

# The Agency of Deceased Victims in the Lives of Terrorism Survivors in France

Yordanka Dimcheva

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## Abstract

This article examines the experiences of survivors of the 13 November 2015 Paris attacks and the 14 July 2016 Nice attack in France, focusing on how they relate to the deceased victims and experience their agency. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study explores how agential relationships can emerge between survivors and the dead, even in the absence of prior acquaintance. The findings challenge conventional accounts of agency as solely intentional action, showing that the dead can exert a form of agency grounded in affective, ethical, and meaning-making processes. Drawing on the concepts of *communitas* and continuing bonds, the paper demonstrates that the shared experience of existential rupture can create enduring connections between the living and the dead in the aftermath of political violence. The study contributes to grief and agency theory by reconceptualising survival after terrorism as a relational condition, shaped through the ongoing agency of deceased victims.

## Key words

agency, terrorism, survivors, deceased victims, continuing bonds, *communitas*, interpretive phenomenological analysis (ipa)

## Contact

Yordanka Dimcheva, The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, United Kingdom; e-mail: [y.dimcheva@bham.ac.uk](mailto:y.dimcheva@bham.ac.uk)  
ORCID iD 0000-0001-5650-5540

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In the wake of terrorist violence, the dead do not vanish from the social or political imagination. In contemporary France, especially following the high-profile attacks between 2015 and 2016 (the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris and Saint-Dennis and the 14 July 2016 Nice attack), the deceased victims have become central to public mourning, political and securitisation discourses and even debates on national identity (Gensburger – Truc 2020; Faucher – Truc 2022; Bogain 2018). The state's commemoration of victims—including national commemorative ceremonies at Les Invalides<sup>1</sup>—has institutionalised a form of presence of the dead that goes beyond mere remembrance. Memorials, whether they be inert structures or symbolic and affective expressions, testify to the continuous individual and public engagement with the loss and absence of the deceased (Arvanitis – Simpson 2024: 175).

Scholarly works in the fields of memory studies, sociology, and critical terrorism studies have addressed the variety of social responses generated by terror attacks across societies (Truc 2017) and how victims of terrorism are politically mobilised in broader counterterrorism and resilience discourses (Heath-Kelly – Fernandez de Mosteyrin 2021; McGowan 2022). Qualitative research with victims of terror attacks has also explored how survivors and wider society engage with memory and memorialisation (Milošević 2024; Karcher et al. 2024) and the diverse ways in which deceased victims are remembered and mourned (Phelps et al. 2025; Dimcheva 2026). Additionally, a significant body of research has examined the psychological impact of terrorism upon survivors and the ways meaning and sense of self are disrupted in the aftermath of such life-changing experiences (Pemau et al 2023). Psychological studies of trauma have also shown that life-threatening experiences and exposure to violent fatalities can significantly alter the survivors' identities in a way that profoundly transforms how they relate to the self and others (Thoresen et al. 2012).

Nevertheless, the relationship between the survivors and deceased victims of terrorism has so far been studied only through the lens of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, emphasising feelings of survival guilt or death anxiety (Aakvaag et al. 2014; Hamama-Raz et al. 2016). Consequently, little is known about the experiential impact that witnessing the death of others has on the survivors or about how they reason and relate to the deceased beyond institutionalised forms of remembrance and commemoration.

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1 France holds commemorative ceremonies for victims of terrorism at Les Invalides in Paris, a site of national significance where the tombs of Napoleon and other war heroes are located. Following the 13 November 2015 Paris attacks, these ceremonies have served as a symbolic space of national mourning, honouring the victims' memory, and reinforcing collective solidarity.

Existing studies have also been remarkably silent on the social, affective and moral agency that deceased victims exert in the lives of survivors when they are not connected by prior relationality. Thus, understanding how the dead continue to “act” within and shape the lives of survivors calls for an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that goes beyond psychological perspectives to trauma and survival and incorporates a broader understanding of the meanings such experiences hold for survivors.

Engaging with the lived experiences of seven survivors of the terrorist attacks in France, namely the 13 November 2015 quasi-simultaneous Paris attacks and the 14 July 2016 vehicle-ramming attack in Nice, this article offers an in-depth analysis of how survivors reason about and relate to the deceased victims of the attacks, as well as the different ways survivors experience their agency. I employ interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to further explore how this perceived agency is understood and negotiated by the survivors. This methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of the agential relationship between the deceased victims and the survivors. By foregrounding the ways in which the deceased shape the memory, narratives, and identity of survivors, the article offers a novel perspective on the bonds between the living and the dead in the wake of political violence.

