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## **Alive after Death: An Exploratory Cultural Artifact Analysis of the Merry Cemetery of Săpânța**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper uses insights from several Social Psychological theories to study the cultural artifacts of the Merry Cemetery (MC) of Săpânța (Romania). In the first study we have content analysed the epitaphs written on the painted crosses of the MC and the results show that the epitaphs reflect personal as well as social identity (in which individuals are described as members of both the family and the community) and play two important roles for the community members: they serve as a message to the dear ones and as an external memory of the community's social norms and shared worldview. The second study explored the social representation of the MC in the local community. The results show that the social representation of the MC clusters around three main themes: its symbolic, economic and local identity value. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

*Key words:* terror management theory; social representations; cultural artifacts; Romania

### **INTRODUCTION**

Communities, as social groups that share cultural values and engage in joint activity, often develop cultural artifacts which represent patterns of community change, dynamics of interpersonal and inter-group relations, and critical historical and socio-political events. Although a considerable amount of research has been devoted to understanding how communities influence the cognition and emotions of individual members, as well as shape their behaviour, as yet little to no interest has been shown in the use of cultural artifacts for this purpose. A core benefit of using cultural artifacts as a research tool is that they allow the exploration of the dynamic interplay between community-relevant events, and of psychological phenomena, facts and incidents across different historical periods. Most of the research to date in Social Psychology is rather static and ahistorical (Spini, Elcheroth & Figini, 2009). However, by analyzing the content of cultural artifacts across

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several decades we can explore the dynamic interplay between individuals and their community in a given (real) cultural context and across several historical periods.

In the mid 1930s a Romanian folk artist Stan Ioan Pătraş started to carve epitaphs on painted oak crosses in the local cemetery commemorating the lives of the deceased, and thus initiated the cultural artifact known today as the Merry Cemetery (MC) of Săpânţa. The tradition begun by Stan Ioan Pătraş is carried on to this day and the vast majority of the deceased Orthodox community members have a painted cross with an epitaph. The aims of this paper are: (1) to explore how shared cultural values are expressed in the texts of the epitaphs and (2) to explore the roles and function of the MC in the context of the modern community. Our paper uses insights from several theories to position our exploration along three main lines. First, using terror management theory (TMT), we explore the symbolic and existential function of the MC in helping people to deal with the anxiety generated by their inevitable mortality. Second, we explore the social identity function served by this artifact and the way in which it encourages adherence to shared norms and values and builds a strong sense of identity. Finally, we explore the extent to which this artifact serves as a normative reservoir that helps the members of the community to achieve a sense of control and predictability.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The MC of Săpânţa is a widely known cultural phenomenon, and lately tourist attraction, famous for its painted crosses with epitaphs (sometimes with a satirical character) written in the local dialect (Popp, 2002). Therefore, the MC of Săpânţa is a religious artifact associated with death and dying. Religion can help people define their social identity through membership of a particular social group (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010) and satisfy fundamental attachment needs (Granqvist, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010), which can ultimately help people to cope with threats and alleviate distress. Awareness of mortality can lead to anxiety that results in a set of coping reactions being activated. Social identity and attachment theories argue that threats to self-esteem or one's very existence are alleviated through identification with and attachment to a social group. Social groups offer a safe environment and a sense of stability that will ultimately help members cope with the idea of their own death. Therefore, the MC and the religious beliefs associated with it are salient for the social identity of the community members and offer them a framework for interpreting their immediate experiences. The message communicated through the epitaphs may also foster the idea of *eternal* group membership and thus reduce the existential anxiety of the group members (Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

According to the Uncertainty-Identity Theory (UIT, Hogg, 2000; Hogg, Adelman & Blagg, 2010), group membership and the social identity associated with it helps to reduce uncertainty by guiding individual actions in social settings. People often experience uncertainty with respect to the social perceptions, attitudes and values that they or others are 'supposed' to feel, think or act in a particular social situation. This experience of uncertainty acts as a strong motivator to resolve the most personally relevant uncertainties; death and dying are certainly in this category. Group membership and adherence to the normative practices of the group can reduce uncertainty by anchoring the self in collective practices and expectations. From this perspective, the set of values and the shared worldview embodied in the epitaphs of the MC guide individual as well as group behaviour

and reduce existential anxiety by creating a sense of certainty about what is appropriated, valued and expected from community members.

The MC is a cultural artifact that portrays in a very condensed form the identity of the deceased members of the community. It can therefore be viewed as a reservoir of collective knowledge or social representations. Social representations are knowledge structures, beliefs, ideas and practices that emerge from communication, are shared in a particular social group, and used to make sense of social reality and to guide social behaviour (Moscovici, 1984). Social representation scholars (Doise, 1998; Duveen & Lloyd, 1986; Howarth, 2006) have addressed the issue of social identity as a function of social representations; according to Doise (1998) the conceptualization of personal and social identity as a function of social representations requires a common knowledge repository of personal and social identity as part of a meta-system of social regulations. Consequently, in this paper we use the social representations theory as a framework to explore the personal and social identities of Săpânța community members as illustrated in the epitaphs. These epitaphs serve as collective knowledge repositories that position each individual within a framework of socio-psychological meaning. Identity related social representations are an ongoing collective production of meanings and social relations (Howarth, 2006). They function as building blocks for social identities and reduce the ambiguity of social identity and existential anxiety.

