What makes conversations about death with strangers enjoyable? Applying a neo-tribal lens to the Death Café interaction

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ABSTRACT

Death Café is a not-for-profit international social franchise founded in 2011 in London. This paper is based on the most extensive empirical research of Death Cafés to date, examining the content of Death Café conversations. I interrogate the finding that, alongside talking directly about death and dying, people at a Death Café consistently talk about the value of being at a Death Café and about the value of talking about death. I introduce three main ways that talking about the value of conversations about death appears in a Death Café and, most importantly, I argue that talking about the value of conversations about death is an enjoyable part of the conversation in its own right. I use neo-tribal theory and its concept of aesthetics as 'a way of feeling in common' and 'a means of recognising ourselves' to examine this further. When talking about the value of conversations about death, Death Café participants reflexively consider the activity they are engaging in= together, which strengthens the feeling of collectivity, and bonds them into a neo-tribe. This paper demonstrates that Death Café is a valued form of social interaction, moving it away from the current academic attempts to discover Death Café's instrumental utility.

Introduction and rationale for the paper

Death Café events are informal, pop-up gatherings where people, usually strangers, come together to engage in an unguided conversation about death, dying and grief. The first Death Café was held on 25 September 2011, in London (Underwood, 2011). This not-for-profit international social franchise is the brainchild of British council worker and web-designer Jon Underwood and his mother Sue Barsky. Underwood was inspired by Café Mortel created in 2004 in Switzerland by sociologist and anthropologist Bernard Crettaz (Underwood, 2014). There is a Death Café guide (*Holding your own Death Cafe*. n.d.: https://deathcafe.com/how) which outlines the principles of Death Café and provides guidance and advice for holding your own event. To summarise the lengthy and detailed document, Death Café should be an unguided conversation without predetermined

themes or leading the attendees to any conclusions. They should also be held in a voluntary (instead of strictly professional) capacity without remuneration beyond attendees voluntarily purchasing any refreshments or choosing to donate towards the hire of the venue (*Holding your own Death Cafe* n.d.)

Hospice worker Lizzy Miles is a major proponent of Death Café in the USA and was the first person to pick the idea up outside the UK with a Death Café in Ohio held on 19 July 2012. In a paper 'Death Café: What is it and What Can we learn from it?' Miles and her colleague Charles Corr claimed that Death Café is 'truly unique as compared with other end-of-life community initiatives in that there is no ideology or agenda for the gathering' (Miles & Corr, 2017, p. 152). This is indeed the ideal of Death Café philosophy as outlined in the Death Café guide, but in practice, many events that are called Death Cafés go beyond Death Café's non-directed, voluntary philosophy and have been applied in various contexts with a goal of getting people to talk about death, especially in the context of compassionate communities (Abel & Clarke, 2020, p. 67), broader policy objectives, public health campaigns (Public Health England, 2016, p. 14; Guy's and St. Thomas NHS Foundation Trust, 2018), various charity and coalition public-facing activities in the UK and beyond (Herring & Purser, 2018, Sheffield Hallam University, 2015; Beard et al., 2017).

As part of their study mapping the scope of the movement and organisers' motivations and perceptions, Richards et al. (2020, p. 567) distinguished between 'instrumental', or 'strategic', and outcomes-driven usage of the Death Café model; and the use that is more akin to the original ethos of imparting 'a sense of *carpe diem'* (Richards et al., 2020), where any tangible effects, such as making an advance care plan would be considered 'incidental' (Richards et al., 2020). Significantly, the majority of existing academic publications focus on the instrumental use of Death Café, attempt to place Death Café as a useful tool to start end-of-life conversations and to measure its benefit. This is done without a strong empirical basis about what is going on within Death Café events. For example, Fong's (2017) ambitious claim that Death Café is a bona fide transformative and existential social movement is based on data from just 5 Death Cafés.

In contrast to this, my empirical research is unique as it aims to capture the dynamics within Death Café events that attempt to operate as intended in the Death Café guidelines: to talk about death with strangers with no defined outcome. In my research, I focused on what happens at the Death Café itself, instead of focusing on the Death Café *event* as an instrument to achieve any tangible effects, such as reduce clinician burnout (Hammer et al., 2019), promoting death literacy (Laranjeira et al., 2022) or to raise awareness of hospice service (Adler et al., 2015). I argue that this original ethos of Death Café is an interesting phenomenon in itself and turning our academic attention towards it can be a useful tool in expanding the applicability of certain theoretical frameworks, in this paper specifically, neo-tribal theory. One of the first observations I made during fieldwork that was confirmed time and time again was that people at a Death Café talk about the value of being at a Death Café. It was especially prevalent during the end of meeting reflections, where attendees often highlighted how much they appreciated the opportunity to talk about death without judgement and in a casual environment. Attendees talked about talking about death throughout the event as well. Many times, they were not exchanging specific advice or sharing information but mused about the fact that there was no death talk 'in our society' and how helpful it is to talk about death. To see how prevalent the conversations about the value of Death Café and

the necessity to talk about death actually were in the recorded Death Café conversations, please refer to Appendix A. I found that in many of the conversations, discussing the features and value of Death Café itself, and as such reflecting on having the opportunity to talk about death were as significant conversation topics as death itself, if not at times more prevalent. This finding prompted me to place attention on talking about the value of conversations about death as a prominent, but academically overlooked feature of Death Café interaction'. The literature on Death Cafés is important to outline because it provides a rationale for choosing the theoretical lens I approached Death Café with – neo-tribal theory – and I will do so now.