Moving beyond conventional views of agency as deliberate, conscious action (Giddens 1984; Archer 2000), it is argued here that the presence of the dead in the ongoing lives of the survivors reflects a form of agency grounded not in intentionality but in affective, ethical, and meaning-making dimensions. Drawing on the continuing bonds model (Klass – Silverman – Nickman 1996) and the anthropological notion of “*communitas*” (Turner 1969/1991) that denotes an intense connection with others through shared transformative experience, the article further highlights the distinct ways in which the deceased structure the experiential landscapes of the survivors’ lives. Simultaneously, it advances the argument that such agency can emerge not only on the grounds of personal histories, but also from a shared experience of a profoundly tragic event and its enduring significance for the survivors.

## **Theoretical background**

The concept of agency has traditionally been understood as the capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices within a given structure. Rooted in Enlightenment ideas of rationality and autonomy, agency in classical sociological and philosophical literature has been closely linked to the living subject—a conscious, intentional actor (e.g., Anscombe

1957; Davidson 1963). Recent theoretical developments, especially within anthropology, memory studies, and posthumanist theory, have expanded the boundaries of agency. Scholars such as Alfred Gell (1998) and Bruno Latour (2005) propose a distributed or relational understanding of agency, whereby agency is not limited to human subjects but extends to objects, technologies, and even the deceased (see Crossland 2014). According to the philosophical framework of agential realism developed by Karen Barad (2007), agency is not the property of individual, autonomous subjects but a distributed phenomenon that emerges through intra-actions between human and nonhuman bodies, materials, and temporalities. Barad's (2007: 182) concept of "spacetime mattering" further complicates conventional temporal separations between past and present which, when applied to the dead, suggests that the living and the deceased are entangled in ways that cannot be reduced to linear causality or symbolic remembrance. This broader perspective allows for the interpretation of agency not merely as action initiated by an autonomous will, but as something that emerges relationally, through affect, memory, materiality, and discourse (Barad 2010: 261). The shift also opens up the conceptual space to consider how the dead may exert influence—what some scholars term "posthumous" (Hanson 2025) or "postmortem" agency (Arnold 2014).

Applying this broader conceptualisation to the dead—particularly those who perished in acts of violence—challenges the assumption that death necessarily marks the end of influence. For instance, Veena Das (2007) discusses how the aftermath of violence becomes folded into everyday life, with the dead continuing to shape the survival narratives, subjectivities and ongoing lives of the survivors. In the context of terrorism, the dead often become moral referents, rallying points for collective identity, or symbols that justify political or ideological actions (Lawther 2014; Rodrigo-Jusúe 2024). Their absence could equally become a form of presence—what Gordon (2008) might call a "haunting"—which exerts emotional, cultural, and political force. In parallel, anthropologists and sociologists have investigated the "social life of the dead" (Verdery 1999; Laqueur 2015), revealing how human remains, commemorative practices, and cultural imaginaries allow the dead to shape politics, identity, and community.

Theoretical advances in the social sciences have also challenged the assumption that the dead are passive objects of memory, emphasising their continued agency in the social world. Exploring representations of death and the dead in popular culture, Penfold-Mounce (2018) demonstrates that the agency of the dead is exerted in a variety of ways, such as prompting the living to confront and consider issues of mortality, to act on their behalf or to fulfil their wishes. Meyer and Woodthorpe (2017) go further in arguing

that even the absence of the deceased can exert agency, as it is “spatially located” and possesses “some kind of materiality”, and thus the power to act or do things. Likewise, Hallam and Hockey (2001) emphasise the role material objects and places play in facilitating relations between the dead and the living. Building on ethnographic research that explores how the dead sustain a dynamic, relational “absence-presence” in the lives of the bereaved, Maddrell (2013) contends that memorial artefacts function as vehicles of remembrance across landscapes and communities.

Central to the posthumous presence and agency of the dead is the notion of continuing bonds, a concept from grief studies which challenges earlier models that framed healthy mourning as a detachment from the deceased. The continuing bonds model, first articulated by Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996), marked a significant departure from earlier grief paradigms that emphasised detachment from the deceased as the goal of bereavement (Freud 1917/1957; Bowlby 1980). Rather than viewing persistent attachment as pathological, this model proposes that maintaining an ongoing internal or symbolic relationship with the deceased can be a healthy and adaptive aspect of grief. Research following this model has documented a range of practices through which mourners preserve connections with lost loved ones—from internal dialogues and rituals to dreams and memory work (Sas – Coman 2016; Đorđević Belić 2024).