TMT was acclaimed as a broad theoretical approach with far reaching implications concerning the concept of self and of self-esteem. Its explicit concern with death and dying (Vail, Rotschild, Weise, Solomon, Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 2010) makes this highly relevant for the aim of this paper. TMT is a rare example of breadth in a theoretical approach, in a field that has been dominated in recent decades by micro-theories (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1997). It builds on the awareness of death as a critical source of existential anxiety and argues that people use two mechanisms to protect themselves from the anxiety generated by the awareness of their mortality. The first mechanism is rooted in culture and refers to a set of socially shared values and beliefs that offer individuals a sense of structure, stability, permanence and a promise of literal or symbolic immortality (Harmon-Jones, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon & McGregor, 1997) that reduce the anxiety experienced when thinking of death and dying. A second mechanism refers to the sense of personal value closely associated with self-esteem. People derive this sense of value by respecting the core values of their worldview: the terror of death is ameliorated by the self-esteem generated when one meets the standards of cultural values and norms shared by the community (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1999).

Although one of the strengths of the TMT is that it focuses on social-cultural mechanisms for managing death related anxiety, attempts to take the TMT out of the lab into the broad cultural context are scarce and rather descriptive in nature. One of the aims of our paper is to explore the extent to which theoretical claims derived from the TMT hold for a particular Romanian community in which an innovative set of death-related cultural practices and artifacts have developed. The epitaphs are messages from the dead to the living and usually contain a brief description of the deceased's life; thus the MC could be seen as an embodiment of what Lifton (1979) coined 'symbolic immortality' and what the TMT authors claim is a cultural mechanism buffering the fear of death.

Symbolic immortality entails a set of shared cultural beliefs that help individuals to transcend mortality by asserting that they will be represented by something (their work or contributions to community) or someone (their children) after they die. In other words, individuals will continue to exist symbolically in their communities even after they

die. The crosses from the MC of Săpânţa – and especially the epitaphs – are enduring cultural artifacts marking one's place in the community. Because they are primarily religious symbols, the painted crosses and the epitaphs are also closely connected with 'literal immortality'. Literal immortality refers to a shared set of religious beliefs that non-corporeal aspects of individuals are immortal (Jonas & Fischer, 2006).

In line with the theoretical arguments presented so far, the epitaphs displayed in the MC should play a crucial role for the Săpânţa community in dealing with death and dying by: (1) portraying – and enforcing – the social identity of community members, (2) describing the shared worldview and thus reduce uncertainty by providing a sense of control and predictability for the community members and (3) providing a set of symbolic resources and as such a ground for literal and symbolic immortality. To explore these claims we have carried out two studies. First, we have content analysed 673 epitaphs carved on the crosses of the MC and we have used a multidimensional scaling (MDS) procedure to explore the main emerging clusters and the extent to which they reveal a worldview shared by the community members. Second, we have interviewed 28 community members about the MC and the role it plays in community life. The results of the content analyses were also subjected to a MDS analysis in order to reveal the social representation of the MC in the Săpânţa community. Before describing the studies and their results we briefly introduce some historical and ethnographical data about Săpânţa.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Săpânţa is a village situated in the extreme north of Romania, near the Ukrainian border, in the heart of the great historical region called Maramureş. Official statistics (1839–1930), show that the majority of the inhabitants of Săpânţa were Romanians; currently the village is surrounded by multicultural villages (Romanians, Hungarians and Ukrainians). During the 18th–19th centuries, the Jewish community of Săpânţa was very important and gave birth to a Hasidic dynasty (Spinka, the Yiddish name of the village). The Jewish community however, disappeared after the deportation by the Hungarians during the horthyst occupation of northern Transylvania at the beginning of the 1940s (Neumann, 1996).

Inhabitants are very attached to the Church, perceiving it as the main institution that helped them to preserve their original identity in times of frequent social and political unrest (e.g. feudal conflicts, Hungarian occupation, wars and the communist regime) (Filipaşcu, 1997). From around 1700, the majority of the population in Săpânţa belonged to the Greek-Catholic Church. During the communist period, the Greek-Catholic Church was proscribed by law, and as a consequence, today most inhabitants in post-communist Săpânţa are Romanian Orthodox Christians.

Since the middle ages, it has been known that Săpânţa has had good economic potential. Several historical notes mention forests, lands and mountains belonging to the local community. The main occupations of the inhabitants were agriculture (wheat, then corn, etc.) and animal husbandry, especially the rearing of cows and sheep. Artisanal work remains a core occupation within the local community and the locals are well known in Romania for producing wool blankets (*cergi*) and other fabrics with traditional designs. Its international fame rests however on the MC (Popp, 2002), with ranks of richly decorated blue crosses depicting, in verses and images, episodes of the villagers' lives. Local craftsmen carve the crosses and write the epitaphs after consultation with the family

members of the deceased. In order to unfold this complex set of cultural practices we have collected and analysed the epitaphs of the MC. The results of this analysis are reported as Study 1.

## STUDY 1

### *Procedure*

We have transcribed and analysed 673 epitaphs (approximately 95% of the total number mentioned in different sources) carved on the crosses of the MC. The epitaphs were collected either directly by transcribing them from crosses or by extracting them from previous sources documenting this cultural phenomenon (Bițiu, 2008; Bițiu & Man, 2006; Golopenția, 2006; Mazzoni, 1999). After transcribing, the overlaps were dropped, and 673 epitaphs were kept for further analyses. Based on an extensive reading of 90 epitaphs we have identified 13 main recurring themes: relationships with the family, relationships with the household, with the livestock, relationships within the community, relationship with God, the circumstances of death, final message to the dear ones, positive personal attributes, negative personal attributes, occupation, money, biography, nostalgia for life and living. Three trained independent coders conducted the content analysis of the 673 epitaphs. Before coding, the experts ran a common preliminary analysis to improve inter-rated reliability. In this trial, the differences in coding between them were solved by reaching consensus. Each coder had to analyse and code a number of epitaphs on the 13 dimensions.

