How to Know You’ve Survived Death
A Cognitive Account of the Popularity of Contemporary Post-mortem Survival Narratives

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Abstract

Reports of people who have survived death have captured the attention of mainstream audiences. Why do these ideas enjoy persistent and widespread success in contemporary Western culture? Adopting a cognitive approach to the study of afterlife accounts and drawing upon our own research, we argue that mainstream survival narratives are popular because they provide convincing evidence that one has journeyed to another realm. Such accounts are convincing, in part, because they meet default cognitive assumptions about what human survival would look like if it were possible. We support this claim by highlighting recurring common themes in recounted episodes of near-death experiences and past life accounts and outlining how key findings in the cognitive science of religion, in conjunction with culturally situated accounts, can help scholars concerned with ideas about anomalous experiences to better understand their appeal.

Keywords
cognitive science of religion – near-death experiences – parapsychology – reincarnation – the afterlife
From around the mid-twentieth century, Western media has capitalized increasingly on accounts of seemingly reputable cases of life after death. The general population is enamoured with tales of people who claim that they experienced rich sensations and perceptions while either close to death or clinically dead\(^1\) (i.e., “near-death experiences,” hereafter referred to as NDEs, see Moody 1975). In these NDE narratives, people often describe feelings of detachment from one’s body (often accompanied by seeing one’s own body from above); meeting deceased friends, relatives, or other spirits; undergoing a life review (i.e., seeing autobiographical events either from one’s own perspective or that of others); feelings of transcending time and space; and sensing that one has journeyed to another world or realm (see Kinsella 2016). Other narratives present personal accounts of reincarnation, the idea that after biological death a person leaves his or her mortal body and returns to the human world in another form following rebirth (see Obeyesekere 2002). Often people recount their memories of having lived before (i.e., so-called “past lives”).\(^2\) These memories typically take the form of detailed recollections of traumatic life events, such as being separated from loved ones, drowning, or being burned alive. Such first-person material is regular fodder for mainstream news outlets, including the New York Times (Miller 2010), high-profile television shows, such as the “Oprah Winfrey Show” (Winfrey 2013) and feature in a recent spate of bestselling books (e.g., Alexander 2012; Burpo and Vincent 2010; Leininger, Leininger and Gross 2009; Weiss 1988).

From a commercial perspective, these survival stories are a huge success. An entire business empire generating hundreds of millions of dollars rests on the persuasiveness of personal accounts of individuals claiming to have had such experiences. How can scholars explain the popularity of these survival accounts? To date, the standard response from social scientists concerned with anomalous experiences\(^3\) is to explain the transmissive success of ideas by locating them in a historically situated socio-cultural context. For instance, particular ideas about past lives in contemporary America may well have a competitive advantage over other accounts because they are tailored to suit

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2 E.g., see Bowman 2012; Edelmann and Bernet 2007; Haraldsson 1997; Lyons 2013; Moye 2014; Stevenson 2001; Tucker 2013; Wallis 1999; Weiss and Weiss 2012.

3 There is debate amongst scholars over how to construe these phenomena (e.g., religious, paranormal, supernatural, etc., see Lindeman and Svedholm 2012). For simplicity, we refer to them here as anomalous experiences.
a quintessentially modern, eclectic brand of New Age spirituality and religious individualism that has become immensely popular in the West (e.g., see Albanese 2006; Bender 2007; Dawson 2006; Farias, Claridge, and Lalljee 2005; Fuller 2001; White, Kelly and Nichols 2015). It is no accident that popular past life narratives often include ideas about the individual’s traumatic past-life experiences and provides guidance for the person to fulfill their potential in their current life. It may also be the case that, for example, remembering something from a previous existence is readily taken as evidence of reincarnation by those who have already become disenchanted with the conventional Judeo-Christian canon.