The mental representation of the dead has also been interpreted as a model for action which supports the living in planning their future (Marwit – Klass 1995) and resolving grief (Root – Exline 2014). Experiences in which individuals believe they meaningfully interact with deceased loved ones, or what Cerulo (2023: 10) calls “living-deceased perceived interaction”, are also known for generating social and psychological benefits for the bereaved, such as guidance, strength, and connection. Scholars have found that those who choose to sustain the bond with their lost loved one tend to develop a heightened sense of connectedness to others, a deeper feeling of religious meaning in life, and that they experience lower death anxiety (Krause 2011). However, these studies have typically assumed a pre-existing personal relationship between the mourner and the deceased, leaving little room to consider how bonds might form—and persist—in the absence of such familiarity. Moreover, the assumption of relatedness and previous familiarity limits its applicability to contexts such as terrorism, where individuals may feel connected to and influenced by the deceased victims, who they did not know at the time, but shared a profound, life-altering experience with.

Experiences of trauma and victimhood further complicate traditional grief and mourning categories. Survivors of terrorism are not merely

witnesses to death but direct participants in the same fatal event. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, for example, survivors frequently report a complex mix of grief, guilt, and identification in relation to those who perished (Murray et al. 2021; Pitcho 2025). These experiences may be accompanied by heightened empathy, spiritual deepening, a renewed focus on relationships, or a motivation to engage in activism or public service (Tedeschi – Calhoun 2004; Fausor et al. 2022). Yet, these emotional responses are often understood through the lens of trauma psychology, thus marginalising the agency of the dead to distressing recollection, the power of affect or moral imperatives to remember the victims. Similarly, memory studies and political science scholarship largely treat the dead as symbolic figures within collective memory (Eng – Kazanjian 2003; Edkins 2003) rather than as agents whose deaths can actively restructure the lives of those who survive violence.

This review highlights the growing body of interdisciplinary work on relationality between the living and the dead. However, to the best of my knowledge, there are no grief or agency theories that explicitly account for the bonds between the deceased victims and survivors of mass casualty events. The theoretical gap is particularly significant given the multiple ways experiences of terrorism and witnessing the violent death of others influence the post-traumatic identity of survivors. To bridge this gap, I propose that understanding how the dead exert agency in the survivors' lives, even in the absence of prior personal acquaintance, can be approached through the concept of *communitas* (Turner 1969/1991: 138) that designates the intense bonds formed between individuals through a shared transformative experience, outside normal social structures. Complementing this, the continuing bonds model from grief studies highlights how symbolic relationships with deceased individuals can endure and influence the living over time. Together, these frameworks provide a lens for analysing the agential relationships that can develop between survivors and deceased victims through the shared experience of existential rupture and transition.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore how terrorism survivors in France experience and make meaning of the ways the deceased victims influence their narratives on the events, and their identity and life trajectory. Seven survivors participated, each of whom had been directly impacted by the terrorist attacks of November 2015 in Paris or July 2016 in Nice and witnessed the deaths of others. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger qualitative re-

search project at the University of Birmingham looking at experiences of urban terrorism in Europe (2004–2019) across five European countries. The interviews analysed in this paper took place online between May 2021 and August 2022. The online format was influenced by the global pandemic at the time and the resulting travel complications. Ethical considerations also played a key role in choosing to conduct the interviews via Zoom, given the potentially triggering effect of meeting in public spaces, which were targeted in both attacks relevant to this research. While it has been argued that conducting interview research online inhibits the rapport between researcher and participant (Varma et al. 2021), the deeply personal experiences and post-traumatic self-questioning that the research participants shared with me opened a particular relational space that went beyond the mere exchange of information. As a researcher, I co-created this space through empathic and non-judgmental listening, informed by methodological training and by the emotional preparedness gained from prior engagement with scholarship on trauma and survival.