### *Findings*

MDS analysis was conducted to explore the extent to which the emerging themes can be clustered based on their co-occurrence in the epitaphs. Each theme was coded as a binary variable (1 for theme being present and 0 absent from a particular epitaph). The ALSCAL algorithm was used to calculate the proximities in the resulting matrix. The solutions were represented in a two- and three-dimensional space. In order to evaluate the accuracy of the MDS results, two goodness-of-fit indices were used: S-stress and RSQ. S-stress values range from 0 to 1.00 and lower values usually reflect a better model fit (the relationships between the matrix stimuli is accurately represented by the number of dimensions selected), while high stress values indicates that the number of chosen dimensions is not accurate for representing the relationship between the matrix stimuli (Sturrock & Rocha, 2000). The RSQ indicates the percentage of variance in the data accurately accounted by the coordinate distances and it also ranges from 0 to 1.00. The higher the value of the RSQ index, the higher the accuracy of the MDS solution.

The MDS procedure was carried out with the ALSCAL algorithm using the 13 epitaphs themes as factors and we have restricted the maximum number of dimensions to three in order to make the output more comprehensible. ALSCAL stopped after 13 iterations for the two-dimensional model and after 6 iterations for the three-dimensional model, when the improvement in the S-stress value was lower than 0.001. For the two-dimensional model, S-stress = 0.09 and the RSQ = 0.94, while for the three-dimensional configuration, S-stress = 0.06 and the RSQ = 0.96. According to the conservative cut-off points suggested by Kruskal (1964), the S-stress values for both models reflect a 'fair fit' of the model with

the data. However, we also compared the S-stress values with the cut-off reported by Sturrock and Rocha (2000) in a simulation study. For a three-dimensional model with 13 stimuli, the cut-off for a reasonably good model is 0.11 and for a two dimensional model the cut-off point is 0.19. Our observed S-stress values for both models are lower than the cut-off points indicated by Sturrock and Rocha (2000), therefore we can interpret the results of the MDS as being reasonably accurate. In other words, the association of the themes in the epitaphs is not random and the themes can be accurately arrayed in a two- as well as a three-dimensional space. Because the increment in fit produced by adding the third dimension is not significant and for reasons of parsimony, we have decided to focus on the two-dimensional solution, which is presented in Figure 1.

The MDS results reveal three main theme clusters. The most important cluster (Cluster 1) portrays the deceased as members of the community and contains the following themes: relationships with the community, with the household, and with the livestock, money making, negative personal attributes, the circumstances of death and relationship with God. This sense of community membership is an important component of social identity and thus the first cluster fits closely with what the TMT theorists label the ‘shared worldview’. The second cluster (Cluster 2) is illustrative of the personal identity of the deceased and contains three main themes: the occupation of the deceased person, positive personal attributes and biographical remarks. Themes in this cluster describe in a very condensed form the deceased’s life. Finally, the third cluster (Cluster 3) describes the deceased as member of the family and contains three themes: relationships with the family,

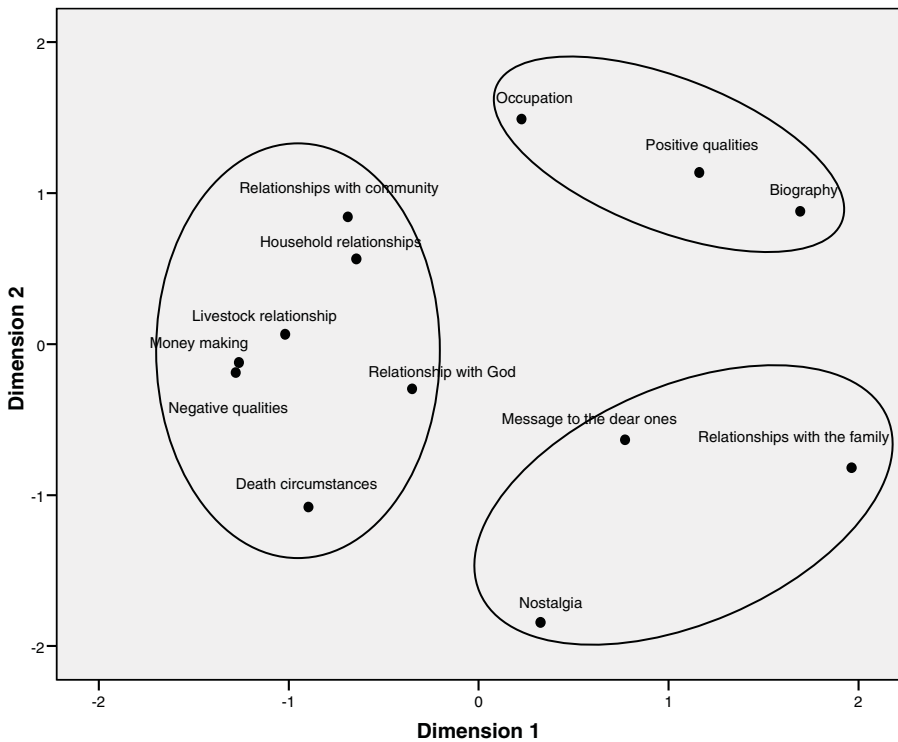


Figure 1. Two dimensional MDS solution (ALSCAL) for the epitaphs codes.

feelings of nostalgia towards life and a message to the dear ones. In order to better illustrate the content, we will present a detailed description of the three emergent clusters.