We contend that while cultural factors are necessary to explain the transmissive success of survival narratives, they are not sufficient. Consider the marked variation between NDE accounts. Variation in reports may well be explained by cultural differences and modes of conceptualizing geophysical space. For instance, while experiences of journeys to another realm are found throughout the world, the means of transport vary: in North America, people often speak of traveling through a tunnel, whereas in Melanesia, people tend to report ascending ladders or walking along roads (Counts 1983; Kellehear 2009; Shushan 2009). Likewise, the appearance or overall milieu of the afterlife realm can and does often vary significantly. But even among culturally—and individually—idiosyncratic NDEs, the basic structural features of one’s spirit traveling to another realm and interacting with other deceased souls who dwell there are remarkably consistent. These similarities must also be explained. Furthermore, they align with basic assumptions about the afterlife that recur cross-culturally: namely, that the essential identity or personality of an individual (i.e., “consciousness”) exists apart from the body, survives biological death, and travels to some other dimension inhabited by social others (Couliano 1991; Masumian 2009; Moreman 2008; Shushan 2009). It is likely that belief in an inhabited afterlife realm has as much do with our species’ cognitive predispositions as it does fears of one’s own eventual demise, as people tend to view the death of a loved one as resulting in a change to their physical location rather than as an existential annihilation (see Bering 2006; Hodge 2012).

A cognitive approach thus helps to explain why some survival narratives—including that we survive death, in what form this survival takes, and what constitutes evidence for this survival—enjoy widespread cultural success despite differences in propositional beliefs about life after death. In this paper,

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4 Not all researchers agree on what features are universal within NDE accounts. For an overview of cross-cultural comparisons, see Fox (2003), Kellehear (2009), Shushan (2009), Corazza and Kuruppuarachchi (2012).
we outline how research in the cognitive science of religion (CSR)—including the results of our own primary research—can shed light on the popularity of two phenomena, near death experiences and past life beliefs, which, although seemingly different in terms of content, are underpinned by similar assumptions about personal survival.

In short, we propose that some survival narratives are popular because they are convincing, and they are convincing, in part, because they meet intuitive expectations about what human survival would look like if it were possible. Over the past twenty-five years or so, CSR has mounted evidence to suggest that recurrent features of religious and other types of extraordinary phenomena—like other aspects of popular culture—arise in large part through default intuitions about the natural world (e.g., see Barrett 2007; Boyer 2001; Sperber 1996; White 2017). The rationale behind this empirical discipline is summarized by Boyer and Walker:

An account of religious representations requires an explanation of their cognitive salience. If we focus on the recurrent patterns underlying the apparent diversity of religious representations, it appears that they are constrained by a small number of principles that are part and parcel of everyday cognition and are not specifically religious in nature. (2000: 134)

This approach is grounded in a selectionist framework, which proposes that to explain the spread of religious ideas, one must consider, in addition to socio-historical factors, the role of human cognition in constraining and facilitating their transmission (e.g., Barrett 2000; Boyer 2001; Sperber 1996). Thus, CSR complements a social learning interpretation by focusing on the common denominators of widespread ideas in survival narratives that, in conjunction with culturally specific ideas, lead to their rapid dissemination.

Thus far CSR has focused more on the assumptions underpinning postmortem survival to explain traditional theological accounts of life after death, but the approach also has the potential to explain why some descriptions of personal survival in popular Western culture are especially compelling, even when they are divorced from mainstream theological doctrine. From this perspective, the core features of popular survival narratives showcase contemporary Western society’s assumptions about the afterlife, which are largely tractable to panhuman predispositions concerning the representation of persons, minds and bodies. The intuitive appeal of these stories is not limited to those who purport to believe in supernatural phenomena, and thus cannot be explained away as a product of propositional beliefs. For example, although commercial success reveals that past life narratives routinely attract considerable
interest and media attention, only around 20 percent of Americans actually believe that reincarnation is possible, and even fewer believe that they themselves have lived before (see Haraldsson 2006; Walter 2001; White, Kelly, and Nichols 2015b).