Each of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half and was audio recorded with the participant's informed consent. I transcribed each interview and analysed them in detail based on the original language of the transcript (French or English). The transcripts were subsequently sent to those interviewees who wanted to see them for review and approval to ensure their accuracy. Only one participant chose to modify their transcript by deleting all identifying information. The emotional toll of this ethical process was evident from the time it took for those participants who chose to see their interview transcript to review it, with several admitting afterwards that revisiting their experiences in written form had been extremely challenging. Participants were able to choose whether their name appeared in the research outputs to protect their privacy. While only one participant asked to remain anonymous, I refer to all other interviewees by their first name only, mindful of the sensitivity of terrorism-related experiences and the difficulty of anticipating the long-term consequences of being publicly identifiable when giving consent.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to examine the data. This methodology was selected for its emphasis on lived experience, meaning-making, and the subjective sense participants attribute to significant life events and relationships (Langdridge 2007: 9). Its idiographic, interpretative approach and focus on a small participant sample enabled me to examine in depth how the survivors perceived and interpreted the agency of the deceased victims in their lives (Smith – Flowers – Larkin 2022: 3). Particular attention was paid to the participants' language and embodied descriptions when speaking about the dead and how the memory

of them shaped their outlooks on survival and navigating life after trauma. Following the method's aspiration to move onto general knowledge claims by beginning from a singular experience, I read each transcript multiple times, and made detailed notes on the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the data. From these notes, I constructed experiential themes and then explored connections between the themes within each case. I repeated this process for all participants and then identified patterns, convergences, and divergences across cases to produce a rich, nuanced account of the participants' sense-making in relation to those who had lost their lives in the terrorist attacks (Smith – Flowers – Larkin 2022).

## Analysis

The findings section highlights how the deceased victims in France's two deadliest terrorist attacks of the 21st century exert posthumous agency in the survivors' lives and identities. The analysis unfolds across three interconnected experiential themes: the survivors' reflections on their own survival amid the violent deaths of others, the ongoing processes of meaning-making and resilience, and how memories of the deceased shape the survivors' outlooks on life and relationships.

### *Trauma and survival*

The research participants from both Paris and Nice interpreted their survival in direct relation to those who had died in the terrorist attacks. In the majority of cases, their struggles with post-traumatic stress symptoms were triggered by recurring memories of violence and the indiscriminate murder of innocent people. The recurrent thoughts and flashbacks were not merely symptoms of trauma, but also attempts to make sense of both the tragic event and the improbable fact of their own survival (Bond – Craps 2020: 74–75). The deceased victims returned as emotionally charged presences in dreams, sensory re-experiences or mental revisits, reanimating the traumatic event in the survivors' psyche. They were equally present in their reflections on fate, chance, and meaning. For example, several of my interlocutors referred to their survival as a miracle that they had not yet been able to explain.

Sanchia, who survived the vehicle-ramming attack in Nice in 2016, had no memory of how she managed to get out of the way of the 19-ton cargo truck the perpetrator drove into the crowds gathered on the Promenade des Anglais for the National Day fireworks. Separated from her husband and his family during the attack, she could not believe her eyes when she

saw them alive on the other side of the street after the vehicle had passed. In a state of shock, she perceived those who had survived as angels—so miraculous did it seem that they had escaped the truck's deadly path. Her enduring sense of incredulity at having survived underscored the deep psychological impact of the near-death experience and direct exposure to mass casualties. The descent from absolute joy to a nightmare within seconds on that evening has indelibly marked Sanchia's and many other survivors' innocence about death, leaving post-traumatic healing and recovery still feeling like "a work in progress".

*"People are dead around you. You ask yourself: 'Is this person that you love in front of you real or is it a vision or a fragment of your own imagination?' Until you touch one another. That's when you realise: 'Oh, this is real. You are real'. I then realised that he is alive, that he is my husband and not some angel that I am imagining. We couldn't believe that his parents were actually alive. It was the four of us. The fact that all four of us actually made it is incredible."* (Sanchia)

The lingering traumatic impact of the terrorist attack was evident in Sanchia's account through her permanently altered field of experience and the way her miraculous survival was affectively entangled with the memory of the deceased victims. Despite the lack of prior relational ties, the experience of trauma and near-death blurred the boundaries between the tragic fate of others and her own existential horizon, producing an acute vulnerability to perceived threats. For Sanchia, sensory or situational similarities continued to function as triggers that reactivated embodied and perceptual traces of trauma, as well as memories of those who did not survive. This temporal entanglement between past violence and present thought and action illustrates how the agency of the dead can be mutually constituted (Barad 2007: 151), enacted in moments of intense recall or in significant locations.

Moreover, Sanchia confessed that, since the attack, even in her happiest moments, she could suddenly envision something horrific happening in a split second. Vivid recollections of the attack and of those who did not survive intruded into her present and triggered involuntary visions of tragedy (Mezzalira 2022: 8). As a result, she avoided sitting on a bench on the Promenade at busy times even several years after the event. Her heightened alertness and visceral responses further highlighted how the effects of a near-death experience can endure long after the violence and summon the deceased as latent agents who mediate experience.