*Cluster 1.* The themes in this cluster revolve around the relationships with the community and with the household. Because the themes in this cluster describe the deceased as a member of the community, they encapsulate core elements of their social identity.

Main themes in this cluster also describe the position of the deceased within the religious community, his/her relationships with the household and with the livestock. The epitaphs contain rich information about the inter-group relations within the local community. As mentioned before, the village is situated in a geographical area cohabited by several ethnic groups: Romanians, Hungarians and Ukrainians. The following epitaph is an illustrative example in which these inter-group relations are portrayed together with the relationship with the livestock and economic activity: *Good cattle I have raised/And I have sold plenty of milk/To the Hungarians in Câmpulung.* Here, we can see the opposition –largely debated in studies of cultural anthropology – between a people of farmers (Romanians) and a people of craftsmen (Hungarians), which transforms the goods bought before selling them in a larger commercial process.

Despite civil peace, inter-group conflicts are also recorded in some of the epitaphs. One relevant instance in which the inter-group conflicts had a strong impact on the local community is the horthyst occupation of northern Transylvania at the beginning of the 1940s. An epitaph from 1943 reads: *Here I lie to take my rest/ Saulic Ioan is my name/ In the Belmezău garden/I looked after my sheep/When a bad Hungarian came/And shot me in the head/Cut my head from my body/ And buried me like that/May he forever be damned.* Hungarian ethnics are not richly represented in Săpâța, therefore inter-group contacts have been largely restricted to economic exchanges with neighbour communities and military clashes during the Hungarian occupation of northern Transylvania. As Transylvania is well known for interethnic conflicts (Cernat, 2010) and it is commonly argued that inter-group contact is one of the most important factors for reducing prejudice (Curșeu, Stoop & Schalk, 2007; Tausch, Hewstone & Roy, 2009), no definite picture can be drawn for the local community based on the content analysis of the epitaphs.

The epitaphs also remember critical historical events (such as the impact of the communist period) and reflect on their influences on the community. The crosses in the cemetery memorialize the communist persecution of the Greek-Catholic Church. Pop Gheorghe was condemned by the communist regime for supporting the Greek-Catholic outcaste priests, refugees in the woods of this hilly country. He was imprisoned and died in Gherla, one of the most notorious camps for political prisoners in communist Romania. His epitaph reads: *My name is Pop Gheorghe/This is not my resting place/My grave is in Gherla/You will find it there/I walked in the forest/To bring food to the outcast priests/I thought it was a right thing to do/To give bread to the hungry/Here is what happened/They (the Communist Party) imprisoned me for that.* Another example of communist persecution is found here: *As long as I lived/I went through lots of suffering/Never ran away from work/ When I was a boy/I was kicked out of school/For I was the landowner's son/Did not do well with the communists/I was also prosecuted by the communists in the village/And sent up for trial/They imprisoned me in the end/And I was never guilty.* However, not everything about communism is condemned in the epitaphs, as one may see in the next two verses, written for a communist official: *As long as I lived, I loved the Communist Party/And all my life I tried to help the people.*

Some of the epitaphs are ironical and satirical, emphasizing vices or negative personal attributes. Negative personal attributes are mentioned as lessons to be learned by other



community members: *Till I got myself a wife/I've walked even with the Devil/Boys when you get married/Do choose wisely/For I had three wives/And I liked none of them*, and another epitaph, from 1942 refers to smoking and laziness: *Here I lie to take my rest/Ion Griguță is my name/As long as I lived/I smoked the pipe/I avoided hardworking/Although I took care of myself/A bad disease reached me/And I did not get much older/Because I left this life/When I was 57*. Heavy drinking is another negative attribute mentioned in some of the epitaphs: *One more thing I loved very much/To sit at a table in a bar/Next to someone else's wife, and Let me tell you another good one/I enjoyed drinking plum brandy/With my friends at the pub/I often forgot what I came in for*. Smokers and heavy drinkers have traditionally been stigmatized within communities and these health threatening behaviours were often related to morality (Farrimond & Joffe, 2006; Orford, Rolfe, Dalton, Painter & Webb, 2009). In the epitaphs these 'bad habits' are often mentioned as a violation of moral standards and a subject of social disapproval.