Death Café in academic literature

Many of academic publications on Death Cafés are in the form of conference abstracts (Adler et al., 2015; Allen & Martin, 2019; Bell, 2018; L. Green et al., 2016; Hammer et al., 2019; Herring & Purser, 2018), reflections on hosting Death Cafés (Clark McGhee et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2021; Skilbeck, 2015), interviews (Moynihan, 2015), podcast summaries (Morgan, 2017), commentaries (Hammer et al., 2019), and editorials (Flegel & Patrick, 2016; B. Nyatanga, 2017; N. Nyatanga, 2017). On a rare occasion that Death Café events are researched for peer-reviewed publications, the findings are limited to simple content summaries (Parry et al., 2021). The most notable efforts to apply any theory to Death Café come from Glasgow End Of Life Studies group (Koksvik & Richards, 2021; Richards et al., 2020). Other studies examine using the Death Café model as a 'debriefing session' (Bateman et al., 2020); to combat clinician burnout (Oliveira et al., 2021); and enhance workplace culture in a healthcare setting (Nelson et al., 2018). These studies argue that the Death Café model can be adapted to professional medical settings and the approach may be useful for institutions seeking to provide additional learning opportunities for students and healthcare professionals (Howorth et al., 2018; Olives et al., 2020). This instrumental usage of Death Café might be prioritised because of the planning required for a massively ageing population which is a concern for healthcare. However, it is necessary to remember it is not the only light to examine Death Cafés in. Several authors have reflected on enjoyment of each other's company at a Death Café as it is one of the most easily observable features of Death Café interaction (e.g. Koksvik & Richards, 2021; Seifu et al., 2022). However, it has not been the focus of analyses in any of these mentioned studies. On the other side of the spectrum, in two key publications, the togetherness experienced at a Death Café has been presented as part of grandiose transformative social movement narratives (Fong, 2017; Miles & Corr, 2017). There is one notable example of moving away from narratives of action, effectiveness and measuring outcomes when researching Death Cafés in a measured way - Koksvik and Richards (2021). There, rather than viewing Death Cafés primarily as spaces for death awareness-raising, they draw on Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity (1992, 2000, 2002) to conceive of Death Cafés as 'peg communities' where people strive for human connection to counter the dislocation and loneliness of late modern societies. Indeed, Death Cafés have arisen at a similar time to other initiatives emphasising the importance of being together in conversation, such as Happy Café (Action for Happiness, 2015), Memory Café for dementia patients and their carers (Miesen & Jones, 2004), Climate Café (Gribkoff, 2021; Pepper, 2015), Talking Café (Abel & Clarke, 2020, p. 67) Menopause Café (Weiss, 2017), even some educational

initiatives, such as *Café Scientifique* (Grand, 2014), mental wellbeing focused Frazzled Café (Wax, 2017), Chatty Café to battle loneliness (The Chatty Café Scheme, 2020). The growing attention on the need for social interaction also means acknowledging that some people might attend Death Cafés to fulfil the need for socialising. Thus, I argue that the social aspect of Death Café meetings must not be overlooked in favour of focusing on the frequently evoked notion that people have gathered to 'break a taboo'. In other words, researchers must not lose sight that Death Café is as much about people, as it is about death.

This paper focuses on the novel finding that talking about the value of conversations about death (i.e. talking about the value of Death Café while being engaged in the Death Café) is a significant part of the Death Café interaction. The paper proceeds as follows: I briefly outline the methodology and methods used for this research, then introduce my theoretical framework – Michel Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory. In this paper specifically I introduce and use the concept of neo-tribal aesthetics. I then present the empirical material which consists of discussing the three main functions that talking about the value of conversations about death performs in the Death Café interaction. All of this is done with the aim to argue that by talking about the value of conversations about death, Death Café attendees relate to each other and create a temporary communal identity – Death Café then becomes a bonding experience. Death Café as a case study of temporary intimate social bonding serves as an empirical contextualisation of neo-tribal theory. From a theoretical perspective, this paper argues for relevance of neo-tribal theory both as a useful standalone framework and a valuable perspective in the context of existing academic narratives of Death Café which tend to prioritise Death Café's instrumental value or attempt to quantify its outcomes.

Finally, I conclude the paper by contemplating what impact my findings have on attempts to define the value of Death Café.

Methods

This paper emerges from the most empirically extensive research of Death Cafés to date – the author's ethnographically informed PhD research based at the University of Glasgow, Dumfries campus. This study has received approval from University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee. I attended 20 Death Cafés across the United Kingdom from October 2018 to June 2019 with two events organised by University of Glasgow in March 2018. These different Death Cafés operate on their own cycles, some monthly, some once every 6 months, and are not significantly connected in other ways besides all being under the umbrella of Death Café. Some Death Cafés I attended were happening monthly throughout my fieldwork and beyond, while in other cases I attended pop-up events that have not been repeated since. Fundamentally, my fieldwork was characterised by diversity and intensity, rather than traditional ethnographic values of prolonged and sustained social contact with research participants, hence I refrain from calling it ethnographic and instead use the term 'ethnographically informed'. My use of this term is consistent with the trend of ethnographic methods being increasingly used across various social science disciplines (O'Reilly, 2011; Pink & Morgan, 2013), as a way of utilising the practices of participant observation and immersion without relying completely on the classical notions of a long-term single-place fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983/2007).

Death Café organisers were contacted via a contact form on the official Death Café website, where I introduced myself and introduced them to my study. I travelled to Death Café events in which organisers agreed to have my presence. Death Café conversations were recorded where all participants had given consent. I recorded 14 Death Café conversations which resulted in almost 20 hours of conversation. There were two main approaches in how I negotiated consent for recording conversations. In the first approach, the Death Café organiser agreed to contact several of their regular attendees to form a separate group – a designated 'research table' - that would participate in my research, with the rest of the Death Café operating normally. In the second approach, I was allowed to simply show up to the venue and introduce myself to all participants at the start of the event and then ask each table if they agreed to be recorded. All the participants have been given pseudonyms and all the Death Cafés were given titles of fictional towns from British culture.

I also conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with Death Café organisers (a mixture of organisers of Death Cafés I attended and those I haven't – that way I got the chance to talk to some of those who held their Death Cafés in the crucial period of the movement's development in 2012–2013). I also conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with Death Café participants I met in the Death Cafés I attended. The role of these interviews was to get a deeper sense of what draws people to participate in Death Cafés. The interviews were conducted via Skype and in person where possible. Data from interviews and recorded conversations was analysed using a thematic analysis framework (O'Reilly, 2012). The lists of attended Death Cafés; recorded Death Café conversations and interviewed Death Café organisers and attendees can be found in Appendix B, Tables B1, B2, B3 and B4 respectively.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, I utilise French sociologist Michel Maffesoli's (1944-present) notion of neo-tribal aesthetics. This theoretical lens allows me to focus the value and impact of Death Café as a form of social interaction. I came across neo-tribal theory as a result of my empirical findings and in order to make sense of them. This article contributes to a resurgence of interest in Michel Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory (see Hardy, 2021; Hardy et al., 2018; Schiermer et al., 2021). The key text for neo-tribal theory is Maffesoli's *Le Temps des Tribus*, published in France in 1988, with the English translation *The Time of the Tribes* following in 1996 (Shields, 1996). Maffesoli had crafted neo-tribal theory fundamentally as a response to dominant scholarly discourses about postmodernity, broadly characterised by the prevalence of highly individualistic and increasingly alienated societies (Dawes, 2016). Maffesoli (1988/1996) broadly agreed with the narratives that permanent social bonds grounded in notions of physical community, kinship, and class that characteristically shaped industrial society were not readily available to individuals living in a post-industrial, globalised climate (Hardy et al., 2018, p. 2). He, however, held a more optimistic view of postmodern sociality, emphasising the 'ongoing desire among individuals to realise themselves as social beings' (Hardy et al., 2018, p. 3) in a fragmented social terrain.

Maffesoli claimed that postmodernity was characterised by 'short-lived flashes of sociality (Shields, 1996, p. xii) that took place in small ephemeral groupings, characterised by 'fluidity, periodic assemblies and dispersals' (Maffesoli, 1993, p. xv; St John, 2008; Xue et al., 2018) he called neo-tribes. According to Maffesoli (1988/1996), neo-tribes are:

> Without the rigidity of the forms of organisation with which we are familiar, [tribe] refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form. (p. 98)

Neo-tribal groupings are centred around their members' shared lifestyles and tastes (Shields, 1996, p. x); shared experiences and emotions (Maffesoli, 1988/1996, p. 72, 2016; Dawes, 2016; Evans, 1997). They also might be based around transient and interim identities, lucrative commodities, brands, labels, or locations (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021, p. 115). In other words, they are 'not limited in the nature of their associations' (ibid) but are grounded in sociality. For Maffesoli, 'sociality' refers to all those social phenomena of being together because of a shared sentiment. Participation in neo-tribes creates temporary feelings of belonging, group solidarity, enthusiasm, and emotional charging. The pleasure of experiencing something together can be short-lived, but 'despite its fragility, the aesthetic bond is the form of integration that is most distinctly social' (De la Fuente, 2007, p. 102; cf. Maffesoli, 1991, p. 8).

This shared sentiment is the basis for the emergence of an important, but largely theoretical concept in neo-tribal theory, lacking empirical contextualisation – aesthetics. Maffesoli describes the aesthetic as 'the taste, the admiration, which is held in common and which cements the collectivity' (Maffesoli, 1991, p. 16). The neo-tribal concept of aesthetics is rooted in not simply good or bad taste, but in a common faculty of feeling and experiencing (Maffesoli, 1988/1996:74, 77, 85). Another useful definition is 'an emotional attraction and shared sentiment between people, with the emphasis upon the collective rather than the individual aspects of experience' (Osborne, 1997, p. 127), or in other words – feeling in common (Maffesoli, 1988/1996, p. 74). Maffesoli finds the origin of aesthetics as a social bond as 'social existence ... returned to itself, people bonding together for no other reason than to 'bathe in the affectual ambience' (De la Fuente, 2007, p. 2; cf. Maffesoli, 1991, p. 11). Put simply, members of neo-tribes have certain sentiments they share as individuals, but the purpose of neo-tribes is to experience those individual sentiments *together*. In neo-tribal theory 'what is ultimately being experienced through shared objects, emotions and activities is the community and therefore the self that is produced in that context' (B. Green, 2018, p. 35). The 'tribal aesthetic' in the Maffesolian sense is a 'way of recognising each other and ourselves' (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 77) and as Lorenc (2018) elucidated:

> Neo-tribes, created on the basis of shared sentiment, are aestheticised in the sense that their constitutive power consists in an emotional bond of belonging, and, at the same time, in the sense that the very [act[1]] of participation is recognised and assessed as what it is. (pp. 17)

Neo-tribal theory has been critiqued for presenting a one-sided, optimistic, and profoundly de-politicised view of human sociality, as well as lacking empirical grounding (Osborne, 1997, pp. 127–128), but has been experiencing a resurgence of interest and new developments in the last decade. Contemporary scholars resonating with neo-tribal theory have broadly abandoned Maffesoli's more esoteric interests, such as 'the occult, ritual incantation, crystal gazing, theosophy and other proto new age phenomena' (Evans, 1997, p. 222). Numerous ethnographically inspired papers (e.g. Asan et al., 2023; Masucci & Falcous, 2024; Wang & Xie, 2021) have helped to contextualise neo-tribalism, and in many ways, 'rescued' (Hardy et al., 2018, p. 4) the concept from redundancy. This is especially prevalent in tourism and leisure literature (see Hardy,

2021; Hardy et al., 2018), in broader cultural studies (Schiermer et al., 2021), while in sociology neo-tribal theory is part of subculture studies (e.g. Canosa & Bennett, 2021; Le Grand, 2018).

I argue that neo-tribal theory has much to offer for social science in the context of transient collectivities in an increasingly mobile and transactional world. Neo-tribal theory is a particularly suitable theoretical framework to make sense of the popularity of Death Café and the pleasant ambience and feeling of collectivity it is lauded for by its proponents and many of the attendees. It is not the only framework to understand Death Cafes through, but just as neo-tribal theory was drafted at first as a challenge to the narratives of postmodernity as devastatingly individualist and alienating, this paper also emerges from research that was conceived a challenge to existing instrumentalist, outcome-oriented academic narratives of Death Café.

Talking about the value of conversations about death – empirical material

Talking about the value of conversations about death, as something people do at Death Cafés has been noted only in two studies of Death Café: Karrel's (2018) dissertation on Death Cafés in Canada and Heald's (2020) dissertation on Death Cafés in South Africa. While appearing only briefly in both dissertations, I found it compelling that in both, as a type of conversation, talking about the value of conversations about death had a negative connotation and was framed as a strategy of avoidance and held to be inconsistent with Death Café's goal to break the taboo (Heald, 2020, p. 61; Karrel, 2018, p. 49). Contrary to this, I will here show that talking about the value of conversations about death is not a conversational strategy of avoidance for conversation, nor does it happen due to inability to talk directly about death, but instead is a significant part of the interaction that allows Death Café participants bond by recognising each other as members of the same transient community. I argue that conversations about the value of death facilitate this bonding in three different ways. First, it allows the group to situate Death Café conversations against the ways death and grief are dealt with in the outside world, in Death Café attendees' daily lives. Second, talking about the value of conversations about death, as a self-referential conversation, helps position the Death Café in relation to other settings and other forms of engagement with death, such as regular daily life, medical settings or other death-related events (e.g. bereavement support groups). This exclusivity again builds solidarity among attendees. Thirdly, taking a more dynamic and significant role in the conversation, talking about the value of having conversations about death offers a common ground for solving conflicts and maintaining a good level of sociability when attendees have differing views.

In the following excerpt from Brigadoon Death Café, rendering the otherwise concealed grief visible at a Death Café is considered as an impetus to gather. Their words came from Jennifer, a council worker who reflected on having fairly recently lost her father:

> You're looking around you and we've all got this secret wound. This massive thing that we've all got in common, and it's totally unspoken. What's amazing about sitting with strangers and talking about death is that we're allowed to talk about this huge thing. It's like when you're driving on your way to a funeral and it's a lovely sunny day, and you still see people walking along the road, having a laugh and you're kind of like: 'WHAAAAAT? you guys, come on!'. It's like: 'Stop all the clocks, everything should stop right now, everyone should know that this is a huge thing!', but nobody does.

This short extract is not talking about death directly or addressing a precise issue or specific experience; it addresses the value of talking about death and how participation in Death Café binds attendees – they are all intentionally carving out time in their schedules to engage in the conversation, often without expecting specific outcomes.

Death Café conversations are often self-referential, which helps position the Death Café in relation to other settings and other forms of engagement with death. This is the second way of talking about the value of conversations about death builds solidarity among attendees. At the end of Borchester Death Café, three conversation groups came together in one circle to reflect on the night's experience. Regular attendee forty-eight-year-old Mina said that she was impressed as always with the honesty and the depth with which people were able to talk about things that they couldn't normally talk about. Seventy-six-year-old Beatrice then challenged Mina gently from the other side of the room by asking if she didn't think that Death Cafés were self-selective and the sort of people who would come here were likely to be the people that had an honest nature and already wanted to talk about death. Mina agreed and Beatrice continued by saying that she had been attending a weekly bereavement group and their reaction to the idea of Death Café was always cold and judgemental. Thus, it seemed that Beatrice sought out Death Café not merely because the topic was death, after all they talked about similar things in the bereavement group, but as an interaction that was specific in its form – open-ended and honest. I am not claiming that this type of self-referential conversation does not appear elsewhere, but I am arguing that it is a frequent occurrence at a Death Café, where reflecting on their reasons for attending is instrumental in allowing the attendees to build trust and feel enjoyment, which contributes to solidifying it as a form of sociable social interaction.

And finally, the third way talking about the value of conversations about death appears is when it takes a more dynamic and significant role in the conversation, offering a common ground for solving conflicts and maintaining a good level of sociability when attendees have differing views. To illustrate this, I recall a conversation at a Borchester Death Café. It circled mainly on a meditative, joint exploration of beliefs about the human soul in Eastern and Western philosophies. I had noticed Ezekiel, an elderly man who had been silent for the first half of the conversation, shuffling in his seat and picking at the leftover crumbs on his dessert plate. The first time he spoke was after facilitator Sally shared with the group that she kept seeing signs of her deceased father's presence – what she called 'synchronicities'. Ezekiel politely but firmly called it 'coincidences'. Some people agreed, others were not convinced, but the topic was not changed. After a few minutes, he brought to the group what he deemed a 'mischievous' question – does death itself matter? He prefaced the question by saying that death and the grief it causes to those who survive was a major concern and that was partly why talking and planning beforehand was so necessary. But he said that he didn't personally think that missing out on the next sunrise matters. Forty-year-old Helena, who had just finished passionately discussing the continuity of the soul, interjected: 'But you might not though, you might be somewhere else where you'll see a better one!'. Ezekiel responded with laughter: 'I might, but I might not!'.

In this instance, Ezekiel, seemingly bored of the conversation topics, gently turned down Helena's suggestions of an afterlife and attempted to shift the focus by raising a broader question about whether talking about death was ultimately helping those facing death or those facing bereavement. After a short silence, Helena agreed that it was quite important to consider who do deaths matter to, how it affects different individuals, and

what we can do about it. Then, she asked Ezekiel if he really believed that death was the end and after his affirmative answer, proceeded to talk at length that she simply could not feel the same. Ezekiel's attempt to change the topic by introducing a question about the value of talking about and planning for death was unsuccessful this time because Helena kept bringing up her own questioning of the finality of death. However, in many other Death Cafés, it has shown to be quite a successful strategy of evoking more generalised responses, instead of focusing on the specific details of beliefs or themes, uniting a disagreeing group again in acknowledgement that they are engaging in this activity together and they all see value in it.[2] Just for a short while, the group was brought together to consider the activity they were engaged in as a collective, instead of remaining in their own firm positions and debating content external to Death Café.

The following excerpt from Riseholme Death Café illustrates the recurrent awareness of collectively engaging in Death Café conversation. Talking about the value of conversations about death here *is* the conversation and this excerpt provides a window into the rhythms of the conversation, the moments of appreciation of the opportunity to talk. Riseholme group talked about the value of talking about death twice during the two-hour meeting – for the first five minutes and the last fifteen minutes. We started the conversation by taking turns explaining what brought us to this Death Café. When it came to retired academic Albert's turn, he took a moment before he started speaking:

> I don't quite know what got me here when it first started, but once I've been coming here, everything makes so much sense.

This prompted Edie, a retired practising Buddhist to dig deeper: 'And when you say it "makes sense" – what makes sense?'. Albert continued:

> Well, it might be a coincidence, but when I first started coming, people in my life started dying. I lost four friends last year, so it was useful to have a space to make sense.

Forty-six-year-old social worker Alice jumped in enthusiastically:

> I was just going to say I think we feel that normally in everyday life we can't just talk about it as a 'talk about it' type of subject. And I think that what's quite important here – it is not a bereavement counselling type of thing, but just the opportunity to be able to talk generally about it. Whereas unfortunately as a society we just feel very guarded about talking about it on a general day-to-day kind of level.

Edie agreed:

> I think that's the thing for me, I just want to normalise it, to be able to talk about death without the sort of [*she gasped dramatically and heightened the tone of her voice*] CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS! It's going to happen, so I want to be able to accept it.

Albert then asked Edie whether she found that talking about death had improved her life and she said that hearing other people's views on their own death and afterlife helped her develop her own Buddhist views. Already in the first five minutes, the group had begun to discuss the utility of talking about death and how talking has been shaping their views. While this came about by Albert referencing his close encounters with death and reflecting on how Death Café helped make sense of that, the talk quickly turned to a general inability to talk about death in other settings.

In the last fifteen minutes of the conversation, it circled back to evaluating the Death Café activity, with Edie actually bringing up the same point about Death Café being an opportunity to hear what other people think. Albert then agreed that he never has conversations of this nature and Alice contributed by saying that Death Cafés give the opportunity to sit down and explore these questions openly and have many varied conversations that would not happen otherwise. She lamented that the topic of death could not be brought up elsewhere. This was essentially the same exchange as at the start of the evening. Octogenarian retired photographer Owen then raised a hypothetical situation of what would happen if someone threw out a nonchalant 'oh, what do you think about death?' to a person sitting next to him on the train. The group roared with laughter and Alice imagined that one would get a surprised and probably even disgusted response, such as 'well that's a bit morbid, isn't it?!!'. The whole group succumbed to laughter again at her enactment.

Owen turned the conversation back to the Death Café by saying: 'We are making a forum here' and then pointing to organiser Edith, who had joined our table during this exchange: 'You, Edith, are making this forum'. Edith laughed saying that it was not just her, that Death Café was an international movement. John, a filmmaker in his thirties interjected commenting that the emergence of Death Café seemed very timely 'considering that the world's in trouble in all kinds of bad trouble'. Then, John attempted to explain that because of the informational highway we have more information at our fingertips and hence more anxiety because we are more aware of all the problems in the world. He then wondered whether Death Café was 'a symptom of that anxiety . . . or a tonic to it'.

This amount of time spent marvelling and pondering about the need for Death Café and the value of talking at a Death Café is not unusual. While such neat circularity does not manifest in every Death Café conversation, in all the Death Café conversations I observed, it was extremely rare for participants not to talk at all about the value of Death Café and of talking about death. While Death Café attendees have preferred topics of conversation, contrary to Karrel (2018) and Heald's (2020) notes on talking about the value of conversations about death, it is not an inferior topic of conversation – it has the power to cool disagreements, give space to a plurality of views and to allow attendees to reflect on the silence surrounding death in other situations of their life and as such, it is an active agent in bonding the group, talking about the value of conversations about death

I claim that talking about the value of conversations about death is an enjoyable part of the conversation in its own right and as a collaborative and enjoyable effort, talking about the value of conversations about death is the key constituent of the 'aesthetics' of the Death Café interaction. While people *do* come to Death Cafés to talk directly about death, ask specific questions, etc., the conversations in which talking about the value of conversations about death dominate the encounter, go beyond the purpose of instrumental utility and engenders significant feelings of commonality between attendees, which they enjoy talking about. While people involved in Death Café claim that it is open for everyone, they are still very much basking in the knowledge that those present are engaging in something special and valuable, whether it would be 'breaking a taboo', or establishing a new space or forum for having conversations about death. Maffesoli also thought of aesthetics as 'a means of recognising ourselves' (Maffesoli, 1988/1996, p. 77). When talking about the value of conversations about death, Death Café participants reflexively consider the activity they have gathered to engage in together, which strengthens the shared sentiment and feelings of collectivity.

Discussion: what does this mean for the study of Death Caf Death Cafés?

Talking about the value of conversations about death (i.e. talking about the value of Death Café while being engaged in the Death Café) is a significant part of the Death Café interaction. Death Café attendees often dip in and out of the conscious awareness that they are all gathered to talk about death. Every so often they identify what they are doing as they are doing it, collaboratively learning how to talk about death in a way they haven't done before. When talking about the value of conversations about death, attendees understand themselves as part of Death Café and bask in collective enjoyment that they are engaging in something special that they all have elected to do – breaking the perceived taboo around talking about death. As such, talking about the value of conversations about death allows to create a temporary communal identity between participants and Death Café then becomes a socially bonding experience. Looking at Death Café using the lens of Maffesolian aesthetics and the aesthetic bond highlighted another aspect of talking about (talking about) death – not directly as a fight against the perceived 'death taboo', but as an enjoyable and valuable social pastime – the basis for the Death Café neo-tribe and, arguably, Death Café's most valuable, yet overlooked feature. Locating this bonding aspect of Death Café is especially relevant in the context of discussions about possible effects and implications of Death Café, e.g. combating burnout (Bateman et al., 2020; Hammer et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021) and as a possible gateway to bringing conversations about death and dying into family context (Baldwin, 2017).

If the inability to talk about death in everyday life leads people to attend Death Cafés and produces sociable moments, pleasant feelings of belonging, and connectedness during this conversational activity, simply the act of participating in a Death Café might be reconfiguring the idea of talking about death. Rather than attending Death Cafés to address burning questions, specific topics, seeking information, many attendees talked about enjoying the easefulness with which the topic was broached, which was not present in other settings. Death Café is undoubtedly used for practical purposes by some attendees: during interviews, organisers said that there have been a few people who attended wanting specific information. However, it is hard to conceptualise Death Cafés as leading towards some sort of specific impact because organisers themselves create a new social space, a particular social aesthetic, granting attendees the opportunity to clarify their own views about mortality, to practice talking about death, and to experience an unusual social interaction. Death Café attendees can enjoy the opportunity to collectively explore what their relationship (or lack of) with death means to them, how talking (or not talking) about death has affected them and how Death Café is doing something new to the way they talk about death. All of this goes beyond the immediate utility of the conventional perception of what talking about death should do, such as lead to end-of-life conversations with the family.

Death Café phenomenon is a unique arena for grappling with how transient, ephemeral, voluntary groupings of heterogeneous participants organise themselves to achieve their collective purpose. Death Café, as an empirical case study, stands in support for Michel Maffesoli's primarily optimistic view of the postmodern social life whereby people gather together to connect and express themselves. His theory stands in contrast to the kind of alienation and individualisation identified by other influential narrators of postmodernity (e.g. Bauman, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The neo-tribal framework provides a backdrop for taking

seriously the way the Death Café transient social formation is bonded by a certain aesthetic – participants recognising themselves through a shared interest in talking about death. In turn, unfolding the inner workings of Death Café sociality uncovers Maffesoli's overlooked notion of the aesthetic nature of the social bond, thus enhancing applications of neo-tribal theory. This is where I carve out theoretical space for my analysis of the Death Café phenomenon.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to a resurgence of interest in Maffesoli's neo-tribal theory of post-modern sociality, where the aesthetic – 'the taste, the admiration, which is held in common and which cements the collectivity' (Maffesoli, 1991, p. 16) – is a distinctive form of social bonding. I inductively applied neo-tribal theory to aspects of Death Café in order to challenge the dominant instrumentalist, outcome-oriented approaches. Specifically, I applied Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribal aesthetics, defined as a 'way of feeling in common' (Maffesoli, 1988/1996, p. 74) and as a result, provided empirical contextualisation to this highly theoretical but largely vague part of Maffesoli's thought.

In this paper, I interrogate an important finding from my fieldwork that in Death Cafes, talking about the value of being at a Death Café and the value of having conversations about death forms a significant part of the interaction. I introduced three functions talking about the value of conversations about death plays in a Death Café: 1) it is evoked to highlight the difference between how death, grief, and bereavement are addressed in people's daily lives versus in a Death Café; 2) it is used to differentiate Death Café from other death-related initiatives, such as bereavement groups; and 3) it is used as an important tool for maintaining conviviality and cooling disagreements by reminding attendees that they are all there for essentially the same reason – to talk about death.

Fundamentally, I claim that 'talking about the value of conversations about death' is a collectively enjoyable activity for the group and forms the basis of Death Café's neo-tribal bond. This paper showed that Death Café is a valued form of social interaction where people can enjoy the opportunity to collectively explore what their relationship (or lack of) with death means to them, how talking (or not talking) about death has affected them, and how Death Café is doing something new to the way they talk about death, which goes beyond the immediate utility of the conventional understandings of what talking about death should do, such as lead to end-of-life conversations with the family. This is an important and overlooked view of the social phenomenon of Death Café, showing that gathering to converse about death with strangers is a valued form of social interaction among those who take part in it, grounded in the enjoyment of the social, beyond the prevalent attempts to discover Death Café's instrumental utility.

Notes

1. Added by the author of this paper as the word is missing in the source as well.
2. This particular exchange was chosen partly because it is succinct. Some other similar conversations exemplifying this were longer and would not be suitable for this type of publication.

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Solveiga Žibaitė undertook her doctoral studies with the End of Life Studies Group at the University of Glasgow. Her PhD thesis is an ethnographically informed study of Death Cafés in the United Kingdom using neo-tribal theory. Her background is in social anthropology (MA University of Edinburgh, MSc University of Amsterdam).She currently is a research associate for the INVEST (Investigating the Value of Early Sleep Therapy) pilot trial at the University of Strathclyde. She has also worked research fellow at the Academic Urology Unit at the University of Aberdeen, where she was involved in OPTIMA (Optimal treatment for patients with solid tumours in Europe through artificial intelligence) programme and ICANBE (Improving cancer and psychological therapies pathway for fear of cancer recurrence) study.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Themes addressed in recorded Death Café conversations

Theme: One's relationship to death

Subtheme – Control:

(1) Relationship to death is important to develop for various reasons:
  (a) Having a choice in your death/pre-death plans/funeral/legacy equals empowerment and ownership of your life
  (b) Taking care of things before death is care for others and oneself
  (c) Trying to meet death in a different way, without fear, but with hope, energy.
  (d) Thought of death is grounding – reminds you to enjoy the her and now but also to take stock in what matters (i.e. let go of small annoyances)
(2) Relationships with the dead are important:
  (a) Holding space for the dead, coming to terms with guilt, unresolved issues letting go.
  (b) Grief transforms you.

Subtheme – Beyond control:

(3) Death itself – Denial vs hope:
  (a) Finding solace (and struggling to find solace) in religion, whether its Christianity or Buddhism (two most prevalent).
  (b) Debating continuity of the consciousness – non-denominational, spiritual, new age beliefs, atheism.
  (c) Good death bad death/length of life vs quality of life – the dying process more feared than death
  (d) Death is unjust and it is impossible to prepare for the death of the other.

Theme: Society and its responses to death and grief:

 (4) Society does not respond well to grief
 (5) Loneliness (of the elderly, in your own body, in communities)
 (6) There is a sense of collective grief – war, climate change.
 (7) The dire state of the NHS
 (8) Over-medicalisation (of birth and death)
 (9) Dissolution of community and rituals around death
(10) Capitalism, no more values, except monetary.
(11) Toxic masculinity, men don't show emotions.