The agential presence of the dead also informed the reasoning of many of my interlocutors on the subject of their own survival. Gaëtan Honoré, who attended the Eagles of Death Metal concert at the Bataclan Theatre in Paris on 13 November 2015 was saved by another victim of the attack. When Gaëtan lay down on the floor in the pit of the theatre hall in an attempt to protect himself, a man who had been shot by the gunmen fell on top of him. The unknown man lay over him with his blood oozing out all over Gaëtan for hours until the police intervened. The lifeless body of the man, whose identity Gaëtan never learned, protected him from imminent death while the perpetrators were indiscriminately shooting at the concert audience. The somatic impact of the traumatic experience caused Gaëtan to feel the dead victim's breath upon his skin for years after that tragic evening and to wake up several times each night to check whether his children were alive. The metallic smell of blood and the scenes of the victims, whose dead bodies lay entangled in the pit, also haunted Gaëtan for years. Similar to Sanchia, the spectral feeling that the worst could happen at any moment echoed the presence of the dead throughout his everyday experiences and perceptual world.

The interviewees' accounts of the aftermath of the attacks were also marked by the omnipresence of hypervigilance, startle responses, and post-traumatic stress symptoms that recurred for years. These bodily and psychological symptoms highlighted an experiential shift in the survivors' sense of security, as well as their openness to the world and intersubjective relations (Christ et al. 2011: 203). Witnessing the death of others in the attacks was woven into the perceptual schema of their post-traumatic lives, guiding attention and shaping bodily responses and actions. For Christophe, who survived the Bataclan attack by hiding in a storeroom, hypervigilance became a defining "way of living". He remembered each moment of the terrorist attack "as if it were yesterday", including the loss of a close friend, and the deeply disturbing sounds of the terrorists' shooting and the victims' dying. The affective trace of the life-threatening experience permanently disrupted his existential feelings of safety and security, transforming the memory of the dead into a force that continues to shape his everyday life, from sleep quality to interpersonal connections.

While survivors of other traumatic events might report similar post-traumatic stress symptoms (e.g., Herman 1992/2015: 37), what was distinct in Christophe's account was the fatalist outlook on life that he acquired as a result of witnessing the death of innocent people. Like Sanchia and Gaëtan, his ability to perceive joy and be fully present in the moment were obstructed by the enduring recall of those who died in the Bataclan attack and the injustice of the experience. Beyond mere objects of trauma or affect,

the deceased victims exerted agency that played a structuring role in how he perceived both life projects and what once used to be habitual actions.

*“The negative side is the symptoms I told you about—hypervigilance, stress. I have a very, very fatalistic way of seeing the future. This was already the case a little before, but 13 November made things worse, which can cause problems for me in all relationships, even romantic ones, for example. When the other person is very open and optimistic and I, on the contrary, tell myself that the worst is always likely to happen anyway, I tend to self-sabotage. I exaggerate a little, but it’s the negative side of not being able to enjoy the moment.”* (Christophe)

For the majority of the research participants, reflecting on the terrorist attack and the scale of terror they experienced was a painful, emotionally charged process, the consequences of which they continued to grapple with daily. For François<sup>2</sup>, who witnessed the death of others on the Promenade in Nice and immediately tried to help those in need, the scenes of gravely wounded and deceased victims remain a powerful presence in his life and well-being. Gratitude for his survival coexisted with recurring reminders of the violence endured, creating a complex emotional landscape in which life is simultaneously cherished and overshadowed by the tragedy.

Even after he had returned home safely, the victims’ cries incessantly intruded into François’s thought processes. The fate of those he had tried to help on the Promenade, by holding their hand or remaining by their side until the arrival of medical teams, remained with him for weeks afterward. Despite not knowing who they were, their fate felt intertwined with his survival, triggering an acute form of survival guilt. The compulsive urge to learn their life stories and what had happened to them manifested itself viscerally in his body and mind as avoidance, body aches, and intense somatisation (North et al 2005: 491). François’s enduring sense of powerlessness and remorse also represented a form of mourning for the deceased and for the innocence about death he had lost in the attack. Yet, what he described during the interview was not simply post-traumatic stress reactions. In fact, these distressing recollections also functioned as embodied representations of symbolic kinship with the deceased. Although François had no prior connection to the victims, the tragedy of the attack became a medium through which they became linked.