Epitaphs sum up the shared worldview in the community through normative statements as well as descriptions of core elements of the community's identity. Some epitaphs refer to dress codes and to the wool blankets, one of the local crafts central to the local identity: *In several exhibitions throughout the country/I have made them famous/From Craiova to Bucharest/The blankets from Săpânța or With blankets I went to Constanța/And there the Death has found me/My mother when she found out/Came to take me home/And here she buried me/As the local tradition says*. Moreover, there are several references to funeral practices, feasts and rejoicing. To conclude, the first cluster contains themes that describe the richness of community life, it is in essence a relational cluster in which relations of the deceased with the community, the livestock, the household and God are well depicted. *Cluster 2*. On the crosses, scenes of everyday life are painted with naïve realism, with the use of strong colours, and commonly representing main occupation, relevant biographical elements and in some instances the circumstances of a violent death (car accident, crime, thunderstruck). As such, these themes reflect personal identity. The occupations are often described or depicted in the images painted on the crosses: millers, butchers, miners (Maramureş is a region with ancient traditions in mining), teachers, doctors, firemen, tailors, priests, but mostly shepherds and breeders: *As I lived in this world/ I skinned many sheep/Good meat I prepared/So you can eat freely/I offer you good fat meat/And wish you to have a good appetite*. Usually the epitaphs start with the name of the deceased person and then mention the main occupation. Relatively few epitaphs begin with the main occupation and leave the biographical information at the end. In some epitaphs the names of the deceased person are not even mentioned: the main occupation and the social ties suffice for identification.

Going behind simple biographical descriptions, the tragedies and joys of an entire community are carved and painted in wood. Job-related accidents seem to have marked the community. One of the epitaphs describes such an accident: *Here I lie to take my rest/Pop Mihai Țușac is my name/Nobody should have bad luck/As I had when I learned to drive the tractor/Far away from my village/Death found me there/And young as I was you took me away*. Moments of happiness, joy and celebration are also commemorated in the texts. The epitaph of a 72-year old woman reads: *Here I lie to take my rest/ Gheorghe Anuța is my name/I used to weed the plants/I used to water the flowers/As long as I lived/ /From my childhood/I liked to sing and dance/And I also liked beds of flowers*.

By presenting biographical notes and especially positive personal attributes, the epitaphs serve as a repertoire of ethical standards and transmit a set of norms essential to cement the local community: honesty, sense of duty, hard work, respect, politeness, good education of

children and strong faith. One such example reads: *Here I lie to take my rest/Borcuțașu was my nick name/I was a good man/I did not do bad things/Only good ones when I could/I worked and tried hard/As long as I lived/I have taught the kids/To be kind-hearted/So they will be well respected in the village/This is what I liked.*

**Cluster 3.** This cluster contains the message to the dear ones, the relationships with the family and feelings of nostalgia. These themes reflect an important dimension of social identity, the family relationships of the deceased. Themes contained in the cluster occur often in the epitaphs written for young adults and children. The epitaph of a young girl reads: *Burn in hell, you damn taxi/ That came from Sibiu/As large as Romania is/You couldn't find another place to stop/Only in front of my house to kill me?*, while the epitaph of a young woman says: *You unfair death/Why didn't you go away/In villages with sad old people/Why did you come to me?/For I have two young children to raise.* Sometimes, the content of the epitaphs are inspired by funeral texts and verses that are traditional in the Romanian culture and known for their nostalgic tone (Mazzoni, 1999). The two epitaphs cited above are very similar to funeral poems performed in ritual contexts.

In the epitaphs, one may see the same groups of families as in real life, and the social ties seem even stronger after death; the real community seems enlarged as the dead and their stories are never forgotten. Social relations, especially strong ties with relevant others, are critical for psychological well-being, and thus for the ability to cope with the idea of death and dying. An important component of the fear of death and dying is the fear of being separated from the dear ones. The themes identified in this cluster play a role in the management of these close relationships. Often the message to the dear ones is nostalgic, built around the idea of loss. The most important loss depicted here is a relational one. Unexpected death shatters relations and takes away the joy of a fulfilled life. Death is portrayed as unfair, ugly and taking something valuable away. This representation helps to rationalize death and functions as an anxiety buffer.

In order to further explore the association between the themes of the epitaphs and community-relevant events, we have plotted the summed frequencies of the themes mentioned in the three clusters across 5 time lags (see Figure 2).

During 1934–1949, the incidence of Cluster 1 themes is highest; the incidence then drops continuously towards 2007. The period that overlaps with the Second World War (WWII) is probably marked by a substantial existential anxiety and thus this pattern is in line with the predictions of the TMT, stating that anxiety should be associated with a stronger reliance on shared values and norms. The beginning of the communist period (after 1950) is associated with a substantial increase in the frequency of Cluster 2, mostly concerned with the biographical information of the deceased person. The beginning of the communist period was also associated with social anxiety, mostly due to the ideological pressures exerting change on traditional values (religious beliefs, private property). The nature of this anxiety is somehow different as it relates more to the shared social identity of the community than to the very existence of the individual, as was the case during the WWII period. From 1950 to 1977 themes in the second cluster are the most dominant in the epitaphs. This cluster is most aligned to the communist ideology of the devoted hard working men and women. Another relevant pattern refers to the dominance of Cluster 3 during 1978 to 2007 showing a strong emphasis on the symbolic and literal immortality dimension of the MC. In order to further explore the function of the MC for the Săpânța community and the way community members represent the MC we have carried out a second study based on a set of interviews with community members.