Theme: Death Cafes:

(11) Timeliness and necessity of Death Cafes.
(12) Space to have conversations about death which touches all but is not talked about.
(13) A setting where you can talk without people being too emotional
(14) No judgement
(15) Might help people rehearse the conversations needed to have with family
(16) A space where you can crack a joke
(17) Certain anonymity and boundaries are important
(18) Fulfils a certain curiosity about who comes to events like this and how it feels to talk about death so openly
(19) Death Cafes help find people with similar types of loss.
(20) Broadening your horizons about how to go about death and mourning in a positive way
(21) Getting information (practical arrangements)

Appendix B. Supplementary materials

Table B1. List of attended Death Cafés.

o	Month, Year	Pseudonym	Organisers' pseudonyms	Description	Conversations recorded (how many)	Number of attendees	Pre-selected research tables?
1	March 2018	Lochdubh 1	Grant	Two one-off Death Cafés with students from a local college in a rural area of the country. Organised by my primary supervisor in collaboration with a local college.	Yes, 2	18	No pre-selected research tables and students were not told beforehand that research is taking place
2	March 2018	Lochdubh 2			Yes, 2	14	No pre-selected research tables and students were not told beforehand that research is taking place
3	October 2018	Riseholme	Edith	An evening time Death Café occurring every other month in an artistic area of a major urban centre. Established in 2017.	Yes, 1	28	Pre-selected research table where selected participants were informed of research beforehand
4	November 2018	Brigadoon	Morag, facilitators Pearl and Michael	Death Café run once or twice a year since 2015 in a small city in the north of the country. Current venue – hotel bar, taking place in the morning.	Yes, 3	14	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
5	November 2018	Weatherfield	Eleanor, Betty, facilitator Doris	A quarterly evening time Death Café in a scenic market town. Established in 2017.	Yes, 1	25	Pre-selected research table where selected participants were informed of research beforehand
6	November 2018	Tilling	Nicola	Monthly daytime Death Café held in a cemetery in an urban centre in Southwest England since 2015.	No	14	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
7	November 2018	Borchester	Serena and her co-host Melanie	An evening time Death Café in a small market town. Established in 2016 and occurring every other month.	Yes, 3	16	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
8	November 2018	Upper Radstow	Kaya	Monthly evening time Death Café in a Buddhist centre in a major urban centre. Established in 2014.	No	19	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
9	December 2018	Akenfield	Millie	Monthly evening time Death Café in a suburban town near a major city, established in 2018.	Yes, 1	13	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.

(Continued)

Table B1. (Continued).

o	Month, Year	Pseudonym	Organisers' pseudonyms	Description	Conversations recorded (how many)	Number of attendees	Pre-selected research tables?
10	December 2018	East Bromwich	Victoria, Leida and Nick	Monthly evening time Death Café in a major city run since 2015 by a group of end-of-life doulas	Yes, 1	18	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
11	February 2019	Wokenwell	Orla	Death Café run by a bereavement charity in various libraries in the area since 2017. Timing varies.	No	7	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
12	February 2019	Riseholme	Edith	A second visit to Riseholme Death Café	No	26	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
13	March 2019	King's Oak	Sadie	A walking Death Café in the woods in a major city, usually taking place indoors in various café venues. Established in 2017, occurring monthly.	No	9	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
14	March 2019	Camberwick Green	Olivia	The last one of long-running (since 2013) tradition of Death Cafés in an affluent area of a major city.	No	29	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
15	March 2019	Portwenn	Frida	Monthly/every other month Death Café in a spa town, now venturing into neighbouring towns. Established in 2013.	No	3	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
16	May 2019	Darrowby	Violet	A weekend morning Death Café occurring every other month in a small market town, run since 2015 by the local community centre.	No	4	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
17	May 2019	Chigley	Roy	A one-off Death Café, run in a hospice by the hospice chaplain during Dying Matters Awareness Week 2019.	No	7	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
18	May 2019	Glendarroch	Ruby	A one-off Death Café, run by a member of hospice staff in a public café in the North of the country during opening times during Dying Matters Awareness Week 2019.	No	23	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.

(*Continued*)

Table B1. (Continued).

o	Month, Year	Pseudonym	Organisers' pseudonyms	Description	Conversations recorded (how many)	Number of attendees	Pre-selected research tables?
19	May 2019	St. Mary Mead	Davina and Kelly	This Death Café took place in the evening after a death-related theatre play in a spa town. Originally established in 2017 and held quarterly	No	19	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.
20	June 2019	Tannochbrae	Lucy	The second-ever Death Café in a unitarian church in the North of the country. Taking place on a weekend morning.	No	11	No pre-selected research table, no participants informed about research beforehand.

Table B2. My presence in recorded conversations.

No	Pseudonym	Conversations recorded (how many)	Number of attendees	Was I present at the table?
1	Lochdubh 1	Yes, 2	18	Yes, for one conversation. Me and three women.
2	Lochdubh 2	Yes, 2	14	Yes, for one conversation. Me and three other women.
3	Riseholme	Yes, 1	28	Yes Edie, Owen, Albert, Miriam, John and I
4	Brigadoon	Yes, 3	14	Yes, for one conversation. Mavis, Iris, Charles, Arthur, Ruth.
5	Weatherfield	Yes, 1	25	Yes, for one conversation. Chester, his wife Anne, Ellie, Betty's husband James, Doris, Miriam, Scarlett and I
6	Borchester	Yes, 3	16	Yes for one conversation. Clara, Helena, Ezekiel, his wife Jennifer, Grace, and I
7	Akenfield	Yes, 1	13	Yes, with all Death Café participants that night.
8	East Bromwich	Yes, 1	18	Yes. Winston, Leida, Victoria, Ida, Darcey, Nick and two more female attendees who agreed to be recorded but not named.
Total	I was present in 8 out of 14 recorded conversations.			

Table B3. Interviewed Death Café organisers.

No	Pseudonym	Age (if known)	Occupation	Death Café hosted	Type of interview	Did I attend their Death Café?
1	Edith	55-65 (estimate)	Funeral celebrant, previously a teacher.	Riseholme	Skype (video)	Yes, twice
2	Morag	52	Counsellor, motivational speaker, workplace mediator	Brigadoon	In person	Yes
3	Eleanor	72	Retired hospice worker and psychotherapist	Weatherfield	In person	Yes
4	Betty	53	Hospice worker, nurse in the past, now in a different NHS role	Weatherfield	Phone	Yes
5	Doris	67	Massage therapist for a cancer support charity, volunteer for a mental health support charity.	Weatherfield (takes on solely facilitator role)	In person	Yes
6	Serena	48	Trained as body psychotherapist, now co- runs a funeral home.	Borchester	Skype (video)	Yes
7	Millie	31	Pathological anatomist at a hospital.	Akenfield	Skype (video)	Yes
8	Victoria	60	End-of-life doula and jewellery maker.	East Bromwich	Phone	Yes
9	Sadie	39	Independent celebrant	King's Oak	Skype (video)	Yes
10	Olivia	70+ (estimate)	Psychotherapist, bereavement counsellor, death educator.	Camberwick Green	In person	Yes
11	Frida	62	Massage and yoga teacher, trained dementia carer.	Portwenn	In person	Yes
12	Violet	50	Community centre administrator with an interest in holistic healing and also working as a homoeopath.	Darrowby	In person	Yes
13	Ruby	30-35 (estimate)	Administrator at a hospice.	Glendarroch	In person	Yes
14	Roy	68	Hospice chaplain.	Chigley	In person	Yes
15	Lucy	50-55 (estimate)	Unitarian chaplain	Tannochbrae	In person	Yes
16	Tina	50-55 (estimate)	Civil celebrant, teacher and nurse previously.	Ledshire Death Café in North of the country run two-three times a year since 2018	In person	No
17	Simon	50	Funeral celebrant and trainee counsellor, previously theatre actor and director	I talked to him before he hosted his first-ever Death Café in a suburb of a big city.	Skype (video)	No
18	Laura	65	Christian Minister in the West of the country.	Occasional Death Café, associated with the Dying Matters	Phone	No

(Continued)

Table B3. (Continued).

No	Pseudonym	Age (if known)	Occupation	Death Café hosted	Type of interview	Did I attend their Death Café?
				campaign		
19	Belinda	66	Author, speaker, podcast host on the topics of spirituality, consciousness, and death and dying.	Used to hold her Death Cafés in her narrowboat at different points alongside a river since 2014.	Skype (video)	No
20	Marina	54	Psychic artist, channel and energy healer.	Marina was one of the early adopters of Death Café in the UK and ran them in a major metropolis from 2013 until 2018.	In person	No
21	Emma	52	Florist, cancer support counsellor in a major city.	Runs Death Cafés as part of her job role in a local charity	In person	No
22	Jamie	25	Charity worker in the same major city as Emma.	Ran one Death Café as part of public engagement for a charity he works in	Phone	No
23	Sienna	43	Hospice worker, training to be a soul midwife. Lives in a secluded town in the South of the country	When I talked to Sienna, she was about to hold her first ever Death Café, on her mother's death anniversary	Skype (video)	No
24	Lydia	46	Celebrant and author	Has been holding Death Cafés in a town close to Tina since 2017.	Phone	No

Table B4. Interviewed Death Café attendees.

	Death Café attended	Name	Age	Occupation	Type of interview	Time at Death Café
1	Riseholme	Albert	68	Retired academic	Phone	First
2	Riseholme	John	32	Film producer	In person	Third
3	Riseholme	Alice	46	Adult learning disabilities social worker	Phone	Second
4	Riseholme	Owen	87	Retired photojournalist.	Video (Skype)	Third
5	Brigadoon	Mavis	73	Retired teacher	phone	Second
6	Brigadoon	Iris	49	Worked for the NHS, trained to be a homoeopath, now is an independent ordained minister.	phone	Second
7	Brigadoon	Charles	58	Council worker dealing with cremations and burials	Phone	First
8	Brigadoon	Maggie	57	Holistic therapist	Phone	First
9	Brigadoon	Pamela	70	Retired nurse, midwife, manager for various NHS services.	Phone	First
10	Weatherfield	Ellie	55	Freshwater ecologist	Phone	Second
11	Weatherfield	Scarlett	61	Carer	Phone	First
12	Weatherfield	Miriam	69	Retired counsellor and psychotherapist.	Phone	First
13	Weatherfield	Chester	70+	Retired doctor and academic	Phone	Second
14	Borchester	Grace	72	Worked as a secretary, in public relations, publishing, now retired and obtained a certificate in botanical illustration as well as finished counselling training.	Phone	Third
15	Borchester	Eve	82	Retired GSCE level teacher for adults, university tutor.	Phone	Second
16	Borchester	Frederick	66	Retired landscape gardener	Phone	Fourth
17	Borchester	Henry	45	Trained as a counsellor, out of work at the moment.	Phone	First
18	Borchester	Ava	51	Obtained degrees in psychology, organisation behaviour, is currently training to be a counsellor	Phone	First
19	Borchester	Clara	37	Carer and end-of-life planner	Phone	First
20	Akenfield	Daisy	41	Designs and delivers workplace learning and development courses	Phone	Third
21	Akenfield	Fay	60	Retired NHS worker (role unclear)	Phone	First
22	Akenfield	Molly	70	Retired lawyer and bookshop keeper	Phone	First
23	East Bromwich	Ida	21	Journalism student	Phone	First
24	East Bromwich	Darcey	43	Cabin crew	Phone	First
25	I also conducted a face-to-face interview with Pauline (70+) who I reached out to after I found out she wrote a fiction novel with Death Cafés as part of the plot. She went to Frida's Portwenn Death Café to research it for the book.					