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2 The name has been changed to hide the victim’s identity.

*“I started looking for the people I had helped. I discovered that the first person I had helped had died and that the second person had total amnesia and didn’t remember anything. This really disturbed me. It’s difficult. I didn’t know these people. I found their photos. I knew their lives, what they did for a living, whether they had children, etc. There you go, I had the whole story of these people’s lives.” (François)*

Similar to my other interviewees, the experience influenced François’s identity, self-understanding and interpersonal life to the core. For instance, the “state of death” he found himself in made him incapable of resuming his professional activities. Many of his life projects collapsed at that point and he was faced with the difficult decision of moving away from Nice.

The survivors’ ongoing reflections on their survival and lasting trauma illustrate how their post-traumatic selves remained in ongoing intra-action with the memory of the deceased, who acted as co-authors in shaping their narratives of the experience. Interpreted through the notion of *communitas*, the terrorist attack can be seen as an anti-structural event that suspended the ordinary social order and opened a liminal space in which new, unexpected bonds emerged (Turner 1969/1991). Within this anti-structure, the deaths of others were not simply tragic but profoundly personal, confronting survivors with the contingency of fate and their own mortality. Through post-traumatic symptoms and intense recollections, the agency of the deceased continued to shape the survivors’ perceptual world and engagement with the self and others far beyond the temporal boundaries of the violent event.

### Meaning and resilience

In the aftermath of terrorism, survivors often find themselves in an existential vacuum—grappling not only with psychological trauma and survivor’s guilt, but also with a profound rupture in their assumptive world (Janoff-Bulman 1992; Kauffman 2002). This rupture was reflected in the accounts of some of my interviewees, who reported that their framework of meaning had been deeply shaken. For them, the shock of living through an event that claimed the lives of others posed a deep existential challenge. Yet, for the majority of participants, survival was not experienced as mere endurance. Rather, it was understood as a morally charged condition that called for transformation on both a personal and an intersubjective level. Repeatedly across the interviews, the dead, and the mourning they left

behind, were described as a force that drew the survivors into new forms of ethical responsibility and meaning-making.

For some interviewees, career shifts or relocations represented a form of “living differently”, in response to the irreversible effects of trauma and the lives prematurely ended. Others reported a sharper focus on relationships, personal well-being, or creative pursuits they had previously neglected. A sense of heightened urgency to reconsider life priorities and live more meaningfully was particularly evident in Stéphane’s account. After being taken hostage by the perpetrators of the Bataclan attack in a service corridor, Stéphane was ordered to stand against the door for nearly two hours to prevent the police from storming in. Although he was still struggling to find a logical explanation for why his life and the lives of the other hostages were spared, while a total of 130 people were killed in Paris and Saint-Denis that night, the experience recalibrated Stéphane’s priorities in life in a positive way.

Trauma literature frames this transformation as post-traumatic growth, emphasising that although it cannot erase suffering, it signals a reorientation in its aftermath (Tedeschi – Calhoun 2004: 2; Wolf – Nusser – Cappelliez 2024: 1026). In Stéphane’s case, the heightened awareness of mortality he acquired following the traumatic experience led him to live more fully and to embrace opportunities as they arose. Despite the deeply humbling impact of the event, the miracle of survival became a lens through which he now perceived life’s frailty and the significance of each day.

*“I realise that I am more in a ‘no time to lose’ approach. That is to say, things that I thought a lot about before, well, now, no, I say, let’s go. I used to think before planning a vacation, buying plane tickets, etc. Now I say to myself, no, if I want to and if I can, I’ll do it, because life is short.” (Stéphane)*

The research participants also described feelings of a responsibility to live “fully” and “meaningfully” in light of the deaths of others. This suggests that remembering the deceased can transform survival from a passive or merely reflective state into an ethically charged process. For example, Sanchia spoke about the important role gratitude played in her post-traumatic life and the enduring ways in which the agency of the dead had reshaped her outlook and sense of purpose. Regardless of the emotional pain that recalling the tragic events and the deceased inevitably brought, she did not try to erase their memory. On the contrary, Sanchia symbolically internalised the dead as “angels” who guided her life and offered existential insights that were integral to her identity reconstruction. While this form of agency

did not resemble conscious action, it was nonetheless deeply consequential in the way she sought to make sense of the experience.