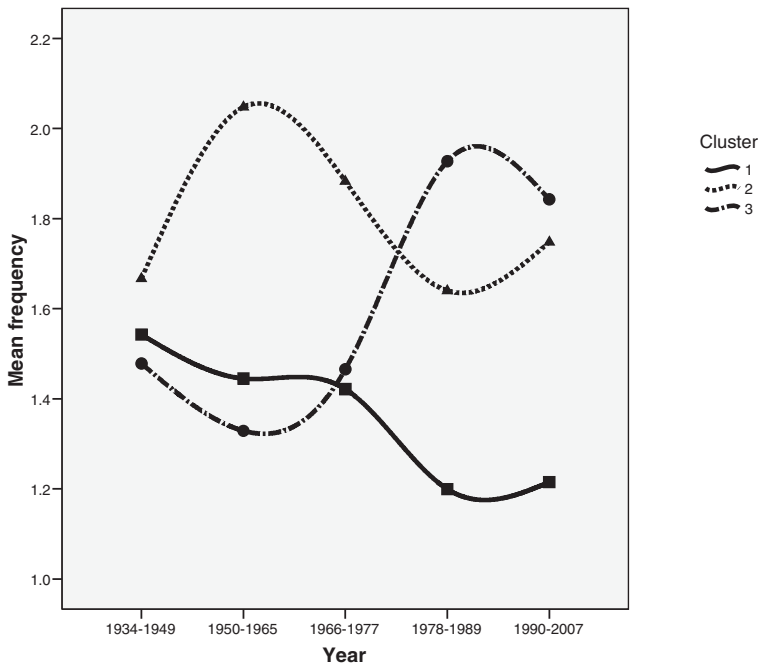


Figure 2. Mean frequencies of themes in the three clusters across time. Legend: Cluster 1 = shared worldview (individual as member of the community), Cluster 2 = biographical information (personal identity), Cluster 3 = individual as a member of a family.

## STUDY 2

### *Sample and procedure*

Twenty-eight Săpânța residents (17 women) with an average age of 50.64 (ranging from 16 to 78) were interviewed. The interviews were conducted by one interview operator, unaware of the aim of this study. During one of the field visits a snow-balling technique was used to identify respondents. The interview was centred on the way the respondents represent the MC and the interviewees were asked the following questions: *What does the MC mean to you? How do you see the place/role of the cemetery in the local community?* The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then content analysed and ten main themes emerged from the analyses: (1) the MC (2) the MC as an embodiment of old traditions, (3) the MC is closely connected to the Church and the religious beliefs of the community members, (4) it has painted crosses with epitaphs, (5) it is a unique art product, (6) it is the pride of the village, (7) it is visited by tourists and thus (8) it brings financial benefits for the locals, mainly from (9) hosting the tourists and (10) selling local artisanal products. This coding framework was applied systematically to all interviews. Results were further recorded as dummy variables, 1 when a particular theme was present and 0 when it was absent from the interview.

### *Findings*

Similar to Study 1, two and three-dimensional MDS analyses were carried out with the ten interview themes as factors. ALSCAL stopped after nine iterations for the three-

dimensional model and after five iterations for the two-dimensional model, when the S-stress improvement was lower than 0.001. The S-stress and RSQ indices of model fit were as follows: S-stress = 0.13 and RSQ = 0.88 for the two-dimensional model and S-stress = 0.04 and RSQ = 0.98 for the three-dimensional model. The S-stress value for the three-dimensional model reflects a 'good fit' even according to the conservative cut-off points suggested by Kruskal (1964). A visual inspection of the three dimensional configuration reveals the theme of tourists as a common theme for two main clusters. On the one hand, tourists are closely associated with financial benefits, artisanal products and, as an attribute of community members, welcoming hosts, while on the other hand tourists are associated with the MC, the pride of the village and the cemetery as a unique art product. Therefore, although the best configuration is derived in a three-dimensional space, for clarity it is depicted in two dimensions with 'tourists' as a common element in two clusters. The two-dimensional configuration is presented in Figure 3.

Two clusters are interconnected through the 'tourists' theme. One cluster refers to the economic value of the MC for the local community and contains themes like financial benefits, good hosts (locals offer housing for tourists) and artisanal products (locals produce artisanal products to be sold to tourists visiting this region). The second cluster refers to the identity value of the MC for the local community. This cluster contains the following themes: MC is a unique art product, the pride of the village, visited by thousands of tourists. Finally a third cluster refers to the symbolic value of the MC: it embodies the old traditions and is a reflection of the religious beliefs of the locals.

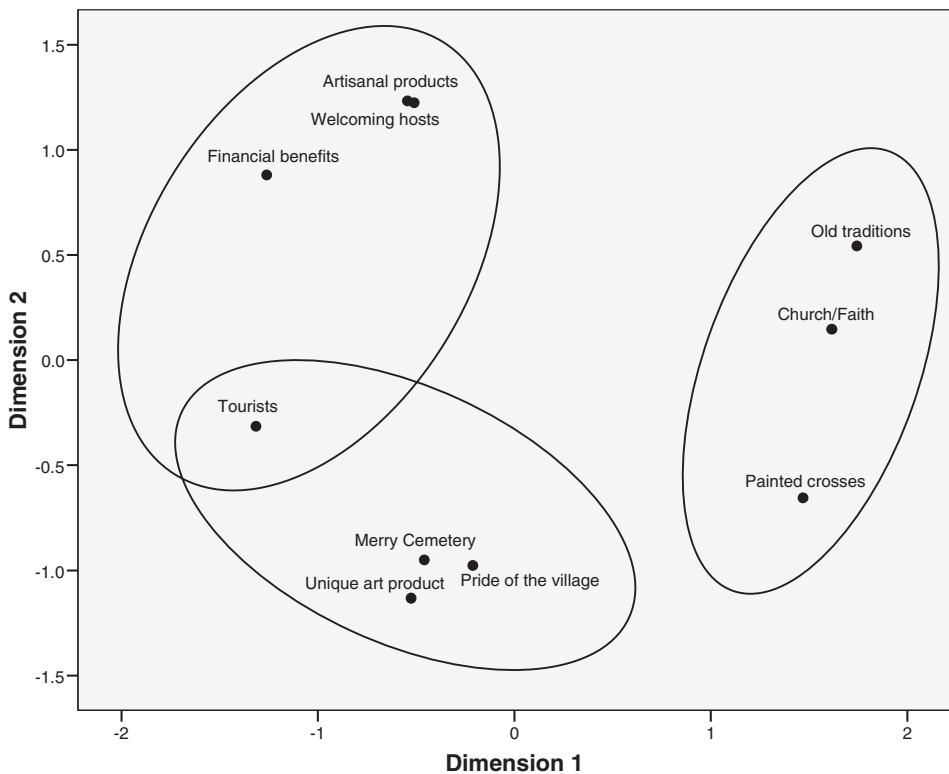


Figure 3. Two dimensional MDS solution (ALSCAL) for the interview codes.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations for study 2

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Age	50.64	14.62	1		
Symbolic value (shared worldview)	1.85	1.20	0.54**	1	
Local identity	1.92	1.48	-0.47*	-0.35	1
Economic value	1.57	1.23	-0.12	-0.59**	0.14

\* $p < 0.05$ .\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The last cluster identified in the interviews contains themes relating to the painted crosses with epitaphs, to the church and religious beliefs, as well as to the old traditions (symbolic shared worldview). A prediction derived from the TMT would be that, as people approach death, they will be more inclined to use the values associated with the shared worldview. Death becomes more salient in the case of older adults and in line with the mortality salience hypothesis people are more likely to engage coping mechanisms, including a stronger reliance on a culturally shared worldview. This will ultimately ensure a sense of symbolic immortality. We expect therefore a positive correlation between age and the total score for the themes forming the third cluster. The correlations between age and the sum scores of the three thematic clusters are presented in Table 1.

As predicted by the TMT, our results show a positive association of the sum score for the 'shared values' cluster and age. It does seem that people increasingly value the symbolic value of the cemetery, as they grow older. An alternative explanation could be that religious beliefs and practices are more prominent in older than younger adults and thus this positive correlation between age and the local identity cluster could actually be a cohort rather than age-related effect. However, as reported in the European Values Study, in Romania, religious beliefs and practices are not different across different age cohorts (Voicu, 2009), suggesting that this is indeed an age rather than cohort-based effect. It is highly pertinent to note that in their answers, only older adults mentioned the idea of having a painted cross for themselves. They reflect on being part of this tradition by choosing a painted cross for themselves as a means to transcend death. A few quotes illustrate this particular tendency:

'I would like to have a painted cross myself . . . we have here people that know how to make them so I will be remembered for generations to come. My wife is buried in the cemetery and she has a wooden cross painted in blue. Many people took pictures of the cross so they know her story' (man, 78 years old).

'Here in Săpâna we don't have stone crosses, we have wooden crosses made here in the village. All my deceased family has such crosses . . . only Jewish people have otherwise. I would like to have a wooden cross with my life story written on it so other may remember me' (man, 70 years old).

'So far this is the tradition in Săpâna, blue painted crosses, blue is our color, the color of Săpâna. I would like to preserve the tradition and so I will ask for a wooden painted cross . . . I already have the oak prepared, when I die, they just have to bring the wood to the craftsman and he will write my story' (man, 65 years old).

'I think I would like to have a painted cross myself. This is the tradition here. This is the way the village became famous: some French tourists came in 1967 and took pictures of the crosses. They have never seen something like this, painted crosses with a story for each person. They wrote

about this in newspapers and showed the pictures of the crosses and so everyone knows our stories' (woman, 60 years old).

These findings are in line with the predictions of the TMT: as the threat of death becomes salient, people tend to find ways of achieving symbolic immortality. The painted crosses and the epitaphs of the MC certainly fulfill this function for community members. One of the interview excerpts contains a reference to an out-group (Jewish). It is a clear indication of the role played by the shared worldview both in building a sense of symbolic immortality and in differentiating the in- and the out-groups. This result is in line with previous research in TMT, suggesting that mortality salience is associated with strong ethnocentric views and religious defensiveness (Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

Another interesting result is the negative correlation between the age of the respondents and the sum score of the local identity cluster. This means that in contrast to older adults, younger community members tend to represent the MC as defining part of the local identity. The social representations embodied by the epitaphs provide a framework for the younger community members to construct a social identity and to position themselves in a network of meanings shared by the local community. The epitaphs are therefore both a reflection of, as well as a resource for, social identities, illustrative of community members' struggle to understand the world and position themselves in it. Strong social identity helps to reduce uncertainty and existential anxiety by anchoring the self in the collective practices and expectations of the community (Hogg, 2000; Hogg et al., 2010).

The correlation between age and the sum score for the economic value cluster is negative, yet not significant. We can therefore conclude that, as people grow older, they certainly tend to represent the MC as a source of symbolic immortality rather than as a source of economic value or local identity. This result is in line with Cozzolino, Staples, Meyers and Samboceti (2004) who show that mortality salience is negatively associated with a preoccupation with wealth and other economic symbols (e.g. money) and positively associated with external values supporting the culturally shared worldview.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results reported here add to the current TMT literature by exploring some of the theoretical propositions in the context of two field studies. The MC of Săpânța is an illustration of how symbolic resources embodied in a cultural artifact can be used as a buffer against the fear of death. The epitaphs written on the painted crosses are ways in which community members symbolically transcend death. Our studies explore from two angles a cultural artifact and its impact on the local community. We first conducted a content analysis of the epitaphs and we have identified three main clusters and showed that the epitaphs serve two main roles: they function as a communication tool with the dear ones and they help the community members to transcend death by encompassing a wider social identity and shared worldview. In a second study we have interviewed members of the community to uncover the social representation of the MC, the way they use this symbolic resource, and to uncover its real functions for the community.

The content analysis of the epitaphs reveals that they are social identity reservoirs in which the deceased are described as members of the local community and their family. As such, the epitaphs offer a rich input to community members about constituents of social identity (Doise, 1998; Duveen & Lloyd, 1986). In other words, epitaphs are ways in which

norms and expectations about community or family membership are transmitted. As the socio-political context evolves, community members engage with the social representations (Duveen & Lloyd, 1986) and change these representations, as illustrated by the change in the use of the three theme clusters in the epitaphs across time. This is a clear illustration of the complex interplay between social representations and social identity.

Because epitaphs represent to a very large extent the culturally shared worldview, they serve as a set of symbolic resources (Zittoun, Duveen, Gilespie, Ivinson & Psaltis, 2003) as well as a communication tool between the deceased and the dear ones. People are naturally afraid of the unknown and of separation from their loved ones, and thus the epitaphs offer them the chance of communicating after death and of preventing their being forgotten by the dear ones. Therefore, the epitaphs as a set of symbolic resources help the community members to close the rupture caused by death. Through the epitaphs the deceased transmits a final message of remembrance to the family members and the dear ones (see the third cluster in Figure 1). The relational function of the epitaphs is very important because often the fear of separation from relevant others is stronger than the physical fear of complete annihilation (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1997).

Moreover, the epitaphs summarize the core normative system of the community and thus help to preserve social norms: the epitaphs become the embodiment of the shared worldview in this community. The epitaphs structure the complex normative social system of the community and help the community members to remember and to extract useful information that will ultimately make it easier for them to conform. Conforming to shared social norms is important because it carries several social benefits (acceptance, affiliation, self-validation), but also because it boosts self-esteem. Self-esteem increases as people meet the standards imposed by socially shared norms and thus in line with the anxiety buffer hypothesis, high self-esteem can alleviate the experience of death-related anxiety. As opposed to the individual, shared norms and values are perceived to be 'immortal' (Landau et al., 2004) and thus, becoming part of this shared worldview (by conforming to it) helps community members to achieve symbolic immortality.

The core evolutionary assumption of TMT, that people developed shared beliefs systems and cultural practices to buffer the anxiety associated with the awareness of mortality, has received intense criticism (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1997; Leary, 2004). Although we are aware that grounding evolutionary claims is difficult, our results address to a certain extent the claim that cultural artifacts develop in order to help community members cope with the fear of death. We have explored a set of cultural practices that emerged in a community in close connection with death and dying and show that the content of the epitaphs is closely associated with macro-societal events like wars, political changes and turmoil. The practice of writing epitaphs that summarize the life of the now-deceased, supports the culturally-shared worldview and ensures continuity and transcendence. At the same time it preserves the history of the community as it evolves through time under different social circumstances.

As the results of the second study show, the epitaphs help the community members to cope with the fear of death. For the older members of the community the painted crosses are an important part of the 'rite de passage' (they prepare the wood for the cross and talk to the craftsman, etc.), as shown by some of the interview excerpts. From the very beginning the epitaphs helped community members to achieve a sense of symbolic immortality, and so the 'innovation' introduced by Stan Ioan Pătraş was immediately accepted and had a wide impact on the community members. The inhabitants of Săpânţa accepted very easily the new funeral practice, so that the tradition initiated by Stan Ioan Pătraş had to be

continued by his 'students': the nephew Toader Turda, Toader Stan and his son Gheorghe, Dumitru Pop called Tincu (Mazzoni, 1999). The practice of writing epitaphs has become an important part of the contemporary local identity of Săpâța. Community members perceive the MC as a mark of distinctiveness and a source of pride. These two roles are however distinct and it seems that as mortality salience increases, the symbolic value grows more important and the identity role is less prevalent.

#### *Limitations and future research directions*

This study takes the predictions of TMT out of the lab to be explored within a real community setting. Although such an attempt has important merits, it also has several limitations. Only a small sample of the community was interviewed in order to derive the social representation of the MC. This makes the results of our study difficult to generalize in regards to the whole community. Future research could use larger samples and different methods (e.g. free associations) to explore the social representations of the cemetery in a more accurate way.

The MC is a unique and very 'exotic' research context to further test the theoretical propositions of the TMT. The local community has several burial and death-related cultural practices so that fundamental arguments derived from the TMT can further be tested. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which the preference for a 'traditional' painted cross is associated with fear of death and to what extent self-esteem mediates this relationship. Further in depth analyses could explore the Săpâța community in parallel with neighbouring communities without such cultural practices. Moreover, the changing content of the epitaphs shows how political or social transformations impact on the social identity of the community; therefore further exploration of this research context may lead to new insights on the joint dynamics of identity processes and social representations. To conclude, the MC is both a reservoir of social representations and a container of symbolic resources (Zittoun et al., 2003), therefore further analyses could help researchers to make sense of social actions and interactions within a particular community and understand how community members cope with developmental transitions.

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