In addition, ideas about reincarnation are often presented as having credence through corresponding parapsychological research about what constitutes “legitimate” evidence for life beyond death. For example, the late Ian Stevenson provided the most extensive treatment of past-life research to date, documenting approximately 3,000 case reports of people from around the world who presumably possessed memories of their previous lives (e.g., see Stevenson 2001; for an overview of Stevenson, see Tucker 2007; see also Tucker 2013). From a cognitive perspective, ongoing research on reincarnation depends more upon parapsychologists’ implicit reasoning about how one would verify whether or not it exists than simply believing, ipso facto, that it does exist. These empirical practices for assessing the veridicality of afterlife claims tend to correlate with how ordinary people think about consciousness. In what follows, we outline three recurrent themes that appear throughout popular narratives about life after death and showcase how these standard inferences can often be understood within the materialist framework of CSR.

I A Cognitive Account of Compelling Survival Narratives

A Privileged Knowledge

Among the vast array of NDE reports, the most popular—and championed as the most persuasive—are those in which people allegedly acquire information during their death/near-death state or previous life that they could not possibly have known before. These cases are often highlighted because the information contained within them is specific and (according to parapsychologists) later verified as accurate. Both forms of knowledge rely on memories of having lived—and often, having died—before. In the context of past life

5 Although mainstream academics have debated how best to construe the investigation of such phenomena (e.g., as psychical, occult, paranormal, supernatural, etc.), here we refer to research that seeks to determine the veracity of life after death as parapsychology (for an overview, see Lindeman and Svedholm 2012; Taves 2014). Most scholars regard parapsychology as a field that is not impartial and often fails to follow the rigorous standards of scientific enquiry, noting, for example, that their primary method of empirical investigation—case studies—is subject to confirmation bias (e.g., see Edwards 1996; Lamont 2012; Lindeman and Svedholm 2012; Taves 2014).
narratives, these memories typically take the form of detailed recollections of traumatic life events, such as being separated from loved ones, drowning, or being burned alive. For instance, Stevenson reports the case of Ravi Shankar Gupta as evidence of reincarnation. He recalled eating guavas before being taken to the riverside where he was murdered. This description was consistent with the murder of a boy named Munna Prasad decades before, and so the memory was interpreted as support for the claim that Gupta was Prasad re-born (Stevenson 1974: 96-97). Here, the phenomenon of reincarnation is given credence by certain empirical facts: the memory of a distinctive previous-life event conforms to a factual record, one including details of which the person in question would not have any known access.

Popular accounts of NDEs likewise contain the assumption of privileged knowledge. For example, after a patient was pronounced clinically dead, a nurse had removed his dentures and placed them on a nearby tray. Over a week later, the same recovering patient spotted the nurse and exclaimed that she must know where the missing dentures were because he recalled being out of his body during intubation and having witnessed her removing them (Lommel et al. 2001). For further illustration, consider the case of social worker Kimberly Clark-Sharp (then Kimberly Clark; see Clark 1984), who reported an NDE case in which she visited a patient in a hospital who was recovering from a heart attack. The patient, named Maria, claimed that while she was being resuscitated she had found herself floating above the hospital, and remembered having noticed a blue tennis shoe on the ledge of the building. Out of curiosity, Clark-Sharp investigated and did, in fact, find a shoe precisely matching the one described by Maria and in the same spot where Maria reported seeing it. This particular example, notable for its specific imagery, is often presented as one of the strongest to suggest that memories of out-of-body perceptions occurring during NDEs coincide with objective reality, and as such this case is routinely presented (and contested) in NDE-related literature.\(^6\)

In the context of NDEs, cases imply that perceptions occurring during the experience have a basis in objective reality and support the idea that consciousness occurs outside of the body and independently of the brain. In past life reports, they assume that a person can remember their past life and appeal to the audience as empiricists, who weigh up the likelihood of two people having the same experience. Both NDE and past-life reports assume that the

\(^6\) This case is often repeated as strong evidence for the objective reality of NDE perceptions, even though Maria has never been located and there is no corroborating evidence beyond the report of Clark-Sharp (see Fox 2003).
person retains their identity across dramatic biological physical changes—including biological death and rebirth.

**B Psychological Immortality**

Underpinning case studies of life after death is the fundamental assumption that the ethereal mind continues apart from the physical body, an entity that may remain the same, change radically, or even be shed or otherwise discarded by the spirit at the moment of death. One study found that 58 percent of people reporting near-death experiences felt as if they inhabited a new body at the time of the experience (Greyson and Stevenson 1980), although oftentimes people report lacking any kind of body during the experience. For instance, Allan Pring recounts that while he was undergoing a surgical procedure, he suddenly found himself in a “different place” where he claimed, “I knew that I no longer had a physical existence. I was not conscious of having a body and the only senses that I was aware of were sight and sound, but even these were very different” (Fenwick and Fenwick 1995: 114). While conducting an ethnography of groups in Santa Barbara that provide support to those who claim to have had NDEs, Kinsella found most participants were convinced that NDEs provided solid evidence that, in the words of one interviewee, “we are spiritual beings having a temporary, embodied experience” (Kinsella 2012; see also Kinsella 2016). Overall, the sum of NDE reports reflect the widespread assumption that, as developmental psychologist Paul Bloom states, “we do not feel as if we are our bodies; we feel as if we occupy them” (2004: 191).

Bloom’s claim is situated in a growing body of research in the social cognitive sciences, which suggests that ideas about NDEs and past lives conform to intuitive assumptions about the constitution of identity for persons, often referred to as folk-dualism. Research indicates that humans are predisposed to represent persons as composed of multiple “substances”: material bodies and immaterial properties such as minds or “essences” (e.g., Bloom 2004; Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl 1999). On the one hand, other organisms in our environment are tracked fundamentally as physical, bodily objects; on the other hand, they are also represented as mindful, psychological beings, guided in their behavior by unobservable mental states (e.g., beliefs, desires, intentions). There is a general scholarly consensus that people everywhere represent themselves and others as being constituted by non-physical properties, hereafter “minds” for convenience (e.g., Bloom 2004; Corriveau, Pasquini, and Harris 2005; Richert and Harris 2006; Roazzi, Nyhof, and Johnson 2013).

The cognitive science of religion has mounted evidence to suggest that these intuitive tendencies concerning the representation of persons also explain some of the cross-culturally recurrent features of supernatural agents,
such as gods, ghosts, ancestors, and possessed spirits. Although we find many diverse examples of minds without bodies or minds inhabiting other bodies, one constant feature in popular portrayals of supernatural agents is that the individual agent has a mind and, therefore, intentionality (e.g., Astuti and Harris 2008; Barrett 1999; Bering 2002; Bloom 2004; Boyer 2001; Cohen and Barrett 2008; Guthrie 1993). Likewise, the same intuitions—that people’s minds are represented as retaining their personal identity—may explain why some accounts concerning the veracity of near-death experiences and reincarnation are so widely accepted. Many NDE reports include meetings with deceased relatives who retain identifiable characteristics even though they may appear to be considerably different (i.e., young or healthy despite having died due to illness or old age; see Long and Perry 2010). Such evidence of the continuation of personality after physical death is also routinely presented in other kinds of phenomena addressed by parapsychology, such as mediumship, in which the spirits of loved ones presumably make contact with the living and do so while retaining their unique personality traits, adding to the plausibility that the medium has, in fact, successfully made contact with the deceased (see Gauld 2007; Myers 1903).

Such accounts seem to betray a default cognitive operation behind popular survival narratives. They assume not only that memories are the most accurate test of personal continuity after death, but also that the capacity to remember—perhaps more than any other type of mental functioning—somehow survives biological cessation. This observation is in line with current findings in the cognitive science of religion, which indicate that from a young age, we find it easier to represent some biological needs and related psychological states as ceasing after death (e.g., the need to eat: feeling hungry) than non-physically based states, such as remembering (Bering 2002; Bering and Björklund 2004; Cohen, et al., 2011).

One potential cognitive mechanism proposed as being responsible for generating this selective bias in our innate representations of what the dead do and do not routinely experience has been referred to as a simulation constraint. In the context of thinking about what the afterlife is “like,” this refers to the inability to conceive of ourselves as “being” dead and unconscious, because we use mental states to simulate all experiences (e.g., see Bering 2002; Bering 2006). To be clear, this does not mean that you cannot imagine what life would be like after you are dead (e.g., your funeral, your children’s birthdays, etc.), but such a construal requires a first-person perceptive lens through which you envision

7 For other accounts of the cognitive mechanisms proposed, see Bloom (2004) and Roazzi, Nyhof, and Johnson (2013).
these future events. This imaginative obstacle means that it is easier to represent your dead self, and correspondingly, dead others, as continuing to exist mentally—just elsewhere, whether in a different body or a different realm (see also De Cruz 2013; Hodge 2011; Nichols 2007). One parapsychological example of this hurdle of consciously representing non-consciousness is the common “life review” aspect of NDES, which involves the feeling of reliving (or witnessing) significant autobiographical events and reflecting meaningfully upon these deeply personal memories that have accumulated over a lifetime. One woman, speaking of her own NDE at age fifteen, states:

Suddenly, wooosh I was going up through this tunnel … And then the next thing I knew, I was out in this gray misty place … And then this man came towards me—like a misty light-filled-in outline—and he said, “Come with me and I'll show you your life.” The thing I most remember having pointed out to me was when I was throwing stones at my brothers and sister. I was about 9 or 10, and I was really angry and frustrated … and they were really upset. [Seeing this] I was ashamed, and then he took me away from that.

SUTHERLAND 1995: 148

Memories of having lived before serve as lay verification cues for people around the world, often under very different circumstances. In places where every ancestor is thought to return to the human world, such as some cultures in West Africa, South Asia, and northwestern North America, newborn children are often examined for distinguishing mental recollections that correspond to characteristics of the deceased (e.g., Gottlieb 2004; Matlock 1993; Matlock and Mills 1994; Obeyesekere 2002; White 2016b). Ideas about the continuity of memory in reincarnation are also apparent in elaborate rituals in efforts to determine which Lamas have been reborn and who manifests these revered souls presently (e.g., see Edelmann and Bernet 2007; Haraldsson 2006; Haraldsson and Samararatne 1999; Obeyesekere 2002). The most well-known example of such a tradition is the search for the Dalai Lama in Tibetan Buddhism, a formalized ritual that depends crucially upon a candidate child’s ability to distinguish amongst various objects those which belonged to the deceased Dalai Lama, thus inferring that the child remembers the object from his previous life and is the Dalai Lama reincarnated (e.g., White, Sousa, and Berniunas 2014).

Furthermore, recent research has shown that intuitions about memory serve as robust evidence of reincarnation for many practitioners of New Age spirituality. White, Kelly and Nichols (2015b) found that New Age spiritual seekers in the U.S. regard the memory of a specific past life event as constituting stronger
evidence that the person has lived before than any other potential cue, such as an inexplicable behavior, physical marks or factual information. These intuitions about the centrality of memory in establishing reincarnation are not simply a product of being enculturated in such a belief system. White (2015a; 2016a) conducted a series of studies with Jains in Southern India, who believe in reincarnation, and Americans who endorse stereotypical Judeo-Christian views of life after death. Despite major differences in their explicitly stated beliefs, when presented with a suite of memory-based cues, both sets of naive participants reasoned similarly upon being given a hypothetical reincarnation challenge for “matching” fictional living people with their deceased counterparts. Specifically, individuals intuitively privileged a shared episodic memory (memory of a specific biographical event) as evidence for reincarnation over various combinations of other types of memory (e.g., procedural) and physical features (e.g., physique).

Being in a hypothetical conscious state without memories appears especially difficult to imagine. Indeed, research suggests that people regard memories, and certain kinds of memories in particular, as more likely to remain constant over physical transformations than any other psychological attributes. For example, in a series of experiments by Blok, Newman, and Rips (2005), participants reasoned that personal identity remains intact (e.g., the entity is “still Jim”) so long as the target’s (Jim’s) memories are preserved. This memory-identity effect panned out even when the individual was described as undergoing dramatic physical changes: from person to robot, robot to microchip, and then microchip inserted into a new robot. Furthermore, when it comes to reasoning about the perpetuity of the self, people tend to give special credence to episodic (or autobiographical) memories, such as remembering having had dinner the previous night (Tulving 1972). In contrast to semantic memory, which involves general, factual knowledge that cannot be easily countenanced in terms of its acquisition, episodic memory involves autobiographical events that one can recall having personally experienced at a certain place and time (e.g., “I remember celebrating my 16th birthday at my mother’s house.”).