*“I always, always think about the people who were lost on that day. I think I have a duty to try to... I think that has massively affected me in a big way, in combination with gratitude. Even though it has been a very difficult journey, just to remind myself that there are people that have no chance to continue their lives or them not being here today saved a few seconds for me to manage to get out of the way. So it is my duty to try to live my life as much as possible. [...] I don't want those angels to think that I'm not appreciating my life today.”* (Sanchia)

In the majority of survivors' accounts, the agency of the deceased victims catalysed a form of reflective labour through which they negotiated the tension between survival and the perceived debt to those lost. This reflection extended beyond formal acts of commemoration, appearing in everyday behaviours and relational decisions. In these inner processes, the dead were often projected forward as moral and existential interlocutors.

François's engagement in the victim association Promenade des Anges<sup>3</sup>, for example, represented an embodied and relational attempt to navigate the pervasive sense of guilt and transform trauma into meaningful action. It also sought to restore a part of his inner self that was lost in the terrorist attack through a dialogical relationship with other survivors and, in particular, the deceased. Learning their life stories and seeing their photos created a relational field in which his guilt feelings and search for meaning powerfully merged. The newfound commitments that now guided his life were not merely pragmatic responses. They emerged as part of an enduring bond with those whose tragic death he experienced as affectively entangled with his survival.

*“My membership in the Promenade des Anges association was out of guilt. [...] I couldn't stand being alive. I always blamed myself, in fact, saying that I would have liked to give my life instead of that of a child. I would have liked to leave and see a child saved. I knew the stories of all these people, the deceased, the children. I saw their photos. It's very unfortunate. When I joined the association, it was to be able to help these people. I could offer something. I was lost and hurt, and I was looking for the path to healing through others.”* (François)

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<sup>3</sup> Promenade des Anges is one of the victim associations founded in Nice after the terrorist attack on 14 July 2016.

The powerful way in which the traumatic experience shaped François's emotional landscape and his attempts to find meaning in the attack's aftermath reveal the intense relationality that had emerged between him and the deceased victims. The cognitive responses and altruistic actions this agency elicited gradually transformed into a fragile attempt to reconstruct a coherent post-trauma sense of self.

The second analytical section highlights how the deaths of others in the terrorist attacks prompted an urgency among the survivors to live with a heightened purpose. Simultaneously, the symbolic fellowship between them and the unknown deceased victims fostered a desire to reinterpret the experience in ways that could offer them a new direction in the wake of existential rupture. This dynamic underscored a form of agency in which the deceased shaped the trajectory of the survivors' lives by influencing the values they chose to uphold and their newly acquired outlook on life (Muldoon et al. 2019: 333). In parallel, their renewed ethical commitments operated as a quiet tribute to those who did not survive, thereby widening the conceptual scope of continuing bonds.

#### *Memory and interpersonal relations*

Acts of remembrance were central to the posthumous bond between my interviewees and the victims of the terror attacks. For the survivors, remembering the dead rested on the imperative to bear witness and demonstrate resilience in the face of indiscriminate violence. The felt duty to never forget was embodied by observing anniversaries and visiting memorial spaces which re-activated the conditions of *communitas*. In turn, the dead indirectly shaped the survivors' post-traumatic identity and interpersonal relations. This dynamic reflected many of the processes described in the continuing bonds model, including internal dialogue, symbolic actions, and the incorporation of the deceased into one's self-narrative (Valentine 2008).

In contrast to the destruction of collective bonds sought by indiscriminate acts of violence, remembering the dead powerfully shaped the survivors' social lives and commitments. Even without intentionality, the deceased exerted agency by bringing together individuals whose lives had been forever tainted by the terrorist attacks, as they honoured and remembered the victims. Justine, who survived the Bataclan attack by climbing out of a skylight together with her partner, confessed that she often thought about the people who lost loved ones in the 13 November attacks and whose lives were shattered as a result. She wished she could have stopped it happening, yet she was painfully aware that the tragedy could neither be undone nor forgotten. What helped her integrate the experience into her

life narrative and move forward was the group of friends she discovered through the victim association Life for Paris. With every anniversary, the memory of the dead—along with the shared struggles and milestones of healing—strengthened the bonds among the living.

*“We’re very good friends with Zoe, whose brother Nick was the only British victim. She always says that on that first anniversary when they went back, they went back to a café with her mom and dad and a couple of friends. And every year they have gone back, they’ve had to get a longer and longer table for more and more friends that they’ve made through Life for Paris. [...] There’s just so much love and joy at seeing each other. That’s what they tried to destroy and they didn’t. They didn’t. More love and more friendship has been created by it.” (Justine)*

The future-oriented reflections of the survivors also revealed how the dead are able to shape their approach to working through the trauma. Sanchia, for instance, reported a deepened sense of connection and belonging to the city of Nice as a result of the terrorist attack and the people who died in it. Each year, despite the lingering trauma, she returned to the city, describing her grief over the deceased as both a bonding force and an imperative to keep their memory alive. Many of her actions, such as placing trimmings on the Christmas tree on the Promenade demonstrated a form of personalised remembrance that sustained a dialogue with the deceased.

From the perspective of memory studies (Assmann 2011; Erll 2011), this engagement can be understood as a form of active, situated remembering, in which memories are mobilised not only to preserve the past but also to guide present and future actions. Rather than eliciting distress, such acts of remembering the deceased fostered solidarity and supported existential reorientation. In turn, the deceased indirectly contributed to the survivors’ resilience and helped them reclaim a sense of belonging in spaces marked by violence.

*“In Nice, they had this beautiful Christmas tree on the Promenade. They’ve never forgotten. They’ve never forgotten. I put my own trimmings there. You write a letter and put it in the post. [...] These 86 people, now 88 lives<sup>4</sup> aren’t forgotten. [...] I think that has to*

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4 In the aftermath of the Nice attack in 2016, two more individuals were recognised as victims by the victim associations, as their deaths occurred as a result of intense grief and physical illness directly related to the attack.

*be timeless. They can't be forgotten. What moved me a lot was the big Christmas tree for the victims. They aren't forgotten and I think that's very special."* (Sanchia)

The survivors' commitments after the attacks reflected both an acknowledgment of loss and a reoriented outlook on life. Rather than succumbing to despair, many of my interlocutors described how the transformative experience strengthened them mentally and deepened their appreciation of human connections. The experience of coming close to death also opened survivors up to new relational opportunities they could not have anticipated. This perspective reframes survivorship, positioning the deceased as active participants in fostering a renewed reverence for life and what sustains it.

In Stéphane's account, for instance, resilience was evident in his decision to transform the weight of mortality into a more purposeful life and not give in to melancholia. His awareness of living "a second life" embodied both the memory of the deceased and a new sense of self formed in the aftermath of the attacks. Consequently, recovery in the aftermath of terrorism did not signify a return to equilibrium, but represented learning to live differently, with heightened awareness of fragility and contingency. Speaking of the unique friendship that formed between him and the other hostages during the Bataclan attack, Stéphane shared the following:

*"Today, none of us have a loved one who died at the Bataclan. So, finally, on the day of the commemorations, 13 November, in the morning we attend the commemorations in front of the Bataclan and it is always very hard because we see a lot of people mourning their son, their brother, etc., and we cannot be insensitive to that, of course. But then, in the evening, we tend to celebrate the fact that we're all alive, that we came out of it unharmed, and that we have a second life somewhere. So, we're quite happy to be able to celebrate that all together."* (Stéphane)

The research participants also reported consciously prioritising time with loved ones, deepening emotional bonds, and valuing moments that might previously have seemed routine or insignificant. Having been severely injured in the Bataclan attack and at risk of losing his leg, Victor underwent long months of medical rehabilitation before he was finally able to walk again. During this challenging period, he rediscovered an inner strength and determination to pursue his life goals, supported by his family and friends. While fear and inner doubts would often hold him back in the past, the

near-death experience strengthened his resolve to see his projects through. Confronting mortality also sharpened his focus on personal relationships.

In Victor's account, the agency of the deceased did not constitute a literal action. Rather, the transformative experience created a temporal suspension in which he was pushed to re-evaluate what mattered most to him. While such expressions may not align neatly with traditional grief models, they nonetheless demonstrate a clear symbolic engagement with the lost life opportunities of the deceased victims and how they impact the survivors' ongoing lives and perspectives.

*"Today, I enjoy life and I want to take away positive lessons from it. In my life today, I try to remember this moment to make it a strength and not a suffering. Well, I say basic things, but when you love your loved ones, you shouldn't hesitate to tell them. It seems obvious, but when you feel like you're going to die, there are lots of things that..."*  
(Victor)

The continued reflection of the survivors on the numerous lives lost in the terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice catalysed a renewed commitment to living in ways that honours both the self and the deceased. Remembering the dead also embodied a form of resistance to the annihilating force of violence and stood as a refusal to abandon victims to oblivion. Through these processes, recovery from terror was not merely a return to pre-trauma normalcy, but a transformative reorientation marked by the search for relational depth. