or part of the universe. In these examples the postself is related to immortality that goes beyond social notions. It is said where the deceased actually 'is' or 'is going to'.

An example of the postself that has a strong individual dimension is found in the (typical) expressions or last words of the deceased that are quoted during the funeral ceremony or printed on the mourning card; i.e., the messages that were left by the dead. This form of expressing the identity of the deceased sometimes seems to have an almost literal, transcendent component. The dead are 'speaking' to the survivors one last time, especially when their words are printed on the death announcement. Another feature of the messages of the dead is that they often include a message of teaching or thanking their loved ones. Sometimes it is a way of 'clearing the conscience' when they name those things that they were not so happy about. Such messages appear to be almost an invitation for a dialogue with the survivors, as if they should react to the message. When survivors actually react to these individual notions of the postself we might speak of a layer of transcendence, for example, when mourners think of the dead as watching over their actions and therefore wanting to fulfill their last wishes. However, this is difficult to interpret in the context of burial rites, as the private beliefs of the bereaved are closed to the eyes of the researcher. Messages from the deceased can, moreover, also have a purely symbolic meaning for the bereaved in the sense that they want to honor their loved ones one more time by fulfilling their last wishes. However, the layer between literal and nonliteral immortality in the context of cross-over burials remains thin.

*The intercultural trend*

> The burial will take place at the cemetery [...]. Women are
> asked to wear a headscarf that day. - Mum loved flowers. [Text
> from the death announcement in an intercultural burial]

The final burial trend is defined here as the intercultural burial, which is becoming an increasingly important role in Dutch funerary culture (Wojtkowiak & Wiegers, 2008). Burials following this trend are based on a religious liturgy from another home country than the Netherlands. In this study I focus on the specific case of migrants with an Islamic background. Within the last few years the multicultural burial and especially the Islamic burial has received increasing attention from the Dutch funeral industry. In 2007, the national Dutch cemetery association published a manual on Islamic burial traditions and how to perform the rituals in the Dutch context (Hermsen, 2007). Additionally, cemeteries in the bigger cities are promoting the Islamic burial as it will hopefully replace the decreasing numbers of non-migrant Dutch choosing for burials in the expensive urban areas. In 2007, a Dutch-Islamic online bookshop published a guide for Muslims who are living in the Netherlands and who want to learn about the precise ritual actions that are prescribed by their Islamic faith (Brahami, 2007).

The Islamic burial is moreover an interesting case study, as mourners have many adjustments to make in order to perform a religious burial in the Netherlands. Difficulties are, for example, the legal situation that is different from most Islamic home countries. Examples are the lack of ritual space for the ritual washing, problems with the direction of the grave (towards Mecca) and, finally, the important issue of eternal grave rest, as it simply does not exist in the Netherlands.[43] In this section I will focus on the stories of second-generation migrants with an Islamic background and their experiences in performing an Islamic burial in the Dutch context.

The story of Fatos is a good example of an intercultural burial, as it on the one hand shows how a traditional Islamic burial is performed in the context of Dutch society, and on the other hand it illustrates the changes that are occurring in a migration context. Fatos is a highly educated, religiously unaffiliated woman from a Turkish background. She, her husband and her two children live in The Hague. The difficulties with the burial of her mother started right from the beginning. First of all, the funeral company did not take care of the ritual washing as promised and she had to find someone who was qualified to perform this last honor at the last minute. Furthermore, on the day of the burial, she quickly had to collect all head-scarves at home for her and her female friends, as these are prescribed at the burial. As her (Dutch) friends and she normally do not wear head-scarves, wearing the scarf was a very special gesture during the ritual. The Arabic texts that were used during the ceremony were not understandable for her and her brothers, but

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43      There are, however, in some cemeteries exclusive grave rights for an undistinguished period of time.

luckily her husband was able to read the texts, so he could participate in the collective prayers. Furthermore the burial did not feel 'personal', she was not able to say the things about her mother that she wanted to.

A traditional Islamic burial does not leave space for postself references or other personal input. However, Fatos found a way to say goodbye in a very personal way. She made a mourning card with a short biographical story about her mother. She sent this as a personal thank you card to her friends and the people who were involved in the burial. She explained that after she had posted the letters, it felt as if she finally could say goodbye to her mother. In this case we see adaptations to the Islamic burial, based on practical as well as emotional reasons. In Fatos' explanation of not being able to say goodbye in the traditional Islamic burial, we can also observe an adaptation of the meaning of the burial, as it did not feel complete for her. Other examples from intercultural burials see families place death announcements in the newspaper with personal expressions of the deceased loved one. In the cases that have been assessed, a connection between the postself and immortality cannot be observed, as was the case in cross-over burials.

This case shows the changes that are occurring in the context of Dutch society, but one has to be cautious in interpreting these results as having a genuine foundation in the Islamic community in the Netherlands. The ritual dynamics in an intercultural context have been briefly discussed, but there are other examples. The following quotation is from Amine, a young woman who has lost her parents. Amine's interpretation of the Islamic burial shows that not all people seek ritual adjustment to the intercultural burial. She says:

> After my mother's death, I recognized that I also want a
> burial according to Islamic tradition, without the cards,
> poems, coffee or cake. I do not want people to be too busy
> with these, for me, unnecessary things. But, I also recognized
> that my mother's death brought people together, my sister
> and I were brought together and I hope that my death will
> also bring people together; I mean, you can do what you
> want, but it is not a necessity.

Amine describes her personal interpretation of her mother's death. Although she prefers a burial ritual without personal elements, she gives meaning to her mother's death in a very personal way. Furthermore, here we see a description of the transition that is taking place in the burial ritual (Hertz, 1960; Van Gennep, 1960/ 1909). After the burial the social statuses of

members of the social community are re-structured. In that sense not only the relationship with the deceased is re-structured in the funeral, but also the relationships between mourners.

## 5.5 Interpreting immortality and transcending the postself in burial rituals

In Table 5.2 the themes resulting from the analysis of contemporary burials are summarized. Each burial trend is represented by the themes of literal and nonliteral immortality found in the data. In the secular trend we see mostly a personal postself, which means that each performer or person involved in the ritual explains their personal image of the deceased and their personal relationship with the deceased. In the religious ritual, there is also space for the postself, but in just a few ritual components, such as the *In Memoriam* or on the mourning card. Therefore, the life of the deceased is often shortly summarized, and a more general social image of the deceased is presented. In the cross-over burial, we see that postself elements are combined with notions of literal immorality. This creates individual in-between forms of immorality that are specifically related to the deceased and his or her life in this world. The postself is then transcending the social representation of the deceased, but is not necessarily localized in another, transcendent world. In the intercultural trend, we see the postself emerging in some ritual elements, such as the mourning card or death announcement, but there are still very few references towards the postself. The term 'emerging' is borrowed here from the field of rituals studies as it highlights the changing features of ritual but still makes clear that it is an early starting point for ritualizing in the context of a certain cultural community. Furthermore, the intercultural, as well as religious, burials include traditional literal references to immortality, such as heaven, soul or reunion with deceased loved ones. In the secular trend, there are generally no references towards literal immortality.

**Table 5.2** Nonliteral and literal expressions of immortality in different burial trends

| Burial trend | Nonliteral | Literal |
|---|---|---|
| Secular | Personal Postself | No references |
| Religious | Social Postself | Religious references |
| Cross-over | Transcending Postself | Individual in-between |
| Intercultural | Emerging Postself | Religious references |

The burial ritual represents the social transition of the status of the deceased from 'living' to 'dead' (van Gennep, 1960/ 1909; Hertz, 1960) and the transition for the mourners (Turner, 2008/ 1969). The social transition is reflected in the re-establishing or validation of the relationships with the deceased, which in contemporary burials can be observed in the use of postself elements in the ceremony. This symbolic transition to the world of the dead is more difficult when people are not sure about what the world of the dead exactly is and if they believe in a 'world of the dead'. The postself oriented elements in the ritual reflect some kind of negotiation of the survivors on concepts of immortality in burials with a cross-over trend. In these cases the postself is often added with a transcendent dimension, referring to a personal variation of literal immortality that is closely linked to the postself.

Furthermore, when the deceased has left funeral arrangements, the burial also becomes an additional dimension of incorporation, as the survivors have to integrate the wishes of the deceased in the burial ritual. The deceased is physically 'gone' but is represented by the personal documents, wishes and speeches left for the funeral. The personal documents that were produced in the face of death differ from documents that were produced during life. In the case of the later, the person did not reflect on being dead, whereas during the funeral planning he or she did. This is often the case when people know that they are going to die due to illness, and as such the processes of separation have already taken place in the process of dying. What is left is not only the body that needs to be ritually interned in the grave, but also a symbolic legacy that needs to be integrated in the burial ritual.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed contemporary burials in the Netherlands and the role of the postself in constructing concepts of immortality. The claim is that Hertz' model of the interrelation between the dead body, the mourners and the soul is more nuanced in contemporary Dutch society and the results from the two studies support this. First, in the survey study, it was revealed that the relation between different forms of body disposal and concepts of an afterlife are mostly visible among Protestants. The study also showed that the different religious groups, as well as the group of unaffiliated people, agree mostly with a personal meaning of death, which was only slightly related to different forms of body disposal. On the basis of these results it can be concluded that the relations between body and soul (as metaphors for concepts of immortality) are not as strict as suggested in Hertz' classic model of burial rites. In addition, the possibilities around death are very

diverse in contemporary Dutch society, as are the interpretations of the soul. Immortality concepts are more complex still and often even vague. Mirroring this, the groups of mourners are also much more diverse.

These general findings of the first study are approached more deeply in the second study on concrete burial rituals. The analysis of burial trends has shown that references towards the postself of the deceased are found in all sorts of burials, but that there are different meanings attached to them. In the secular trend, the postself has a central role in the form of nonliteral immortality. The postself of the deceased is expressed in different speeches, poems and music pieces or directly through the deceased. The life of the deceased forms the central 'theme' of the burial. More general subjects, such as belief in life after death or faith in a deity are less prominent or are even absent during such a secular burial. The religious trend is marked by the clear religious tone of the burial. This means that there is a spiritual leader throughout the whole ritual; in the cases discussed above this was a priest, but it could easily be some other representative of a religious group. The postself is present in form of the life story (*In Memoriam*) that is read during the ceremony or printed on the mourning card that is distributed during or after the burial. The representations of the postself in such a burial do not include references towards literal immortality. In the intercultural burial trend, we see religious representations of literal immortality and slowly an emerging postself in the burial rituals that are performed by second generation Muslims who are themselves not strictly practicing the religious faith of their parents.

The most interesting results concerning concepts of immortality were found in the cross-over burials. The cross-over trend shows the greatest amount of creativity in linking the postself with concepts of symbolic and literal immortality. In cross-over burials, we see poems, sayings and greeting of the deceased that contain references to literal immortality in the expressions of the postself. This means that the symbolic representations of the deceased are closely linked to transcendent references by defining where the deceased now is after death. This means that in these postself references the social representations are closely linked to transcendent notions. The term 'transcending' (Knoblauch, 2009) might help us in interpreting these results, as these postself references transcend their social representation in the ritual, but do not necessarily refer to another world. We have seen that in the attitudes from the first study of this chapter that transcendent interpretations are less prominent in Dutch society. However, in the analysis of burial trends, we have seen that there are ways of combining literal and nonliteral notions of immortality for those who are religiously affiliated and

those who are not. These in-between individual concepts of immortality often refer to a specific immortality that is linked to one particular deceased and not all who are deceased, as is the case in institutionalized religious concepts of immortality.

With regard to Hertz' argument, we have seen that in contemporary Dutch burial rituals the three elements (body, soul and mourners) are not as directly related as suggested by the model, although they are not completely independent either. In each of the three elements, there are variations that are related to processes of individualization, personalization and secularization of beliefs and rituals of death. The changing perspectives on burials and immortality concepts among different groups are related to the changing relations between the three elements. We can observe a more complex version of Hertz' argument where the three elements are influenced by personal convictions of mourners and the deceased. In terms of ritual authority (who decides how the ritual is performed?) the wishes of the deceased are most important (what did he or she want?), then the next of kin (what do we want to say about the deceased?) and the social community (what do others want to hear about the deceased?). The ritual professionals (whether religious or secular) are asked for advice and information, but there is no clear ritual script as to how to perform the final ritual.

# Chapter 6
# The postself in the process of mourning: communicating with the dead and transcending relationships[44]

## Introduction

After the funeral, the process of mourning begins, which is for some bereaved the final realization that the deceased is really gone. The period before the funeral is often busy and accompanied with visits and calls by family and friends. After the funeral, the social embeddedness of the mourners decreases slowly. In terms of the rite of passage model, mourning rituals are considered as focusing on incorporating the bereaved into the world of the living and the deceased into the world of the dead (Sörries, 2005). The funeral meal, for example is, considered as the first step into incorporation (Yoder, 1986). This chapter deals with concepts of immortality in the process of mourning. More specifically, the focus is on the role of the postself in private mourning practices. Private commemoration maintains the social identity of the deceased (Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, 2010). The cases studied here are those of contemporary home memorials for the dead. From the survey data it was found that 30 % of the Dutch population has such as a memorial.

The question is: what is the role of the postself in attitudes towards concepts of immortality in the case of home memorials? Moreover, what kind of ritualizing can be found around home memorials? The focus is therefore also on attitudes, actions and transitions in the mourning process. These questions

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44       This chapter is a modified version of the paper: From soul to postself: Home memorials in the Netherlands. Mortality, 14(2), 147-158. (2009) And
Private spaces for the dead: Remembrance and continuing relationships at home memorials in the Netherlands. In A. Maddrell & J. D. Sideway (Eds.) (2010). Deathscapes. Spaces for death, dying, mourning and remembrance (pp.207-221). Farnham: Ashgate.

will be investigated among both religiously unaffiliated and affiliated home memorial keepers. I argue that home memorials represent the postself of the deceased through material objects, which is why in this analysis the social and material dimension of the postself are important. Furthermore, home memorials are not only private practices of preserving the social identity of the deceased and expressions of the personal relationship with the deceased, as I argue, but also expressions of personal immortality concepts.

To this end, I present two explanations of the home memorials phenomenon: a religious-spiritual explanation and a psychosocial explanation. The religious-spiritual explanation focuses on the dimensions of home memorials that refer to concepts of immortality and transcendence more generally, such as (1) afterlife beliefs, (2) beliefs in a higher power and (3) ritual actions associated with the memorial. The psychosocial explanation is based on (4) emotions that are associated with the memorial and, more generally, (5) the relationship with the deceased from the perspective of the mourners. This distinction between 'religious-spiritual' and 'psychosocial' is not an antithesis: it does not imply religious versus psychosocial dimensions, but instead underlines the importance of both dimensions in the phenomenon of contemporary home memorials in the Netherlands.

## 6.1 Creating a place for the dead at home

The home has been theorized as part of the self or as a symbol of personal identity (Francis et al., 2005, James, 1891; Lawrence, 1987). "There is no place like home" and "home sweet home" are common expressions indicating the significance attributed to the home as a very special place like no other. Our home is not only a physical place but it has also great emotional value; a place where we transfer social and cultural norms to the private sphere and where we communicate our personal way of life to family, friends and other visitors (Lawrence, 1987). William James describes the home as an extension of our material self: "its scenes are part of our life; its aspects awaken the tenderest feelings of affection" (James, 1891; p.292). Lawrence (1987) highlights the fact that besides its psychological and emotional value, cultural, socio-demographic and economic factors also come into play. The occupants' economic background, for instance, affects the size of the house, allowing for more or less private space restricted to the family and shielded against access by the outside world.

Jonathan Smith's theory of ritual space is a significant contribution to ritual studies (Smith, 1987). He argues that space is the most important determinant of the meaning that is given to ritual elements. Smith speaks

of different 'nows' in ritual (Smith, 1987, p. 110). Grimes' (1999) comment on Smith's theory underlines the fact that place is not the distinctive element of ritual. Whereas Smith pays most attention to space, Grimes attaches more importance to action. The symbolic values underlying ritual actions make it possible to express things that are sometimes difficult to articulate. Smith writes that "ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention [...] place directs attention" (Smith, 1987, p. 103). In addition, he cites the example of ritual place as an obvious hallmark of ritual such that, for example, a temple can serve as a 'focusing lens' for ritual (Smith, 1987, p. 104). The temple manifestly marks an event as a ritual, since you go to the temple for this specific purpose. On the basis of what was said about cemeteries, following Smith, the graveyard, or more specifically the graves, can be seen as a focusing lens for certain ritual actions and moments of mourning. In the case of home rituals, the place as such does not immediately mark them as rituals. Nevertheless, a home memorial creates a ritual space for mourning and remembering the deceased. Hence, adapting Smith's theory, I speak of (private) ritual *space* rather than place. I argue that home memorials serve as focusing lens for ritual space and continuing bonds with the dead. According to this line of argumentation, home memorials are mediators of ritual actions and beliefs towards immortality. This means that maintaining a home memorial is accompanied by ritual actions (when you initiate such a place of remembrance, then you know that your are doing 'things' with it). At the same time actions may also spontaneously or unconsciously develop from ritualization with the home memorial. For example, the changing of flowers might become a special moment of remembrance that later becomes instinctive or routine. Moreover, these ritual actions can also express concepts of literal and nonliteral immortality.

## 6.2 Re-invention of private mourning rituals

The appearance of home memorials in the Netherlands in the early 21st century can be considered in light of the re-invention of rituals and the quest for new rituals of mourning (Wouters, 2002). The religious version of the home memorial or house shrine was found predominantly in Catholic households in the Netherlands. Catholic house shrines used to be common but have mostly disappeared from Dutch homes (Margry, 2003; Nissen, 1995). The influence of institutionalized Christian belief systems and rituals is dwindling in Dutch society, but historically Catholic house shrines featured prominently, particularly in the South of the country.[45] In traditional Catholic

45      For a wonderful overview of all sorts of shrines around the globe, see: Martin, J.-H.

homes house shrines consist of sacred objects such as crucifixes and statues of Mary, often combined with candles (Margry, 2003).

The features of the home memorial show that this is an intensely personalized form of death ritual: it is 'used' by separate individuals in the context of their homes, together with personal objects belonging to the deceased. I therefore prefer the term 'home memorial' to 'house shrine'. The difference between a shrine and a memorial is that the former is more closely associated with institutionalized religion, whereas 'home memorial' stresses the importance of memorializing the dead, which is pivotal in these spaces.

As this chapter deals with attitudes and actions that are associated with home memorials, I will present data from a nationwide survey on the subject conducted in the Netherlands. Home memorials are maintained in the private setting of the home and their ritual use takes place at moments that are difficult to observe. Therefore, in contrast to the previous chapter on burial rites, which are more accessible to participant observation, for this chapter the use of questionnaires was preferred, with open and closed questions concerning home memorials. The closed questions included in the survey allow for a distinction to be drawn between different concepts, such as belief in transcendence, prayer or the length of time spent maintaining a home memorial. But, as we are also interested in the ritual actions that are taking place around these private memorials, open questions were also asked in the questionnaire, inviting participants to describe their objects, actions, moments and experiences related to the home memorials.[46] The data in this chapter results from two large-scale surveys conducted in the Netherlands in 2005 and 2007 (see Appendix). The second sample includes a follow-up study on home memorials that resulted from the first study, which looked at the same participants. The quotations from the open answers later in this chapter are from this follow-up study, sent out in 2007 and which resulted in 506 respondents (138 of whom reported having a home memorial). Respondents who kept a home memorial happened to be between 21 and 83 years of age ($M$ = 53, $SD$ = 12) and were mostly women (60 %). Moreover, among the religiously unaffiliated 34 % has a home memorial with 42 % of Catholic and 31 % of Protestant participants reporting having a home memorial.

Both younger and older adults create home memorials, though the mean age of respondents with a home memorial was just above 50 years. From the second half of one's life (assuming a life expectancy of 80 years), death becomes more and more a part of everyday life. In most cases, it is the death

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(2002). Altäre. Kunst zum Niederknien. Hatje Cantz Verlag.
46        Moreover, I have also interviewed two professionals who design home memorials and some bereaved people with home memorials ($n$ = 5).

of parents that is represented in home memorials, which is also the most common death experience in general. About 60 % of the home memorial keepers were female. The reason for the predominance of women is by no means clear, but there are possible explanations. Studies on grief and gender have shown that bereaved women express their grief more openly and deal with it more actively (Sidmore, 2000). It has also been shown that men accept the death of a parent quicker than women (Moss, Resch & Mosch, 1997). The home memorial is a way of dealing with grief and expressing one's feelings. As we shall see, respondents seemed to regard their home memorials as sites of some kind of ritual communication with the dead.

34 % of the Dutch population has or has had a private memorial in their homes.[47] In addition, 80 % of people with a home memorial maintain it for longer than a year. This shows that memorials for the dead are not a temporary phenomenon remaining briefly after the death of a loved one, but are long-term memorial spaces. In the follow-up study, participants were asked when they installed the memorial, which yielded a spread from 1954 to 2007. The frequencies showed an increase in home memorials from the late 1990s (around 1998) onwards. The increase in the number of home memorials in the 1990s is not surprising, as it is in line with more general developments in Dutch death culture. This period is often characterized in terms of increasing professionalism, education and openness towards death.

Participants were asked why they had a home memorial and nearly all respondents referred to the death of a significant other. In one third of cases the memorial was set up for a deceased parent. The second largest group, consisting of 25 % of the respondents, kept a home memorial for more than one deceased person. Specific replies ranged from "for my mum and dad" or "my sister and my aunt" to "I want to remember all the dead". The third group, of 13 %, referred to a deceased partner. Smaller but still significant groups kept memorials for other dead relatives: parents-in-law (7 %), a child (6 %) or a sibling (2 %). Some respondents did not specify their relationship to the deceased, they just referred to the "death of a loved one". Two female respondents (32 and 45 years old) had memorials for a dog and two cats respectively.

Respondents who had home memorials were asked such questions as "Could you describe what kind of objects you placed in the home memorial?", "Have you included objects that belonged to the deceased?" and "Did you ever experience the presence of the deceased? If so, could you please describe how you experienced it?" Furthermore, home memorials mostly consist of one

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47      Furthermore, in the 2007 sample 138 out of the 506 respondents stated that they had a home memorial (SOCON, 2007).

or more pictures and personal belongings or small objects associated with the deceased. Additionally, next to these items most people have candles and flowers in their memorials. Most home memorials were for deceased parents or more than one deceased person and second to most for partners. The place of the memorial is often in the 'living area' of the house: the living room or hallway.

## 6.3 The social life of things that belonged to the dead

Most of the respondents had more than one object in their home memorial. The largest number reported a combination of objects consisting of photographs, candles and flowers. No less than 93 % of the respondents had a memorial with a photograph of the deceased, 36 % had one or more candles and 24 % had flowers as part of their home memorial. The presence of candles and flowers indicates that ritual gestures are being performed at home memorials. Candles and flowers figure heavily in ritual offerings, as will be shown below.

The prominence of photographic portraits of the dead comes as no surprise. The American writer Susan Sontag speaks of photographs as "an index of mortality" (1990, p. 70). Elisabeth Edwards (1999), visual anthropologist, describes photographs as the most important objects of memory in the 20th and 21st centuries. A photograph is, at many levels, a direct reflection of the memory of the person it portrays, because you can see it with your own eyes without any need of technical devices, you can put it wherever you want and you can touch it with your bare hands. In addition, photographs are linked to the past and have great value as social biography. In the case of a home memorial, the photograph is a link to the person represented there. The identity of the deceased is 'labeled' by the photograph.

Personal belongings of the dead or objects related to the deceased's identity were found in 36 % of cases. A fifty-year-old woman, for example, put the guitar plectrum of her deceased husband on the memorial space together with other personal belongings. Other significant personal objects included glasses, personal letters, a clock, small figures associated with the deceased, a mandolin or paintings. These objects used to belong to the person portrayed in the memorial and therefore directly represent the postself of the deceased. Margaret Gibson (2008) argues that personal possessions of the deceased, even everyday objects with no economic value, can become sacred objects after death or even during the process of dying. The value of such objects lies in the emotional and symbolic dimension and their power to evoke memories of the deceased. Home memorials can consist of everyday objects and are part

of the mourners' everyday lives. Nevertheless, the meaning of the memorial is anything but 'ordinary'. On the contrary, it has great emotional value, as the data revealed.

Of 138 respondents, only eight kept an urn with the ashes of the deceased at the home memorial. In two cases, moreover, the ashes were those of pets. Some people said they had a special place at the graveyard as well as at home. This suggests that the home memorial is not just a substitute for the lack of a grave.

Why are objects so important in the home memorial representations of the postself? Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986) states, in his chapter on the social life of things, that every object has a biography just as human beings have. The same is true of the history of the deceased's possessions. The idea of objects having a social life of their own is relevant to the personal objects used in home memorials. These personal belongings tell the story of the deceased. Candles and flowers have a different function. Flowers and candles have become mainstream symbols of peace and hope in public mourning (Harlow, 2005), but they also have a place in private memorials. They play an important role in ritual actions at the memorial (such as lighting a candle every day or placing fresh flowers). Moreover, these two groups of objects – the personal and the ritual objects – not only have different functions; there is also another way in which they differ. Candles and flowers are replaceable while the personal objects are not.

Candles and flowers must be replaced and do not last indefinitely, unless the candle is left unlit or the flower is dried. The letters, photographs and other personal belongings of the deceased are, in contrast, irreplaceable. A case in point would be a grandmother's jewelery, inherited after her death. Even if one bought exactly the same piece, it would still not be one's grandmother's jewelery. Kopytoff's idea of a cultural biography of objects reflects the importance of the material dimension in the concept of the postself. The personal objects we discussed above have a central place in the memorial, and they help survivors remember the dead person. A closer look at the personal objects in the memorial reveals that these are often things which the deceased made or produced during his or her life such as gifts, letters or other personal documents, paintings or other artworks. Therefore, the objects were already important during the life of the person whose postself is in question. The question remains: to what extent do the meaning of these objects change after death? In the case of symbolic objects that represented the person's identity during their lifetime, we can assume that the meaning was important during their lifetime as well (Sax, Visser & Boer, 1989). In the case of objects of utility such as a toothbrush, the importance might change

as it becomes a reminder of the deceased. Another category of objects relates to the funeral: mourning cards, the *In Memoriam*, a rose or cross from the coffin. The funeral is the occasion of the last goodbye and, therefore, these objects represent the final memory of the deceased. In general, the personal objects represent typical attributes of the deceased and have emotional value for the bereaved or, in the case of objects from the funeral, represent a last memory of the deceased. As artist Annet van der Kamp, specializing in home memorials, put it: "The memorial had a central place in my everyday life when I was dealing with my grief." She set certain ritual moments, as she says, to deal with her feelings of mourning.

## 6.4 The meaning of ritual actions

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the debate between Smith and Grimes on the determinants of rituals, to the extent that we can even speak of any (Grimes, 1999; Smith, 1987). Grimes is not convinced that there are things such as determinants of rituals, but he does name action as an important one. Smith's theory is built on the argument for the importance of ritual space. When taking these theoretical aspects of ritual action and space into account in the analysis of contemporary home memorials, to what extent do we find arguments for both views?

In the previous section of this analysis, it has been shown that more than a third of memorials featured one or more candles. Some people light a candle every day; others light them once in a while or only on special occasions such as the birthdays or anniversaries of the death of the deceased. "When I'm at home I always light a candle" said a 67-year-old woman who has kept a home memorial for her youngest son for eighteen years. A 50-year-old man, who has a home memorial for his deceased best friend, wrote: "In the evening I light a candle, but apart from that I don't do too much with it, life goes on." Although the answers differ in their emotional connotation of bereavement, both employ the ritual gesture of lighting a candle at their home memorial. The male respondent says that life goes on and he does not give too much thought to the memorial, but still he uses the candle to create a ritual moment.

Another ritualized action taking place at home memorials concerns the replacing and reordering of objects. In most cases people added new photographs of other deceased persons to the memorial. Some people wrote that they eventually put the whole memorial away and that in most cases only the photograph of the deceased remains. Therefore, home memorials can be of a very dynamic nature. A 65-year-old woman, for instance, wrote:

"I change the memorial constantly, with the seasons of the year." Her home memorial consists of photographs, stones, leaves and other natural objects. She also lights incense in a ritual fashion and uses the memorial in order to pose questions to the dead. Her memorial is intended for several dead people whom she had known. One woman told how she moved the photograph of her dead grandmother from the living room into her bedroom because she was having a difficult time and needed the support. These examples demonstrate that the objects displayed on memorials (and their meanings) are constantly changing. Things can be moved to other places or replaced by other objects. These movements and replacements underline the ritual character of the actions taking place around home memorials.

The descriptions of home memorial keepers point towards the central role of ritual actions in maintaining the home memorial. These are not static places, but rather moving spaces of ritual creativity. The transitional nature of the objects in a memorial may suggest a contradiction with regard to Kopytoff's argument about the irreplaceable biography of things (Kopytoff, 1986), but this is not the case. Even when the meaning of the objects changes in the present, their unique past does not. Moreover, the object's biography continues after death. Further still, these things are set apart, made special or singular; they are subject to a 'process of singularization', in Kopytoff's terms (1986). Like the postself, the deceased's identity that continues after death, the biography of the objects continues after the death of the owner. Objects find new owners and continue to have a story of their own. The material dimension of the postself is therefore a useful concept in studying the biography of objects after death. The personal belongings of the dead are not just a way of remembering them; they also have to relate to their past life after they are gone. The photograph of the grandmother, taken to the bedroom to give comfort, nicely illustrates the density of meaning an object can have and how its life continues after the death of its owner. The discussion about the biography of objects has already shown that objects can move from the memorial to another place and we must therefore consider home memorials as dynamic rather than static.


## 6.5 Notions of immortality in home memorials

In the study of literal and nonliteral forms of immortality, one question in the survey produced some rather interesting results. The question was whether people had ever experienced the presence of the deceased in any way. First of all, almost half the people with a memorial said they had felt or sensed the presence of the dead. Next, we wanted to know how the

survivors experienced the presence of the dead. The descriptions varied from "a feeling", "in my dreams" to "the lamp got stuck". Most people sensed the presence of the deceased as a feeling (16 %), under the heading 'not a coincidence' (16 %), at certain events (15 %) or in certain objects (11 %). The first category is understandable in psychological terms. For example, when you miss someone very much or think about someone intensely, it can feel almost as if the person were there. The later categories are, however, trickier to account for. Are we dealing here with symbolic representations that remind the bereaved of the deceased, such as objects or events? Or do people literally feel the presence of the deceased at certain moments? A more detailed analysis of the answers categorized as 'not a coincidence' can help us. Here are some examples: "I feel him [the deceased] when the wind blows between my legs, although all windows are closed!" or "Again a lamp breaks or something falls" or "The clock stops and starts again all by itself". These descriptions of sensing the dead can be described as less 'rational' and belong more to the category of 'feeling'.

When people interpret 'coincidental' happenings as the presence of the deceased, these interpretations entail some belief that the dead have an influence on the world we live in. Some people explained that they talk to the dead through a photograph of the deceased. A 52-year-old woman, who had a home memorial for her deceased father, explained: "When I talk to the photo, I sometimes think he can hear me." A man (42 years old) said that he feels his father "is looking over his shoulder and agreeing with everything" when he is at the memorial. These answers show that being around the home memorial stimulates people to communicate with the deceased; and in some cases the dead 'communicate back', which also showed up in the 'not a coincidence' category. Both Walter (2001) and Klugman (2006) point to the regularity with which people communicate with the dead in secular societies. This is confirmed by the results in relation to home memorials.

The descriptions of the objects and events can have both symbolic and literal interpretations of an existence of the deceased loved one. Some answers refer to "feeling the presence of the deceased very closely" when, for example, wearing the things of the dead, such as jewelery or clothes; while others are defining moments of memory where the objects simply remind survivors of the deceased. Other descriptions could be interpreted as lying between the symbolic and literal. A 40-year-old woman writes: "when I am wearing the wedding ring of my mother, she is with me a little bit". The verb 'is' refers to a literal presence of the mother, but the addition of 'a little bit' shows that she is not completely convinced of a literal presence.

In the previous chapter on burial rituals, we have seen that there are

different dimensions of the postself, such as material, social and individual, which are not all equally represented in different burial trends. This analysis of home memorials shows that material objects, as well as actions, are very important in maintaining these memorial spaces. In terms of the postself, we see the importance of material and social relations with the deceased; but this can even take on spiritual forms, when the bereaved are literally communicating with the deceased. In another survey study conducted during commemorative practices at several cemeteries in the Netherlands ($n$ = 432), I asked if and what kind of objects mourners keep in order to remember their deceased loved ones. 76 % of the respondents reported to having memorial objects for the deceased. Most of these objects were things that not only belonged to the deceased but that were also used, worn or made by the deceased, such as clothes, jewelry, bags, glasses, paintings or other things that were used in everyday lives. Mourners admitted to also using these items through which they remember the deceased or even connected to them. Moreover, it appears that objects used in daily activities of the deceased are important notions in keeping material memories and feeling connected.

Important aspects of home memorials are highlighted here and, specifically, tell us more about communication with the deceased. Furthermore, correlations were calculated between the variable of whether and for how long people have had a home memorial[48] and statements about the meaning of life and death. Statements about the meaning of life and death are those that were used in earlier chapters: transcendent meaning ("death only has meaning if you believe in God"), personal meaning ("you have to give meaning to life by yourself") and denial of meaning ("death has no meaning at all").[49] A broadly formulated question about respondents' use prayer was also included in order to investigate the ritual actions: "Prayer can be understood in very different ways. Even if you are not a member of a church or religious group, you may have the feeling once in a while that you are praying. Do you pray sometimes?"[50]

The results show a strong, significant, positive correlation ($p$ < .001) between duration of keeping the memorial and prayer ($r$ = .48): the more people pray, the longer they have had a home memorial. In other words, a home memorial stimulates people to pray in a broader sense, but prayer also stimulates people to maintain a memorial. (Our research design excludes statements about causal relationships; correlations stand for an influence in both directions.) Second, there is a significant positive correlation ($p$ < .001)

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48      Answers ranging from 1 = no, never to 4 = yes, longer than a year.
49      Answers ranging from 1 = I totally disagree to 5 = I totally agree.
50      Answers ranging from 1 = no, never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = yes, regularly to 4 = yes, often.

between transcendent meaning of life and death ($r$ = .31). This means that the more people agree with more traditional religious interpretations of life and death (e.g., "death is not the end but a gateway to another life"), the longer they keep a home memorial. Third, there is a significant but negative correlation between denial of the meaning of life and death ($p$ < .001) and duration of keeping a home memorial ($r$ = -.21). The denial category consists of statements that strongly disagree with the possibility of any life after death. This underlines the previous correlation with transcendent meaning, namely that the more people believe in life after death, the longer they have kept the memorial. The personal meaning correlated weakly negatively but was still significant ($p$ < .02) with duration of home memorial ($r$ = -.073).

The results show that people with a home memorial have a strong tendency towards prayer, meditation or communication with someone or something and hold the belief that death is not the end. Moreover, a significant number of home memorial keepers deny that there is no existence after death. At first sight, then, the religious-spiritual explanation applies: people who perform actions that have a religious root such as prayer are more inclined to keep home memorials. In addition, people who believe in an afterlife tend to have home memorials. These traditional beliefs may be triggered by a home memorial or, more generally, by the death of a loved one. Interestingly, the religious backgrounds of mourners had no influence on maintaining a home memorial. But again the design of this study does not allow us to make statements about causality. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to reflect briefly on the relation between mourning and belief in an afterlife. I will return to this issue below, but let us first proceed with the research and findings.

## 6.6 Social and transcendent relationships with the dead

Among the characteristics of mourning in contemporary Western society are two important factors that help us understand the emergence of home memorials: (1) in the mourning process the bereaved are not trying to move on without the deceased, but rather to find "a place for them" (Walter, 1996a, p. 20), and (2) bereavement is part of someone's (auto)biography or self-narrative, which on an individual level means re-shaping and re-constructing your identity without the deceased loved one (Walter, 1996a). Home memorials are an obvious place for reshaping the identity of the bereaved. One's personal identity and the ongoing relationship with the dead are also based on self-narratives and communication with the dead. In the following responses I analyze how the bereaved maintain bonds with the deceased and what religious and psychosocial elements can be found. The first examples

represent religiously unaffiliated respondents. Subsequent quotations are from religiously affiliated persons.

The survey, from 2007, showed that half of the respondents experience the deceased's presence at the memorial ($n$ = 61); but how does this experience become more precisely defined by the bereaved? For example, a 50-year-old woman described how she planted a tree in the garden for her deceased husband ten years ago and surrounded it with flowers, candles and a sign with his name. She writes about experiencing him after burning paintings made by their children near the memorial tree in the garden:

> Yes, indirectly, [I experience him] when I have problems with
> the children; then I think about it before I go to sleep and
> ask my deceased husband for help.  I often have the solution
> the next morning.

This description has different layers of meaning. The fact that she thinks about a problem before going to sleep and has the solution the next day is not uncommon – it is even advised by recent studies of decision making and the unconscious (Dijksterhuis, 2007). But there is one part of the sentence that suggests an afterlife belief: "I ask my deceased husband." This widow attributes her finding the solution to asking her husband, and furthermore believes that her deceased partner can influence her thoughts. This is what I refer to as a religious-spiritual explanation of the experience.

Another quotation is from a 55-year-old man who lost his father "too early", as he says: "Yes, he looks over my shoulder and he approves of it all." The son believes that his deceased father watches him and judges his actions positively. This quotation reflects belief in the father's posthumous existence. A 59-year-old woman describes how she experiences the dead:

> Especially my parents, I experience their presence, feel,
> experience with my eyes closed and see them mostly and can
> talk to them (especially mother; she was also more spiritual
> than father). Sometimes they take the initiative or I ask them
> to come; this can happen anywhere.

This quotation gives different explanations for experiencing the dead. Firstly, she says that she feels and experiences them with her eyes closed. Psycho-cognitive processes can explain this: if you think about someone with your eyes closed, your senses are focused on your thoughts, not on your sight, and you feel more intensely what you are thinking about. She writes also

that she can see them and talk to them. Here the question is whether she is having audio-visual hallucinations or really having a spiritual experience. She also says that the dead take the initiative in contacting her; this clearly indicates agency on the part the dead. The quotation becomes even more complicated when I add her description of her religious affiliation. She writes that she is not a member of a church but believes "in the universe, God, love and spirituality". This list of beliefs includes religious terms (God, the universe) but also modern personal interpretations (love, spirituality). In an interview setting, where I could ask her to explain what she means by 'love' and 'spirituality', I might get an even more differentiated picture of the religious-spiritual dimension.

The next two quotations are from self-reported religiously affiliated participants. A 55-year-old Catholic woman asks her deceased father "for support, to think about us and be with us when we have a difficult time or see to it that everything goes well with births". This personal request specifies the nature of the dead person's agency: she asks her father to think about the family, which refers to a cognitive dimension of the dead agent. A Greek Orthodox woman (63 years old), who has a memorial for her parents, grandparents and other deceased loved ones, writes:

> In my dreams, the clock stops and starts again on its own,
> flowers that open and close when I ask if there is a good soul
> present, cold air behind me (everything is closed and no
> draft possible), candlelight moves and flickers.

This description has some natural elements that one might expect from 'new' spirituality beliefs (flowers, cold air), but also traditionally religious terms (soul). The quotation reveals a variety of sources that people draw on in their experiences of the dead. Some are everyday 'coincidences' (the clock stops); others invoke a spiritual layer in nature (flowers open and close).

Two general characteristics are interesting in this small set of quotations: all participants are between 50 and 65 years of age and most of them write about experiencing their parents. This can be explained by the fact that this is the age when most people have a home memorial (usually for one or both parents). But there is more. We discern a clear tendency to ask for help and support, which suggests the kind of relationship one has with one's parents during their lifetime. Home memorial keepers continue this relationship after the parents' death by asking the dead for support. The same applies to people who have lost a partner, brother or close friend. In almost all descriptions the bereaved think intensely about and ask something from the deceased.

The most important conclusion from this section is that people explain the experience of the dead differently: (1) in religious-spiritual terms varying from traditional to more recent, popular concepts and (2) in psychosocial terms, such as thinking, dreaming and feeling the presence of the dead. The person's relationship with the deceased is continued through experiences with the dead, asking for support and asking if the dead are present. Religious affiliation does not influence the descriptions of these experiences. What's more, we find religiously affiliated people using personal, psychological terms and religiously unaffiliated ones speaking about a spiritual agency. These results underline the position that continuation of the relationship with the deceased is a personal experience based on personal beliefs and not on a belief system imposed by a religious authority.

## 6.7 Religious and psychological explanation of continuing bonds

Benore and Park (2004) present a review of literature on the relation between mourning and afterlife beliefs. They discuss two major concepts in beliefs about death: 'belief in an afterlife' and 'continued attachment'. 'Belief in an afterlife' is the general term for all kinds of afterlife construction (e.g., resurrection, life of the soul, reincarnation). 'Continued attachment' refers to the belief in an ongoing relationship with the deceased that can assume different forms, both symbolic and concrete. The main point of their model of death-related coping is that belief in an afterlife and ongoing attachment are both part of an individual's global meaning system and therefore not a direct result of the death of a loved one. Nevertheless, belief in an afterlife and continuing bonds do give meaning to the death of a loved one. Both forms of belief are involved in the mourning process but are not a consequence of it. This means that people believe in an afterlife and continuing bonds without having personally experienced the death of a significant other. what the death of a loved one does is to make these beliefs central in people's lives. This last point, 'central in peoples lives' (i.e., in people's everyday lives), is what we observe in respect of home memorials. The memorial space has a place in everyday life, but the ritual actions around it (e.g., lighting candles, changing flowers, actual communication, prayer) create moments for remembrance and continuing bonds. The memorial space stimulates mourners to perform symbolic acts of commemoration (e.g., arranging flowers, lighting candles) and to think of or communicate with the deceased.

Apart from the religious dimensions of actions and attitudes prompted by home memorials, there are psychosocial mechanisms. The memorial is

central in the continuing relationship with the deceased. Earlier I analyzed the religious dimensions of concepts of immortality. Margaret Stroebe (2004) points out that there are forms of continued attachment that are strictly secular, such as telling stories about the deceased, naming children after them or keeping objects. Continued attachment is possible without religious beliefs. The qualitative analysis of descriptions of experience of the deceased shows that most descriptions include a mixture of religious-spiritual and secular elements. Stroebe focuses on the importance of attachment in the mourning process and less on the role of beliefs in an afterlife in a person's meaning system. Our study of home memorials shows that most memorials are set up for deceased parents. Here, the role of attachment is of great importance, especially with a view to asking for support and help from the deceased.

It was also asked what kind of feelings people experience when they are around or thinking about the memorial.[51] Firstly, 60 % of the participants describe positive feelings, 20 % negative and 20 % named memories prompted by the memorial, although strictly speaking they were asked to describe feelings. In more detail, people named the following feelings, in order of frequency: peace and restfulness (Dutch: *rust*), warmth, love, comfort, gratitude and respect. Negative feelings were restricted to sadness and loss (Dutch: *gemis*). The feelings show a tendency to have positive associations with the memorial, maybe because of its comforting character. People described how happy they were to have the memorial, and therefore the deceased, close to them in the house. By talking to or 'honoring' the deceased with flowers and candles the memorial keeper creates little private moments of memory, ritual and communication. Feelings of mourning are centralized around the memorial and accompanied by these ritual actions, which give support and comfort in dealing with the loss. The private setting of the home offers numerous possible moments to perform ritual gestures and express feelings away from the public eye.

Benore and Park (2004) criticize categorizing afterlife beliefs into religious and nonreligious; they argue that one needs instead a continuum stretching from religious to nonreligious beliefs about death. In this study, I too opt for a continuum approach. However, I would argue that there are different dimensional levels of religiosity, since there was no clear evidence that institutionalized religiosity motivates the appearance of home memorials, transcendent interpretations of an afterlife certainly does. We cannot identify memorials as either a religious or a secular phenomenon; instead, we study various secular and religious dimensions of the memorials such

51       *n* = 111

as afterlife interpretations or relation with the deceased. Apart from the religious-spiritual explanation of home memorials I wish to highlight the significant psychosocial impact of and on the memorial. Survivors seek to maintain 'private bonds' (Walter, 2001) with the dead for whom they established the memorials in the first place. Ritual gestures and the objects at the home memorials embody these continuing bonds (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). Moreover, as Freud states in 'Mourning and melancholia', the bereaved experience a loss of ego (the 'I') during the mourning process as a result of the loss of a loved one (Freud, 1985/ 1917). Therefore, the self of the bereaved also needs to be restored. Home memorials help keep the postself of the deceased 'alive' and, therefore, they help to establish the relationship with the dead and restore the bereaved self during the difficult time of mourning.

Communication with the dead hints at notions of immortality. Simultaneously, it might be part of a strategy used by survivors to preserve the deceased's identity; that is, to keep the dead person's postself 'alive'. With regard to the objects at memorials, the respondents reported only a limited number of traditional religious symbols. There happened to be five statues of Mary, four crosses, two Buddha statues and a single rosary. It should be noted that one statue of Mary was accompanied by one of the Buddha statues and also the rosary, all on the same memorial that belonged to a woman who is not a member of the church.

Another question referred to the use of religious language in relation to the memorial. We asked if people thought of the memorial as 'sacred'. Only six participants answered 'yes' (three of them Catholic, three not members of any church). These small numbers show that traditional religious symbols and a religious description are not, in general, important in home memorials. When people do make use of religious symbols it is not in an institutionalized religious context. Some people mixed material symbols from different religious backgrounds. In the words of Margry (2003, p. 78), "the traditional Catholic material culture is partially getting further detached from its origin and context". This detachment of the institutionalized religious symbols from their original context can be literally seen in the use of religious icons and symbols in home memorials.

People with home memorials communicate with the dead and sometimes even literally feel their presence. In the large-scale research project 'God in the Netherlands' it was discovered that 71 % of the Dutch population believes in an afterlife or is not sure about it (Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007). It also emerged that although 61 % of respondents did not belong to a religious affiliation, 63 % of all respondents did 'pray'. 'Praying' connoted different forms of utterances in this research (see also Bänzinger, 2007): not only the

religious form of communication with a higher power but also occasions such as "talking to myself", "accepting the situation I am in" or "expressing my emotions". Interestingly, when people were asked about occasions on which they 'pray', most people (60%) responded that they prayed when someone they personally knew had died. The search for God in the Netherlands is difficult and cannot be defined by the simple question 'Are you religious?' It has to be examined in more personal forms of beliefs and rituals. The confrontation with death is a major stimulus for people to reflect on and display belief (James, 1978; May, 1972). Home memorials reveal these notions of immortality concepts through the experience of the dead, particularly in the private setting of Dutch homes.

Concepts of immortality, however, are still difficult to determine from the descriptions of the participants as they can include references towards both the literal and the symbolic presence of the deceased. However, the concept of 'the soul' was not present to any great extent in the descriptions of the bereaved. Actually, only one 63-year-old woman in the survey used the term 'soul' in her description of the home memorial, but she added other, not particularly religious descriptions such as "feeling the deceased in the cold air" and "when the clock stopped". The concept of the postself is a way of studying survivors' relations with the deceased in terms of the latter's identity after death that hint at symbolic immortality. Home memorials do not arise from institutionalized beliefs; therefore, 'postself' is a more apt and neutral term to use in analyzing these representations than the concept of the soul. In addition, the postself, in the way it is define it here, covers the identity preservation strategies of the dying person as well as those of survivors once that person is dead. The home memorial helps survivors keep the memory of the deceased alive, especially through the use of material objects closely associated with that person (Edwards, 1999; Pointon, 1999). Considering the arrangements of objects identified with the dead, the home memorial is also a way of memorializing 'loved ones' in a material representation. Therefore, the objects that survivors place at the memorial in particular arrangements can be seen as material representations of the deceased's postself.

## 6.8 Conclusion

This final chapter on attitudes, actions and transitions in the process of mourning has revealed that the most important motivation in having a home memorial is communication with the deceased. This communication takes literal, by talking to the deceased, as well as symbolic forms, through the use of ritual objects and gestures. Even though the religious background of the

participants had a minor influence on having a home memorial and giving form to the memorial (and this could, in fact, be put even more strongly, since there were considerably more secular people with a home memorial), experiences of the presence of the dead were found in half of the cases. The experiences of the dead included in many cases references towards a literal influence of the deceased in this world; in other words, referring to literal immortality.

Mourners keep the relationship with the deceased alive by maintaining such a memorial space in their home. We might speak here of transcending relations between the living and the dead, as the mourners feel connected or even unified through certain actions and objects that are associated with the deceased. The material postself is of great importance in creating these transcending relations.

Home memorials are constructed for the dead and they represent these persons' postselves in a material sense. The use of their personal belongings, together with symbols of grief (flowers and candles), gives the home memorial an important place in private ritualizing of mourning, memorializing the dead, but also communicating with them.

Traditionally the house shrine was a sacred place, where one communicated with a higher power (e.g., God or the saints). Home memorials also relate to beliefs about literal immortality but the difference between religious house shrines and home memorials for the dead is that God's existence is not crucial. The continuing relationship with the dead forms the common ground for beliefs and practices with regard to home memorials. The social dimensions of the postself seem also to play a central role in the process of mourning, together with the material representation. In the case of belief in literal immortality, people also speak of a reunion with the dead, when they are able to communicate with them. In this chapter on home memorials it has been shown that here we are dealing with a symbolic reunion with the dead. The dead are integrated into the everyday lives of the living, which speaks to the definition of rites of passage according to Van Gennep and especially mourning rituals as rituals of incorporation.

Furthermore, this study reveals the role of private space in mourning rituals. The results show that continuing bonds with the deceased play a key role in maintaining a home memorial. Hence it can be said that continuing the relationship with the deceased by way of communication (literal and symbolic) accords perfectly with the private setting of the home. The social identity of the deceased is preserved in these private spaces for the dead.

As discussed above, J.Z. Smith (1987) stresses the importance of space in ritual. With the results presented here, I have argued that the memorial serves

as a focusing lens for private remembrance rituals. Moreover, Grimes' concept of re-invention of ritual has been used in order to understand the increase of these home memorials in light of the current developments of re-invention in Western mourning culture. The quantitative results of interpretations of life and death and respondents' descriptions of their experience of the dead show that home memorial keepers tend towards transcendent interpretations of death, but invest these with personal meaning on the basis of their relationship with the deceased, for example, by asking deceased parents for support. Religious affiliation appeared to have no significance in this respect. Most home memorial keepers are secular, but they agree strongly with transcendent interpretations of life and death (the religious-spiritual explanation). Finally, the memorials are associated with mostly positive and comforting feelings. Home memorials are ritual strategies in giving meaning to death and giving it a place.

# Chapter 7
# Conclusion

## 7.1 The postself and notions of immortality

The aim of this research was to give insight in contemporary notions of immortality in relation to the postself in the context of contemporary rituals of dying, death and bereavement in the Netherlands. Throughout this study, the concept of the postself was investigated from different perspectives (the dying and the mourners) and at different ritualizing stages of death (dying, burial and mourning). The second chapter described the theoretical background of the concept of the postself and other literature was compared and contrasted, for example, on the self (James, 1891) and identity development theory (Erikson, 1980/1950) and the concept of symbolic immortality (Lifton, 1976). Immortality was distinguished here as two dimensions: literal and nonliteral immortality. This ranges from concepts where the deceased is literally continuing to exist in another lifeform to social representations of the deceased in terms of memory. In the course of this study, it was revealed that these two extremes can be very closely connected, if not overlapping, in the context of rituals where the mourners are not sure about their beliefs in an afterlife and do not deny a literal posthumous existence.

In general, the results of this study show that the meaning of the postself goes beyond its psychological function in the minds of those imagining their own posthumous reputation (Shneidman, 1973, 2008) and that the postself is also an important concept for mourners in finding meaning of the death of a beloved one. In the process of funeralizing we have seen that the postself has strong social connotation for those preparing for their death as the idea of not wanting to be a burden for others is the most important motivation for arranging one's own funeral. After the funeral planning is concluded, people feel more ready to die, which is why we can speak of a transition in the process of funeralizing. Moreover, the activities around the funeral can lead to a feeling of timelessness and self-transcendence and for some people the planning of the funeral is an emotional journey to the world the dead, albeit only temporarily. In the second part of Chapter 5 on burial, we have seen that

the postself has a central role in creating images of immortality. This means that in rituals, where there is neither a clear religious afterlife concept nor a clear atheistic rejection of an afterlife, mourners use postself elements to create a specific image of an afterlife of the deceased. In more theoretical terms, we can observes nuances in Robert Hertz's classic theory on burial rites as in the context of Dutch society, the three transitive parts (body, soul and mourners) are much more diverse. This is also related to more nuances in the parallel transition of the three parts. Third, in the process of mourning, the analysis of home memorials has shown that the postself of the deceased is integrated in the life of the living. Memories of the deceased loved one have a strong material dimension, as is described elsewhere (Gibson, 2008). Moreover, the postself is not only used in creating a memory of the deceased but can stimulate literal communication with the deceased loved one. The ritual, nonliteral communication with the deceased by means of maintaining a memorial space at home is often related to literal communication with the deceased, such as talking, visualizing or hearing the deceased loved one (Klugman, 2006).

The postself has been found to be an instrument in finding and giving meaning to death in contemporary Dutch society. Moreover, the postself has been found to have a central role in ritualizing death, dying and bereavement. The identity of the deceased offers the frame for how to plan and perform funeral and remembrance rituals. This is in line with the results from the survey on meaning making of death in contemporary Dutch society discussed in this study (SOCON, 2005), where it was shown that personal attitudes on meaning making are of greatest importance for those who are not a member of a church as well as for those who are religiously affiliated.

The underlying question throughout this study was whether the postself, in addition to its social function in creating a memory for after death and maintaining the relationship with the deceased, involves more literal notions of a posthumous existence. Using the terminology of Aleida Assmann, this question refers to the relation between *fama* and *pietas*; or, whether the postself is a form of creating memory after death or also a form of creating an afterlife? The results of this study have shown that there are cases where the postself has a transcending dimension that refers to a higher connectedness of the self with the world, which is mostly the case for those who are unsure about their belief in an afterlife or who believe in 'something'. These cases can often be identified by the religious and spiritual self-definition of the mourners, and not by their church affiliation alone. Whether the postself as memory is to be extended with a meaning implying transcendence depends on whether people believe in a literal afterlife and

the ritual context that the postself is part of. This means that for those who do not believe in an afterlife, the postself is expressed in purely social terms, such as in memories and stories about the life of the deceased. According to Aleida Assmann's (2009/ 1999) theory, we would here speak explicitly about *fama.* The same goes for those who do believe in an afterlife. This could be part of the *pietas*, but as this study has shown this is not necessarily the case, because people create images of an afterlife also outside of collective notions and traditional religiosity. People who do have a clear image of an afterlife refer to the postself as a memory of the deceased's identity. Those who are in doubt, but do not deny the possibility of a literal afterlife, use the postself in defining the posthumous existence of the deceased. Agnostics, people who believe in 'something' after death and those who are simply uncertain about an afterlife use the postself in defining a transcending posthumous existence for the beloved deceased. In terms of ritual, in a traditional religious context there is less room for experimenting with personal notions of immortality, whereas in secular and more liberal religious contexts the mourners are free to express their individual beliefs on where the deceased is after death. Mostly, this form of in-between immortality is localized in this world and in things that are closely related to the identity of the deceased, such as the objects that the deceased used, wore or made during his or her life, in nature where the deceased spend a lot of time during his or her life or in more abstract things like writings, thoughts and statements. The ordinary becomes extraordinary after a person dies. The things that were so common about the beloved, the indistinct, small things about the person, become important clues for memorializing and immortalizing the deceased loved one.

In Figure 7.1, I illustrate how nonliteral and literal notions of immortality are related in contemporary Dutch rituals. We have observed an "in-between" immortality for those who are uncertain about their afterlife beliefs. This individual form of immortality is often localized in this earth, rather than another reality, and is specifically formulated for one deceased loved one. The postself of the deceased is used as frame in order to formulate this "in-between" or "cross-over" immortality. The borders between nonliteral and literal immortality are very fuzzy in rituals where the deceased is neither moving to another world, nor leaving this world. Rituals where mourners can be identified as agnostic and looking for personal concepts of an afterlife often show the most ritual creativity and experimentation with concepts of immortality. The diagram also shows that literal concepts such as the soul and a nonliteral concept, such as the postself, are less clear distinguished as liteal and nonliteral in contemporary rituals around death and bereavement, for example mourners also identify the soul as a nonliteral concept and can

add the postself with literal notions.
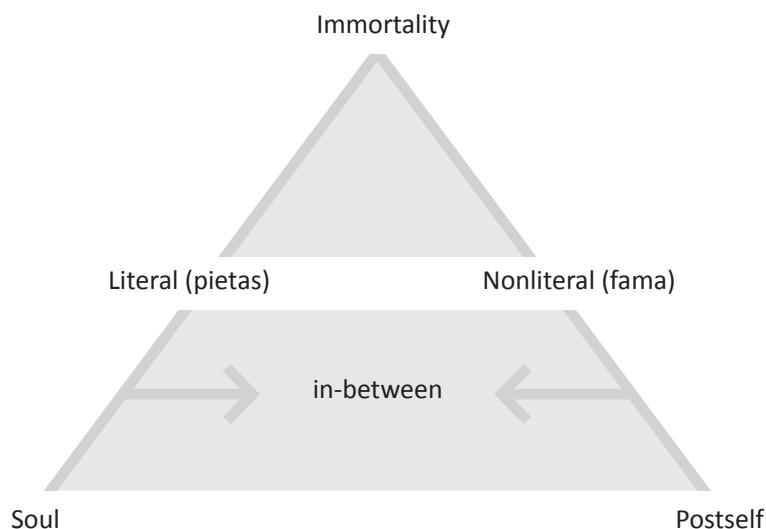


Figure 7.1 Diagram of "in-between" immortality

## 7.2 The postself in rituals of dying, burial and bereavement

*Transcending*
The chapters on the process of dying, more specifically the ritual preparation of one's own death (Chapter 4), burial rituals (Chapter 5) and mourning practices (Chapter 6), have shown that although many people reject institutionalized religiosity in the sense of a belief in a concrete literal afterlife and the use of religious symbols and language, they do not reject the notion of transcending the boundaries of the self after death (Joas, 2008; Knoblauch, 2009). Immortality is then sought for something between the literal and the nonliteral, here referred to as transcending. The drive to continue after death can be satisfied by social and symbolic constructions of the self, and in some cases these social notions are augmented with a more transcendent concept of immortality. This is true for those who are going to die, as well as for those who have lost a loved one. Hubert Knoblauch (2009) argues that contemporary religiosity does not necessarily need transcendence as a complementary objective to immanence. Rather, modern religiosity is striving towards the sense of transcending as an active form and connecting to something bigger than the self. The idea of transcending is similar to what Joas calls 'self-transcendence', but shares a lot too with Lifton's theory

of symbolic immortality, referred to as the wish to feel connected to past, present and future. There is thus a human need for transcending death, which does not necessarily result from a religious, institutionalized or even transcendent perspective. The feeling that everything is connected is part of what is defined as holistic spirituality (Nissen, 2011). According to this world-view, the person sees him or herself as part of something bigger than the self, which fits with the notions of the transcending postself described here.

*Funeralizing*

In the study of ritualizing in the process of planning one's own funeral, it was shown that for some people the sense of being 'dead' is experienced as a strange or even timeless feeling. In the process of funeralizing, which can take weeks, months or even years, the person who is going to die has the feeling of not being a part of everyday life. In the terminology of ritual theory we might speak here of liminality (Turner, 2008/ 1969). The postself is an important instrument in the planning of the funeral, as the person's own identity is used as a frame for meaning and the form of self-planned funerals. However, the most important reason for taking care of funeral arrangements is the desire for not wanting to be a burden for the bereaved. Therefore, the postself has in funeral planning an important social dimension: the wishes for the last ritual take into account the wishes of the bereaved.

In this study of contemporary burial rituals, we have seen that the postself has a central role as part of the general tendency towards a personalized meaning making of death and a personalized funeral. Furthermore, in Chapter 5 I have argued that Hertz's classic model of the interrelation between the body, soul and mourners is more nuanced in contemporary Dutch society. These three 'elements' of a burial ritual have each become more diverse than in a traditional religious context. The treatment of the body takes many forms, the beliefs in an afterlife have become diverse or even vague and there is a lot of variation among the perspectives of mourners on death and funerals. In the study of private home memorials for the dead it was shown that although these are strongly represented among the religiously unaffiliated and the traditionally religious, in the form of religious symbols or language (e.g., the soul), it is not very common. These private rituals express more the belief in transcendence and the ability to communicate with deceased loved ones.

*The postself and unique 'posthumous existence'*

The analysis of the postself in rituals reveals that mourners create an individual immortality that is specifically defined for the particular beloved deceased. This means that the postself transcends social notions of immortality. The

deceased's posthumous existence is localized in elements from their unique biography. Examples of this individual immortality include the localization of the deceased in nature when he or she was a person who enjoyed being in nature. Other examples included the idea of living on in his or her children and grandchildren. Other transcending legacies were formulated in the work of the deceased. There is also a number of vague localizations where the deceased is said to live on in another form, without a specific description what that form is. All these examples come from ritual contexts that were not strictly secular and not strictly religious, which means that there exist in-between or cross-over ritual contexts. However, in religious rituals, where collective notions of an afterlife are represented, the postself is not excluded. Even in rituals with a clear religious liturgy, such as in Islamic burials, we can observe the postself emerging. The unique identity of the deceased is just as important for mourners who are part of a religious community, but in the ritual itself there is less space for exploring the postself. Moreover, the difference with cross-over rituals is that the postself in religious rituals has a purely social notion, representing the past life of the deceased and how he or she was when he or she was still alive, without referring to where the deceased is now.

The analysis of the postself in rituals of dying, death and bereavement has shown that the identity of the deceased is an important theme for the content and form of contemporary rituals. Even in strictly Islamic rituals, we can observe postself notions emerging. In the terminology of Aleida Assmann, we can say that in contemporary Dutch society *fama* has become *pietas*. The representation of the unique identity of the deceased in the death ritual has become an obligation for the mourners. This is also stimulated by the ritual context, which is represented by a greater amount of ritual creativity in contemporary funerary culture, but also by the decrease of the belief in God and a literal afterlife.

*Nonliteral immortality*
In strictly secular rituals, which means those that are planned by a soon-to-be-deceased person who did not believe in an afterlife, there is a focus on social, nonliteral notions of immortality. Social immortality is represented in material objects, the work and hobbies or words of the deceased that are part of their biography. When people do not believe in any form of literal immortality and the wishes of the deceased for the funeral are to not refer to any forms of literal afterlife, we can speak of nonliteral immortality. This does not, however, mean that mourners cannot have their own ideas in their minds. The ritual leader can leave that question open to the audience,

without undermining the belief of the deceased that there is no afterlife.

In institutionalized, religious rituals, where it is believed that the deceased will go to heaven and that his or her soul will leave his body, we observe social representations of the postself (e.g., testament, funeral preparations, choosing burial place or religious songs). These expressions of nonliteral immortality do not go to the same extents as in secular rituals, but still they exist. It is also important to note that people who ritualize their own funeral, but who do not believe in a literal afterlife, do find meaning in the end of their existence. In most research, this atheistic view on death is referred to as 'denial of meaning of death' and is also formulated in negative terms (e.g., "there is no meaning to death"), which is not true for the atheist. Denial of meaning generally scores low in survey studies (see also Chapter 3) and I think that one needs to clarify the meaning making process of atheists not as denial, but as the acceptance of the end of one's existence. The qualitative data in this study has shown that when people are confronted with an incurable or terminal illness, they can find peace in the idea that their existence will come to an end. This is not a denial of an afterlife or meaning of death; it is giving meaning by accepting death as the end.

*Meaning making*
From the quantitative survey data we have seen that a personal approach towards the meaning of death is popular among different groups, religiously unaffiliated and affiliated alike. A religious, transcendent meaning was mostly found among Protestants; however, here personal meaning making also scored highest. This means that processes of individualization are also taking place among church members in the Netherlands. From the qualitative data the nuances of these general outcomes can be highlighted. It was revealed that atheists do not deny meaning of death, but rather find peace in the end of their existence. Some people are very certain that death is the end, while others do not clearly believe in an afterlife, but "leave the back door open". There were cases analyzed where the dying person finds peace in the idea that death is the final end of existence and that there is no literal afterlife. There are also people who describe how they do not believe in an afterlife but end their thoughts with "who knows?". The meaning that is given to the death of the beloved, and in the case of the dying to their own death, is based on social, nonliteral views on immortality. Significant relations, the lived biography and the symbolic legacy of the deceased are here the most important notions of meaning. The social postself is an important part of ritualizing death for those who do not believe in transcendence and posthumous existence.

*Individuality and relatedness*

This study on the postself in contemporary Dutch society raises questions about the relation between individuality and relatedness (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). The postself is in the first instance a way of expressing one's own individuality and uniqueness in death. However, in the results presented here, it was shown that the sense of connectedness with previous and future generations is a subject of importance for those ritualizing death. Therefore, we must also reflect on the relation between individuality and generativity in light of this study. The results have shown that the specific characteristics of the dying and deceased are of great importance in creating notions of nonliteral *and* literal transcendent immortality; this in fact includes the sense of being connected to others. The postself concept depends on being related to others. This relatedness is expressed in rituals, for example, when significant others such as family and friends discuss their individual relationship with the deceased. The connectedness with others also implies the connectedness with present, past and future, which is key in establishing a satisfying sense of identity. The concept of personal identity in contemporary Western society is not a focus on uniqueness only, but also on the relations that make a person unique.

## 7.3 The meaning of death in a secularizing society

In this study, meaning making of death was discussed in the context of secularizing society. Processes of secularization and individualization are strongly visible among religiously affiliated and unaffiliated people. However, the combination of data from quantitative and qualitative data collection shows that secularization and individualization does not mean that there are no references to a transcending connectedness with others or the world in general. The quantitative results reflect the position that meaning is given to death based mostly on personal attitudes and beliefs. Personal attitudes on immortality and the unique destination of the deceased were illustrated by the qualitative data. The postself has been shown to be an important concept in contemporary notions of individual immortality.

In the cases where the postself is connected to notions of transcending the boundaries of memory, the expressions of a posthumous existence are not localized in another world, as is the case in the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence, but rather somewhere in this world. More specifically, the deceased lives on in the things that were typical for him or her and which were part of his or her biography. In that sense, the transition into the world of the dead is not 'complete' as in traditional notions of an

afterlife where the deceased leaves this world. The transcendent approach to the postself means that the deceased does not live on in another form now or in another place outside this world, but that he or she lives on in something that is distinctive for their biography. The deceased lives on in the things that were important to him or her. Transcending death means in this sense remaining in this world and not transforming into another substance in another world. This conclusion is similar to what Hubert Knoblauch (2009) identifies as the active form of transcending.

When taking the results into the cultural context of the Netherlands, we can link them to other studies on religiosity. For example, from the large-scale study 'God in the Netherlands' it was shown that belief in an afterlife has declined since 1966 from 56 % to 40 % in 2006 (Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007). Interestingly, the disbelief in an afterlife has also decreased since 1966 from 36 % to 29 %. However, the uncertainty over whether one believes in an afterlife has increased significantly from 3 % to 31 %. This means that in general, uncertainty about beliefs in an afterlife is increasing while the certainty is decreasing. One third of the Dutch population is unsure about whether there is an afterlife. In this research these people were found to extend the postself by making use of a transcending dimension.

Among the 40 % who do believe in an afterlife, we can observe many nuances in what kind of afterlife they imagine and believe in. In the study by Bernts, Dekker & De Hart (2007) the belief in heaven is represented more strongly than the belief in a soul (52 % and 32 % respectively). For those who are not church members the percentages are reversed, as the religiously unaffiliated believe more in a soul (43 %) than heaven (29 %). Moreover, 30 % of Catholics believe in reincarnation, which is a huge number among Christians. The nuances of these percentages were also shown in the qualitative data collected during this study. Church affiliation does not necessarily define a person's belief. Among church members we can see processes of individualization and fragmentation of belief and the creation of a personal identity and afterlife. For example, the belief in something and the identification with agnosticism, rather than theism, are strongly represented in the Netherlands, also among Catholics (55 % believes in a something rather than a defined God). For Protestants, we see too an increase in 'somethingism' (34 %) but here the belief in one God is stronger (58 %). Somethingism fits with the uncertainty about concepts of an afterlife described above. As the uncertainty about an afterlife is increasing, people look for different options as to how to give form to the concept. The postself is such an option where the individual identity of the deceased is connected to a more literal posthumous existence.

The Netherlands is a secularizing society, which means that the processes

of secularization and individualization of beliefs are not yet finished. It is not clear yet what role institutionalized and non-institutionalized religiosity will have in the future. We can observe a focus on personal meaning making and transcending notions among those dealing with death, whether they are religiously affiliated or not. Compared to other European countries, the Netherlands is strongly secularized based on church membership and participation (Becker & De Hart, 2006). However, the Dutch also have the biggest group of people who are religiously unaffiliated *and* consider themselves as religious (21 %) compared to other European countries. The religious experimental garden in the Netherlands is still flourishing (Janssen, 1998).

*The meaning of 'living on'*
The results of his study have shown that, in general, in the Netherlands there is an acceptance of the transitory character of immortality. There is a great deal of uncertainty about whether people believe in an afterlife and what form this afterlife takes. This also means that the concept of eternity is generally less visible in funeral rites and death memorials. The deceased is represented in what he or she once was, which is not a guarantee for being remembered 'forever' by subsequent generations. Moreover, the individual relation with the deceased is what defines the symbolic, posthumous existence, which necessarily makes immortality a temporal sensation. The mourners who knew the deceased will remember him or her and create a form of social immortality. This social immortality is a temporal phenomenon, which is perhaps a more general trend in contemporary Western societies. The transience of things in life is also found in other life dimensions such as jobs, relations, homes and world-views. In all these domains, choices used to be for a lifetime while in contemporary society people have a temporal commitment. With the accessibility of history in our digital world grows so too the consciousness that everything is part of an era, which will sooner or later come to an end. The postself is a form of transcending death for the funeral or for some years following the death when you are remembered by those who knew you and those who are confronted with your legacy, which gives a sense of symbolic immortality. Asking for an eternal afterlife is less obvious in contemporary Dutch society.

## 7.4 Suggestions for further research
The results of this study also raise questions for new avenues of research and new questions. It would be interesting to study the postself in more

detail in the emerging rituals of migrants in the Netherlands. In this study, I have briefly discussed this subject of burial rituals, but in future research there could be more of a focus on the ritual dynamics in migrant contexts. The beginning of the personalization of Islamic burial rituals would be an interesting case study to focus on in discussing more general topics of cultural identity and integration in Dutch society. What attitudes and beliefs about a personal approach towards death can be observed in the cases of those who originally came from a different cultural and religious background, where the individuality of the deceased is not stimulated?

Another interesting subject that has not been discussed in detail in this study is the role of the postself for processes of self-actualization. In the chapter on the dying process and the planning of the funeral, I discussed the role of the postself in relation to the achievement of a sense of identity in the face of death. But to what extent is the postself a general instrument in finding satisfying forms of self-actualization? What other expressions of the postself, besides the ritualization of one's own death, can be found? We can think of leaving a legacy by donating money to charity and asking mourners to also donate. The postself is revealed in different domains which are not necessarily linked to rituals of death and dying. It would be interesting to broaden the research field of the postself to these other domains. The focus of this research was on immortalizing the self, which means finding ways to transcend the self after death. However, as I suggested earlier, the notion of transitory existence is also something that could be studied in more detail. Is the focus on nonliteral notions of immortality related to the consciousness of relativism in contemporary society? The postself is a glimpse at immortality; it creates a *sense* of immortality and does not establish the notion of 'real' immortality in terms of eternal life. Nevertheless, the postself is an important issue in dealing with dying, death and bereavement in contemporary Dutch society. The postself gives meaning and comfort to those who have lost a loved one and those who are preparing for death.

## 7.5 A last word

Edwin Shneidman discusses, in one of his last interviews in the Los Angeles Times on February 28th in 2009, his perspective on his own postself and notions of immortality. He says that having reached the age of 90, he feels prepared to die and that he does not believe in literal notions of immortality. In this final statement, Shneidman summarizes how a person can reflect on his own posthumous existence. As Shneidman has been my major inspiration throughout this thesis, I want to end it with his words:

I am 90, I don't think I will be 95, 94, I don't think I will be 91. I've expressed disappointment when arriving alive at the ER [Emergency Room], where I sobbed really with disappointment - 'oh damn'. It was the perfect time - to die. And I believe: enough already. A Jew is a person who takes umbrage at an antisemitic remark, that's the kind of Jew I am. Who recognizes that there is a great urge to somehow live on to survive yourself. And you make up in a hereafter [...] and a whole panoply of gods and sub gods and saints and hall of fame. [...] There is no spirit or soul. I will be dead, get that through your thick head, I'll be dead. And I live, in quotation marks, in my children, in my DNA, in my books, in my reputation; it's as simple as that.

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# Appendix

## Chapter 3

In the section *Innovations in Mortuary Rites'* participants were asked if they had experienced the death of a loved one. 46 % of the participants reported to have lost a significant person in their live. Furthermore, we used the principal component analysis that resulted in the following factors: personal meaning, transcendent meaning and denial of meaning.

**Table 3.5** Principal component analysis of meaning of life and death (varimax rotation factor matrix, communalities ($h^2$), percentage of explained variance)

| Item | $h^2$ | F1 | F2 | F3 |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| There is only meaning in suffering and pain if you believe in God | .73 | .85 | | |
| Death has only meaning if you believe in God | .67 | .82 | | |
| Life has only meaning because God exists | .71 | .81 | | |
| Life has meaning because there is something after death | .70 | .72 | | |
| Suffering is bareable if you believe in God | .46 | .67 | | |
| Death is passway to another life | .67 | .67 | | |
| Life has no meaning at all | .52 | | .71 | |
| Life makes not much sense | .50 | | .70 | |
| There is sorrow is, but it has no meaning | .43 | | .60 | |
| After death everything is over | .63 | | .60 | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Death has no meaning at all | .41 | .57 | |
| Suffering has no meaning | .44 | .57 | |
| You have to work through grief and sorrow by yourself | .46 | | .68 |
| You have to give meaning to life by yourself | .46 | | .66 |
| The meaning of life is to make the best of it | .46 | | .66 |
| Death is a natural resting point when life has been lived | .41 | | .60 |
| Death is a part of life | .36 | | .60 |
| Life has the meaning that you give to it | .40 | | .58 |
| **Mean of scale[1]** | | 2.5 | 2.4 | 4.0 |
| **(standarddeviation)** | | (1.0) | (0.7) | (0.6) |
| **Reliability of scale (Cronbach's alpha)** | | .88 | .74 | .70 |
| **Number cases (n)[2]** | | 1096 | 1061 | 1152 |

Explained variance: 52, 3%
[1] Scale from 1 = totally not convinved to 5 = totally convinced
[2] N = 1212
F1 = Transcendent meaning, F2 = Denial of meaning, F3 = Personal meaning.

*Results*

A 2 (deceased loved one yes vs. deceased loved one yes no) x 3 (religious affiliation: unaffiliated vs. Catholic vs. Protestant) MANOVA was conducted on meaning of life and death (personal, transcendent and denial). First of all, there was a significant main effect of death of a loved one on personal meaning $F(1,993) = 10.911$, $p < .001$. Participants who have lost a loved one scored lower on personal meaning ($M = 3.8$, $SD = .027$) than participants who have not ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.32$). There was no significant effect of death of a loved one on Transcendent meaning ($p = .489$) and on denial of meaning ($p = .286$).

Next, we found a significant main effect of religious affiliation on all three forms of meaning: personal, $F(2, 994) = 51,362$, $p < .001$, transcendent, $F(2, 994) = 60.605$, $p < .001$ and denial, $F(2, 994) = 204.958$, $p < .001$. The means in Table 3.1 show that personal meaning was highest among all groups (Unaffiliated $M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.02$, Catholic $M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.04$, Protestant $M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.04$). Second

came the means for Transcendent meaning (Unaffiliated $M$ = 2.1, $SD$ = 0.03, Catholic $M$ = 2.7, $SD$ = 0.06, Protestant $M$ = 3.4, $SD$ = 0.06) and the lowest means were found on denial of meaning (Unaffiliated $M$ = 2.5, $SD$ = 0.03, Catholic $M$ = 2.5, $SD$ = 0.05, Protestant $M$ = 1.9, $SD$ = 0.05). Unaffiliated respondents scored higher on denial of meaning than on transcendent meaning.

**Table 3.1** Means and standard deviations of meaning (Personal, Transcendent, Denial) by religious affiliation

|  | Unaffiliated | Catholic | Protestant |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal | 4.1 (.02) | 4.0 (.04) | 3.6 (.04) |
| Transcendent | 2.1 (.03) | 2.7 (.06) | 3.4 (.06) |
| Denial | 2.5 (.03) | 2.3 (.05) | 1.9 (.05) |

*Note.* Means differ significantly across rows and columns ($p$ < .001), $SD$'s in parentheses.

Moreover, there was a significant interaction of death between a loved one and religious affiliation on personal meaning, $F(2, 994)$ = 7.016 $p$ = .001. The means are shown in Table 3.2 and reveal that Protestants who had lost a loved one generally scored lower on personal meaning, suggesting that experiencing death leads to less effort in searching for meaning in a personal way (Protestant lost loved one $M$ = 3.4, $SD$ = 0.07, Protestant not lost loved one $M$ = 3.8, $SD$ = 0.06). Catholics and religiously unaffiliated respondents did not differ on personal meaning between those who had lost a loved one or not (Catholic lost loved one $M$ = 4.0, $SD$ = 0.05, Catholic not lost loved one $M$ = 4.0, $SD$ = 0.06; unaffiliated lost loved one: $M$ = 4.1, $SD$ = 0.03, Unaffiliated not lost loved one: $M$ = 4.1, $SD$ = 0.03). More in general, Catholics and the religiously unaffiliated scored higher on personal meaning than Protestants. There was no significant interaction effect between death of a loved one and religious affiliation on Transcendent meaning making ($p$ = .86) and denial of meaning ($p$ = .277).

**Table 3.2** Means and standard deviations of two way interaction of religious affiliation and death of a loved one on personal meaning

|  | Deceased loved one | |
|---|---|---|
|  | Yes | No |
| Unaffiliated | 4.1[a] (.03) | 4.1[a] (.03) |
| Catholic | 4.0[a] (.05) | 4.0[a] (.06) |
| Protestant | 3.4[b] (.07) | 3.8[c] (.06) |

*Note.* Across columns, means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p$ < .01), $SD$'s in parentheses.

**Table 3.3** Means (SD) on denial of meaning by gender and covariat age (M = 50.18)

|  | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| Denial | 2.5 (.03) | 2.3 (.03) |

*Note.* $n$ = 1208, $F(1, 1208)$ = 4.773, $p < .05$

**Table 3.4** Pearson correlations on personal, transcendent and denial of meaning

|  | 1. | 2. | 3. |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Personal | 1 |  |  |
| 2. Transcendent | -.236* | 1 |  |
| 3. Denial | .232* | -.466* | 1 |

*Note.* $n$ = 1209, * $p$ < .001. Within Protestants the correlations were much stronger (transcendent and personal $r$ = -.322, $p < .001$, personal and denial $r$ = .443, $p < .001$, transcendent and denial $r$ = -.611, $p < .001$) than within religiously unaffiliated (transcendent and personal $r$ = -.146, $p < .001$, personal and denial $r$ = .140, $p < .001$, transcendent and denial $r$ = -.302, $p < .001$). Within Catholics the correlations were reversed for transcendent and personal $r$ = .183, $p < .01$, denial and personal non significant, transcendent and denial was $r$ = -.304, $p < .001$.

## Chapter 5

In the section *'Innovations in Mortuary Rites'* participants were asked what kind of body disposal they preferred. The answers are reported in Table 5.1 (see Chapter 5) in relation to religious affiliation. In total, 34 % chose for burial, 34 % for cremation, 12 % for donation to science, 16 % leave the decision to survivors, 6 % have not thought about it yet and 3 % reported other. When we take a look at burial, it can be concluded that the largest percentage is found among Protestants (65 %), then Catholics (35 %) and finally the religiously unaffiliated (25 %). Unfortunately, Muslims had to be excluded from the analysis, as this group was underrepresented in this survey. Although burial is the most common among Protestants, the total numbers show that the religiously unaffiliated still form the biggest group within burial ($n$ = 142), as they are in absolute numbers the biggest group in the Netherlands. In the following analyses the smallest percentages (not thought about it and other) were left out.

A 4 (body disposal: burial vs. cremation vs. donation vs. survivors decide) x 3 (religious affiliation: unaffiliated vs. Catholic vs. Protestant) MANOVA was conducted on attitudes of meaning of life and death (personal, transcendent, denial of meaning). First of all, there was a significant main effect of body disposal on all attitudes of meaning: personal $F(3, 918)$ = 10.444, $p < .001$, transcendent $F(3, 918)$ = 9.746, $p < .001$, denial $F(3, 918)$ = 9.975, $p < .001$.

Participants who chose for burial scored higher on transcendent meaning $M = 2.93$, $SD = .05$, compared to participants who chose for cremation $M = 2.6$, $SD = .06$, donation $M = 2.5$, $SD = .103$ or participants who preferred that the survivors decide $M = 2.6$, $SD = .08$. Moreover, participants who chose for burial scored lowest on personal meaning and denial of meaning than the other forms of body disposals: personal meaning: burial $M = 3.82$, $SD = .03$, cremation $M = 4.1$, $SD = .043$, donation $M = 4.1$, $SD = .07$ or survivors $M = 4.04$, $SD = .06$; denial of meaning: burial $M = 2.112$, $SD = .04$, cremation $M = 2.4$, $SD = .05$, donation $M = 2.5$, $SD = .09$ or survivors $M = 2.313$, $SD = .07$.

In addition, there was a significant main effect of relígous affiliation on all attitudes of meaning: personal $F(2, 918) = 7.196$, $p < .001$, transcendent $F(2, 918) = 88.472$, $p < .001$ and denial of meaning $F(2, 018) = 18.508$, $p < .001$. Participants who consider themselves as religiously unaffiliated and Catholic scored highest on personal meaning: ($M = 4.1$, $SD = .025$ and $M = 4.1$, $SD = .042$ respectively, compared to Protestants ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .064$). The religiously unaffiliated agreed least with transcendent meaning ($M = 2.1$, $SD = .036$) compared to Catholics and Protestant who showed more agreement ($M = 2.8$, $SD = .059$ and $M = 3.12$, $SD = .089$ respectively). A denial of meaning making was slightly represented among the religiously unaffiliated ($M = 2.6$, $SD = .030$), and least among Catholics ($M = 2.3$, $SD = .05$) and Protestants ($M = 2.13$, $SD = .076$).

Finally there was a significant two-way interaction between body disposal and religious affiliation on all three attitudes of meaning: personal $F(6, 918) = 4.509$, $p < .001$, transcendent $F(6, 918) = 2.315$, $p < .05$ and denial $F(6, 918) = 5.072$, $p < .001$. The means and standard deviations are presented in Tables 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5.

**Table 5.3** Means and standard deviations of two-way interaction of religious affiliation and way of body disposal on personal meaning

| Personal | Unaffiliated | Catholic | Protestant | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burial | 4.1[a] (.05) | 3.9[a] (.07) | 3.4[b] (.05) | 3.8 (.03) |
| Cremation | 4.1[a] (.04) | 4.2[c] (.07) | 4.0[d] (.10) | 4.1 (.04) |
| Donation | 4.2[a] (.06) | 4.1[a] (.10) | 3.9[d] (.18) | 4.1 (.07) |
| Survivors | 4.1[a] (.05) | 4.0[a] (.09) | 4.1[d] (.13) | 4.0 (.06) |

*Note.* $n = 918$, across rows and columns means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .001$)

**Table 5.4** Means and standard deviations of two-way interaction of religious affiliation and way of body disposal on transcendent meaning

| Transcendent | Unaffiliated | Catholic | Protestant | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burial | 2.3[a] (.07) | 2.7[b] (.07) | 3.8[c] (.08) | 2.9 (.05) |
| Cremation | 2.1[d] (.05) | 2.9[e] (.10) | 2.9[f] (.14) | 2.6 (.06) |
| Donation | 2.0[d] (.09) | 2.8[e] (.10) | 2.7[f] (.26) | 2.5 (.10) |
| Survivors | 2.0[d] (.08) | 2.7[e] (.12) | 3.1[f] (.19) | 2.6 (.05) |

*Note.* $n = 918$, across rows and columns means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .001$)

**Table 5.5** Means and standard deviations of two-way interaction of religious affiliation and way of body disposal on denial of meaning

| Denial | Unaffiliated | Catholic | Protestant | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burial | 2.5[a] (.05) | 2.2[b] (.08) | 1.7[c] (.07) | 2.1 (.04) |
| Cremation | 2.6[d] (.04) | 2.3[e] (.09) | 2.3[f] (.12) | 2.4 (.05) |
| Donation | 2.7[d] (.08) | 2.4[e] (.12) | 2.4[f] (.22) | 2.5 (.09) |
| Survivors | 2.5[d] (.06) | 2.4[e] (.11) | 2.2[f] (.16) | 2.3 (.06) |

*Note.* $n = 918$, across rows and columns means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$)

**Table 5.6** Observation scheme for burial rituals (based on Grimes' components of ritual, 1999)

General questions: to what extent are literal and nonliteral dimensions of the postself represented in contemporary burial rituals in the Netherlands? What kinds of notions of an afterlife are represented? Which elements are personal, which are traditionally religious?

| General characteristics deceased |
|---|
| Age/ gender/ cause of death/ religious self-definition?: |
| Audience (specific clothing? other prominent characteristics?) |
| Actions/ performances (e.g. blessing of coffin, bowing in front of coffin, is coffin brought into the room, is audience walking by coffin?) |

| Space/ Place (what kind of building? where is coffin?) |
| --- |
| Sacred space? Secular space? |
| |
| Objects (e.g. cross, personal objects?) |
| |
| |
| Figures and roles (e.g. who are speakers? Is there a ritual presider? References towards God or other higher power? What is the role of deceased?) |
| Traditional (religious leader?), Personal  (family, friends?) |
| |
| Language (e.g. how do people speak about deceased? use of poems/music lyrics? Other quotes? Life story?) |
| Traditional  (e.g. heaven, soul, angel, spirit, God, higher power) Personal (e.g. rest in peace) Nonliteral – literal? |
| Sounds (music, songs) |
| |
| |
| Texts (which texts are presented?) |
| |
| |
| Beliefs in life after death (visable in what is said/ presented? different views?) |
| |

# Chapter 6

Crosstabs analysis by gender, age group and religious affiliation on home memorial (HM) based on SOCON 2005.

**Table 6.1** Percentages of gender and home memorial (HM) in the Netherlands (Crosstabs Analysis)

| Home memorial | Male | Female | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Yes | 30 ($n$ = 142) | 39 ($n$ = 222) | 36 ($n$=364) |
| No | 70 ($n$ = 314) | 61 ($n$ = 345) | 65 ($n$=685) |

*Note. $n$ = 1049, $p$ < .001*

**Table 6.2** Percentages of age groups and home memorial (HM) in the Netherlands (Crosstabs Analysis)

| HM | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 60-69 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 24 (*n*=16) | 25 (*n*=47) | 32 (*n*=75) | 41 (*n*=92) | 42 (*n*=101) |
| No | 76 (*n*=51) | 75 (*n*=138) | 68 (*n*=163) | 59 (*n*=133) | 58 (*n*=142) |

*Note. n* = 1049, *p* < .001

**Table 6.3** Percentages of religious affiliation and home memorial (HM) in the Netherlands (Crosstabs Analysis)

| HM | Catholic | Unaffiliated | Protestant | Other* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 43 (n=90) | 34 (n=212) | 31 (n=50) | 27 (n=12) |
| No | 57 (n=121) | 66 (n=418) | 69 (n=113) | 73 (n=33) |

*Note. n* = 1049, *p* < .01, *other means religious minorities in this sample Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims

**Table 6.4** Correlations between duration home memorial (HM), prayer and meaning of life and death

|  | 1. |
|---|---|
| 1. HM | 1 |
| 2. Personal | -.073* |
| 3. Transcendent | .31* |
| 4. Denial | -.21* |
| 5. Prayer | .479** |

*Note.* ** *p* < .001, * *p* < .01, *n* = 1211

The follow-up data on home memorials resulted from the SOCON 2007 sample was conducted by researchers of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Radboud University Nijmegen. The sample consisted of 506 respondents from which 138 reported having a home memorial.

**Table 6.5** Open questions on home memorials used in SOCON 2007

| |
|---|
| 1. People sometimes arrange a memorial space in their homes in order to remember a deceased loved one, e.g. with pictures, candles, and/ or flowers. Did you ever arrange a memorial space for a deceased loved one in your home? (Answer: yes/ no) |
| 2. When did you arrange the home memorial? (Answer: year: ….) |
| 3. What was the reason for you to arrange a home memorial? (Open answer) |
| 4. Where in your house do you have arranged a home memorial? (Open answer) |

5. Can you describe which objects you have placed on the home memorial?

   Are there objects included which belonged to the deceased? (Open answer)

6. Were in the course of time objects added or

removed from the home memorial? If yes,

   which objects? (Answer: objects added: ….; objects removed: …)

7. What emotions are revealed this home memorial to you? (Answer open)

8. Do you ever experience the presence of the deceased?

If yes, can you describe in what way?

9. Would you describe the home memorial as saint? (Answer: yes/no)

10. Imagine if someone did arrange a home memorial for you.

How would you like it to look like? (Answer: open)

# Nederlandse samenvatting

## "Ik ben dood, dus ik ben"
## Het postself en noties van onsterfelijkheid in de hedendaagse Nederlandse samenleving

Nederland is een geseculariseerd land waarin traditionele, geïnstitutionaliseerde kerkelijkheid is afgenomen. Ondanks dat zijn religiositeit en spiritualiteit niet verdwenen, maar hebben eerder andere vormen gekregen. Religiositeit buiten de kerkelijke traditie kan zeer gevarieerd zijn en is een individuele zaak geworden. Hierdoor zijn hedendaagse geloofsopvattingen moeilijk in kaart te brengen. Uit eerder onderzoek naar geloofsvoorstellingen van een leven na de dood in Nederland valt op dat de afgelopen 40 jaar niet alleen het geloven in een leven na de dood is afgenomen, maar ook het niet geloven. Dat betekent dat de onzekerheid over het geloven in een leven na de dood significant is toegenomen. In de hedendaagse Nederlandse samenleving is er dus aan de ene kant een afname van traditionele religiositeit te zien, maar aan de andere kant een toename aan rituelen rondom de dood en de focus op persoonlijke zingeving rondom de dood. Dit wordt zichtbaar in de groei en de professionalisering van de uitvaartindustrie met daarbij een nadruk op emoties, zingeving en spiritualiteit. De focus in rituelen rondom de dood wordt gelegd op de individuele identiteit van de overledene en diens levensbiografie. De vraag van dit onderzoek is in hoeverre de identiteit van de overledene ook als kader dient voor hedendaagse geloofsopvattingen rondom de dood. Dat wil zeggen dat nabestaanden na het overlijden van een dierbare en inmiddels ook de stervenden voor hun dood steeds meer zelf invulling willen geven aan de uitvaart- en rouwrituelen, maar de vraagt blijft of hier ook sprake is van noties van een leven na de dood.

Het doel van dit proefschrift is om hedendaagse noties van een leven na de dood nader in kaart te brengen door het bestuderen van rituelen rondom de dood. Hierbij worden de perspectieven van de stervende en de rouwende aangenomen. Het theoretisch concept dat in dit proefschrift centraal staat, het postself van suïcïdoloog Edwin Shneidman, verwijst naar de manier hoe mensen na hun dood herinnerd willen worden. Het postself manifesteert zich in hedendaagse rituelen rondom de dood op verschillende manieren, zoals door de stervende die zijn eigen uitvaart plant of de rouwende die de

identiteit van de gestorvene als leidraad voor de invulling van de uitvaart gebruikt. De introductie van dit proefschrift eindigt met de vraag wat de rol van het postself is bij het construeren van hedendaagse noties van onsterfelijkheid en hierbij wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen letterlijke en niet-letterlijke onsterfelijkheid. De onderzoeksvraag is: wat is de rol van het postself bij het construeren van noties van onsterfelijkheid in hedendaagse rituelen rondom de dood?

Op grond van deze indeling van een letterlijke en niet-letterlijke dimensie van onsterfelijkheid wordt in hoofdstuk 2 het concept van het postself verder theoretisch uitgewerkt. Het postself wordt vergeleken met andere concepten van identiteit, zoals Erik Eriksons' begrip van 'generativity' en William James' dimensies van het zelf (materieel, sociaal and spiritueel). Deze concepten verwijzen vooral naar de betekenis van sociale identiteit en de erbij horende bijdrage die mensen aan de maatschappij leveren. In deze studie gaan wij een stap verder door ons af te vragen in hoeverre het postself ook transcendente noties heeft en in hoeverre het samenhangt met het geloof in een letterlijk leven na de dood. Het concept van het postself heeft ook overeenkomsten met het perspectief van Robert Lifton over een symbolische onsterfelijkheid. Symbolische onsterfelijkheid verwijst naar de menselijke drang om deel uit te maken van iets dat groter is dan het eigen zelf; het is een ervaring waarin men zich verbonden voelt met de geschiedenis. Een gevoel van symbolische onsterfelijkheid kan gecreëerd worden zonder dat er sprake is van een kerkelijke religiebeleving, maar sluit deze niet uit. In Liftons perspectief wordt de basis gelegd van hoe het postself in deze studie wordt gehanteerd: het is in eerste instantie een niet-religieus concept, maar het sluit belevingen van transcendentie niet uit. Het hoofdstuk eindigt met een werkdefinitie van het postself in relatie tot onsterfelijkheid. Het postself wordt onderzocht op basis van materiële, sociale en individuele uitingsvormen in de context van rituelen. Deze in eerste instantie niet-letterlijke manieren van onsterfelijkheid worden in deze studie onderzocht om te kijken of er ook letterlijke noties van het postself in hedendaagse rituelen rondom de dood bestaan.

In hoofdstuk 3 worden de sociaal-culturele en historische veranderingen in het omgaan met de dood in de afgelopen eeuw besproken. Ontwikkelingen rondom het sterven, zoals thuis of in het ziekenhuis, de aanwezigheid van familie en vrienden rondom het sterfbed en de individualisering van rituelen rondom de dood komen hierin aan bod. Het hoofdstuk eindigt met een analyse van de eerste empirische data in dit onderzoek in vorm van een vragenlijstonderzoek ($n$ = 1212). In deze kwantitatieve analyse wordt vooral gekeken naar de relatie tussen kerklidmaatschap en opvattingen rondom de dood. Hier wordt een theoretisch onderscheid gemaakt tussen een

persoonlijke zingeving, een transcendente zingeving en een ontkenning van een zin van leven en dood. Uit de gegevens blijkt dat Nederlanders over het algemeen sterk geïndividualiseerd zijn. Dat betekent dat buitenkerkelijken en kerkelijken het hoogste scoren op persoonlijke zingeving. Daarnaast lijken katholieken qua opvattingen zeer op buitenkerkelijken, door minder geloof in een transcendente zingeving. Het hoog scoren op een persoonlijke zingeving kan deels worden verklaard door het feit dat deze vrij neutraal is geformuleerd, wat dus niet samengaat met een bepaalde overtuiging. De transcendente zingeving daarentegen verwijst naar een God en een transcendente werkelijkheid als bronnen van zin. Als men kijkt naar de relatie tussen het ervaren van een overlijden in de nabije omgeving en zingeving, dan is er alleen een samenhang te vinden bij de groep protestanten die dan minder persoonlijke zin ervaren. Volgens deze eerste analyse kunnen wij zien dat protestanten meer berusten op hun meer traditioneel geloof en katholieken, net zoals buitenkerkelijken, meer variatie tonen in hun zingeving en vooral zoeken naar een persoonlijke invulling van zin rondom de dood. Deze eerste meer algemene bevindingen worden in de volgende hoofdstukken verder toegespitst door gebruik te maken van kwalitatieve data en te focussen op rituelen rondom sterven, begrafenis en rouw.

In hoofdstuk 4 wordt het sterfproces bestudeerd aan de hand van een specifieke casus, namelijk het in toenemende mate populair worden van het zelf plannen van de eigen uitvaart voor de dood. Uit de analyse van tien casussen door middel van interviews met uitvaartplanners en door middel van documentenanalyse van deze zelfgeplande uitvaarten komt naar voren dat er een sterke nadruk wordt gelegd op de sociale dimensie van het plannen van de eigen uitvaart, naast de praktische en financiële overwegingen. Dat wil zeggen dat vanuit het perspectief van de uitvaartplanners de voorbereiding op zich wordt genomen om toekomstige nabestaanden niet tot last te willen zijn. De hedendaagse vorm van uitvaartrituelen in Nederland vraagt echter om een reflectie van de eigen individualiteit wat ook als zingevend wordt ervaren. De eigen biografie en belangrijke relaties dienen als kader om vorm te geven aan het laatste afscheid. Bovendien kan de planning als een transcenderende ervaring worden beleefd, wanneer er door de planning van de eigen uitvaart een emotionele transitie plaatsvindt. Tijdens de planning gaat men over de eigen dood heen; er wordt gesproken van een gevoel van tijdloosheid. Nadat de planning is afgerond voelen mensen zich voorbereid op de dood en in het geval van een terminale ziekte voelen zij zich bereid om te sterven.

In hoofdstuk 5 ligt de focus op concepten van onsterfelijkheid in de context van hedendaagse begrafenisrituelen. In het klassieke werk van

Robert Hertz wordt de relatie gelegd tussen het lichaam, de ziel en de nabestaanden die gezamenlijk een transitie in de uitvaart meemaken. In dit hoofdstuk wordt een nuancering van Hertz' model besproken in de context van de hedendaagse Nederlandse samenleving, waarin de drie elementen van het begrafenisritueel (lichaam, ziel en nabestaanden) gevarieerder zijn en waardoor de relaties ook gevarieerder zijn. Ten eerste wordt er gekeken naar kwantitatieve gegevens, met name welke sociaal-democratische achtergrond hebben mensen die de voorkeur hebben voor begraven. Het valt op dat buitenkerkelijken kiezen voor verschillende vormen van lijkbezorging (25 % begraven, 43 % cremeren, 13 % ter beschikking stellen aan de wetenschap en 19 % over laten aan nabestaanden). Een soortgelijke verdeling is ook voor katholieken te vinden, waarvan ongeveer een derde kiest voor begraven, een derde voor cremeren en de rest voor ter beschikking stellen en het overlaten aan de nabestaanden. De groep protestanten wijkt ook hiervan af, zoals in hoofdstuk 3, doordat zij significant vaker voor begraven kiezen (65 %) waardoor de andere opties in mindere mate vertegenwoordigd zijn. Als men kijkt naar de relatie tussen opvattingen rondom de dood en verschillende vormen van lijkbezorging dan wordt duidelijk dat protestanten die voor begraven kiezen de meest traditionele opvattingen hebben, en dat katholieken die voor crematie kiezen meer geloven in een transcendente zingeving dan katholieken die begraven. De resultaten van deze kwantitatieve studie laten zien dat kerklidmaatschap voor katholieken niet samengaat met traditionele opvattingen van een transcendente werkelijkheid. De vraag blijft welke vormen van onsterfelijkheid door buitenkerkelijken en katholieken worden aangehouden tijdens daadwerkelijke uitvaarten. Als deze qua opvattingen rondom zingeving op elkaar lijken, zijn er dan ook overeenkomsten te vinden in de daadwerkelijke rituelen?

In het tweede deel van hoofdstuk 5 worden de kwalitatieve data bestudeerd die verzameld zijn tijdens participerende observaties op twee Nederlandse begraafplaatsen. Hierbij worden 30 gevolgde begrafenissen geanalyseerd. Zo heeft het postself vooral een niet-letterlijke vorm bij strikt seculiere begrafenissen waar geen verwijzingen naar vormen van letterlijke onsterfelijkheid te vinden zijn. Bij religieuze begrafenissen waar wel duidelijke voorstellingen van een letterlijk leven na de dood vertegenwoordigd zijn heeft het postself ook een niet-letterlijke vorm. Met andere woorden, zowel in seculiere begrafenissen als in religieuze begrafenissen heeft het postself een puur sociale functie: een representatie van de herinneringen aan de overledene. In de hier beschreven "cross-over" begrafenissen, die de meest interessante casus vormen, valt op dat er een mix van religieuze en seculiere elementen in het ritueel te zien zijn. Het postself wordt in deze vorm van

begrafenissen gekoppeld aan transcendente elementen waarin de overledene niet weg is van deze wereld maar blijft voortbestaan in de dingen die hij of zij heeft achtergelaten. Deze individuele vorm van onsterfelijkheid wordt voor die ene specifieke overledene geformuleerd. De overledene leeft volgens de rouwende 'letterlijk' voort in de dingen die hij heeft achterlaten. De overledene is dus niet geheel weg, maar hij is ook niet duidelijk naar een andere plaats of een andere vorm getransformeerd. In sommige uitvaarten worden verschillende verwijzingen naar onsterfelijkheid genoemd en wordt er niet voor één uitdrukking gekozen. Dat betekent dat er ook een vaagheid rondom het concept onsterfelijkheid wordt geaccepteerd. Dit komt overeen met de eerder genoemde cijfers uit onderzoek naar opvattingen van een leven na de dood in Nederland: een derde weet niet zeker of zij geloven in een leven na de dood.

In hoofdstuk 6 wordt het rouwproces bestudeerd vanuit het fenomeen van hedendaagse thuisgedenkplekken voor de overledenen. Er wordt gebruik gemaakt van een vragenlijstonderzoek naar deze gedenkplekken ($n$ = 1212) en een follow-up vragenlijstonderzoek met open vragen ($n$ = 506). Zo blijkt dat 30 % van de Nederlandse bevolking een gedenkplek in huis heeft waarin de foto, bloemen, kaarsen en persoonlijke objecten van de overledene te zien zijn. Deze dienen als persoonlijke gedenkmomenten en hebben een ondersteunende functie bij het verwerken van de rouw, maar hebben ook een transcendente dimensie. Voor een groot deel van de respondenten dienen deze plekken als communicatiemedium met de doden. De communicatie uit zich in niet-letterlijke vormen, door bijvoorbeeld symbolische handelingen (het branden van kaarsjes of het verwisselen van bloemen), maar ook letterlijke vormen door het praten met, horen of ervaren van de overledene. Er is een sterke correlatie tussen de duur dat een gedenkplek wordt bijgehouden en het bidden. De thuisgedenkplekken zijn een mooi voorbeeld van een in eerste instantie geïndividualiseerd ritueel, dat in grote aantallen door buitenkerkelijken wordt uitgevoerd die wel op zoek zijn naar spiritualiteit en iets wat de grenzen van het eigen zelf overstijgt.

De belangrijkste conclusies worden in hoofdstuk 7 besproken. Ten eerste is uit dit onderzoek gebleken dat het postself sterk aanwezig is in hedendaagse rituelen rondom de dood in Nederland. De functie van het postself is echter afhankelijk van de geloofsvoorstellingen van de stervende, overledene en nabestaanden. In rituelen waar duidelijke voorstellingen van een leven na de dood vertegenwoordigd zijn, zoals bij religieuze en kerkelijke gemeenschappen, heeft het postself een puur sociale functie. Dat wil zeggen dat het postself de herinneringen aan het leven van de overledene en de dingen die hij heeft achtergelaten vertegenwoordigt. Hetzelfde geldt voor

rituelen van personen en groepen die duidelijk niet in een leven na de dood geloven, zoals uitgesproken atheïsten. Ten tweede blijkt uit deze studie dat het postself aan een transcenderende dimensie wordt gekoppeld, in rituelen die gepland zijn door individuen die niet zeker zijn of zij in een leven na de dood geloven en die niet zeker zijn welke vorm dit dan zou hebben. Het postself dat sowieso een prominente plek heeft in rituelen rondom de dood wordt dan gebruikt als notie van onsterfelijkheid voor die ene specifieke overledene. De gestorvene is bijvoorbeeld te vinden in de natuur waar hij graag kwam, in de persoonlijke objecten die hij heeft achtergelaten of andere plekken die hij zelf voor de uitvaart tijdens de planning (van tevoren dus) heeft gespecificeerd. Wanneer de nabestaanden ook geen duidelijke voorstellingen van een leven na de dood hebben, wordt hier dankbaar gebruik van gemaakt om een plek voor de overledene te vinden. Vaak is deze tussenvorm van onsterfelijkheid op deze aarde te vinden en niet in een andere werkelijkheid, zoals bij traditionele, collectieve hiernamaals voorstellingen. De doden blijven dus op deze aarde en transformeren niet in een andere vorm, zoals bij de ziel of de hemel. Ten derde is uit de kwalitatieve resultaten van deze studie aangetoond dat atheïsten een duidelijke zingeving rondom de dood kunnen ervaren doordat zij in het einde van hun letterlijke bestaan geloven. Het gaat hier dus niet om een ontkenning van een zin van de dood, zoals vaak in kwantitatieve meetinstrumenten wordt genoemd, maar het gaat om een acceptatie van de eigen sterfelijkheid. Het postself heeft ook hier een puur sociale functie: het representeert herinneringen aan de overledene en dingen die hij heeft achtergelaten, maar er wordt niet verwezen naar een letterlijk voortbestaan van de gestorvene. Tot slot is ook duidelijk geworden dat de onzekerheid rondom voorstellingen van onsterfelijkheid, die een derde van de Nederlandse bevolking, ook geaccepteerd wordt in rituelen rondom de dood. Dit wordt zichtbaar in dat het soms open wordt gelaten waar de overledene zich bevindt en of er sprake is van een leven na de dood.

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# About the author

Joanna Wojtkowiak (1982) was born in Żnin (Poland) and moved to Germany at the age of six where she finished her highschool education (Abitur). After a year of voluntary work, she moved to the Netherlands and started her Master education at the Radboud University Nijmegen at the Department of Psychology. After specializing in Cultural psychology she knew that she wanted to do research. From April 2007 to March 2011, she conducted her PhD research at the Faculty of Religious Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Her publications include articles and book chapters on the subjects of death, meaning making, and the postself. Currently she works at the VU University Medical Center in Amsterdam researching ethics of medical care.