Similar to aspects of the self that be derived from our own predictable behaviors (e.g., “I’m usually stubborn”), episodic memories also give shape to one’s core concept of the self. They feature a self-referential quality of retrieval (i.e., a sense of “mineness”), or the ability to mentally re-experience the event from a first-person perspective. This gives the individual a continued sense of ownership over the memory. Together, these qualities lend themselves to a sort of intuitive model, or default stance, of psychological continuity after death (Conway 2005; Klein and Nichols 2012). For example, if one recalls the experience of having died and seeing the surgeons below attempting to resuscitate
her physical body, that individual is likely to be convinced that it was indeed herself floating above the operating table, not someone else. Thus, for some people, such convincing episodic memories of having lived before or surviving death are the most powerful epistemological evidence of an afterlife, trumping materialist conjectures about the role of the brain in consciousness. If someone recalls having a memory of a personal event, he or she is likely to assume that they were, in fact, “present” at the time of encoding (i.e., that the extant memory is the product of the self’s first-hand experiences at that point in time). The “seeing is believing” heuristic is hard to override when thinking about the self after death.

C  Physical Embodiment
Parapsychological accounts of life after death reflect the implicit assumption that the same mind can inhabit different bodies (such as a physical and non-physical one) at different periods of time, or even multiple bodies over a long, continuous period of time. This observation aligns with a major set of findings in the cognitive sciences showing that we perceive others as having an immutable personal identity that exists independently of their physical appearance. For example, young children judge a caterpillar that has become a butterfly, or a dog that has changed breed, as “the same individual” so long as their preferences are the same (e.g., Gutheil and Rosengren 1996; Hall, Lee and Bélanger 2001; Hickling and Gelman 1995; Rosengren, et al., 1991). Yet these ideas are also constrained by our everyday social experiences. As previously noted, there are NDE accounts whereby people are met by deceased relatives, all of whom are identifiable even though they may appear quite different than what the experiencer remembers (they just know it’s that person). Presumably, what makes these decedents “recognizable” is that the person’s mind is essentially the same as it was in life.

Although the afterlife is typically described as being populated by ethereal spirits (i.e., people without bodies), however, those who have had NDES often betray their implicit representation of these souls as still possessing a bounded corporeal existence. These departed souls may be packaged in invisible bodies, but they would seem to be embodied nonetheless. Folk depictions of the dead endow them with literal, if altered, body forms. In addition, to exert pressure on objects in the natural environment so that their presence is detectable in the form of a communicative “sign,” as is the case in many parapsychological accounts, souls must occupy physical space and possess attributes (e.g., mass) enabling them to affect other physical forms (see Hodge 2008).

While the concept of reincarnation endorsed in popular survival narratives includes the assumption that the person can be reborn into another,
completely different, body, when physical similarities are present between the deceased and the living, this is seen as constituting strong evidence for the phenomenon (e.g., see Stevenson 1997; Tucker 2005). Most often, but not exclusively, these marks correspond with wounds that would have been inflicted at the time of death in a previous life. Congenital abnormalities such as missing fingers, rare birthmarks, and skin irregularities such as discoloration, lesions, spots, or moles are said to betray the cause of death or other misfortunes from the individual’s previous life. For example, Stevenson reports the case of a child who was born with a pale, scar-like tissue approximately three centimeters wide and extending around her entire skull. In conjunction with this unusual physical defect, the girl claimed to recall the life of a man who had had major skull surgery shortly before his death. Stevenson viewed such cases of combined past-life memories and physical markings as the best objective evidence of reincarnation. In fact, he devoted a major tome to these so-called “reincarnation and biology” subtypes in which he meticulously documented over 200 such cases (Stevenson 1997). Just like comparing the details of personal recollections to historical events, physical marks that correspond to those on the deceased (sometimes observable in autopsy photographs) are also taken as verification that some essential aspect of the individual (i.e., the “soul”) has returned to the human world through literal rebirth. Thus, when a person is reborn they are represented as possessing a bounded corporeal existence that shares some form of continuity with the person before death, and thus provides a convenient (and reliable) means of evidence that they are one and the same person.

The appeal of using physical similarities as key indicators of a past life can be partly understood in light of inherent cognitive biases concerning our folk knowledge of persons. Such features are convenient, unique, and easy to detect. In the natural world, too, we ascribe continued personal identity to individuals based on stable physical traits when appearance or personality is otherwise radically altered (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Leveroni, et al., 2000; Malle 2004; Shah, et al., 2001), such as Alzheimer’s disease or amnesia, traumatic bodily injury, or as the result of dramatic aging over long periods of time (Orona 1990; Ronch 1996). Likewise, by comparing physical marks between the living and dead to ascertain the likelihood of reincarnation, whereby some essential and immortal aspect of the individual is envisioned as remaining the same from one life to the next, parapsychologists are employing the same default empirical devices as those used in the everyday social world.

Similarly, Cohen found that members of an Afro-Brazilian spirit possession cult tended to attribute blame to the possessed (i.e., living) person, rather than to the possessing spirit. For example, if a person were drunk at a street party and behaved in socially unacceptable ways, even though onlookers said the
person was possessed by a spirit who had displaced the individual’s mind, they still showed contempt towards the inebriate, and that person would often be sanctioned accordingly (Cohen 2007). Thus, people seem to find it difficult to disentangle physical appearance and personal identity and harbor an intuitive association between these categories. Again, in accepting a person’s claim to have lived before, parapsychologists are likely to revert to the standard cognitive heuristics that they deploy in everyday contexts, even though reincarnation entails, in principle, a transference of the soul to another form.

Together, these observations suggest that one reason popular reports of NDES and reincarnation are compelling is because they meet cognitively intuitive expectations about what counts as evidence for life after death. Their wide appeal suggests that they are not simply by-products of enculturation or indoctrination into a particular theology. Our position is that existing findings in the cognitive sciences, along with targeted additional research questions, can help scholars to pinpoint which psychological pressures drive the continuation of these popular ideas even in the face of widespread scepticism and a materialist scientific worldview.

II Conclusion

To explain why survival narratives have become popular in the modern west we thus need to take account of human cognition. This cognitive approach does not supplant or exclude explanations which look towards socio-cultural particulars that may give rise to them, but rather, complements them. It is rather obvious that to provide a compelling account of particular forms of life after death in a specific culture at a point in time, it is necessary to be concerned with broader socio-cultural factors. For instance, in addition to providing people with a conceptual framework for their inability to cognitively simulate psychological non-existence (see Bering 2006), past-life reasoning also satisfies present emotional needs, accounting for challenges by appealing to some previously lived and unresolved traumatic event (e.g., see Haraldsson 2006; Meyersburg and McNally 2010; Partridge 2006; Spanos, et al., 1991; Walter 2001).

Just as explanatory accounts of the popularity of life after death accounts must take heed of the socio-cultural contexts within which narratives are embedded, likewise, explanations of dominant cultural accounts must also recognize the importance of panhuman cognitive processes in shaping their success. We must look not only at mechanisms of indoctrination and simplistic notions of existential anxiety, but also at how such ideas articulate with an underlying
cognitive system that works in predictable ways. Such ideas tap basic human cognitive processes, including simulation constraints imposed by consciously representing death as non-consciousness. Parapsychology, while ostensibly empirically motivated, may serve similar purposes as religion in this natural, complementary sense. This is especially true for cognitive scientists of religion, since CSR offers a clear conceptual perspective from which to understand the seemingly impenetrable appeal of parapsychology. Belief in parapsychological phenomena (and yet who may not classify themselves as religious or even spiritual) may even be a better—and untapped—resource for ascertaining the role of cognitive mechanisms in this domain of human reasoning.

References


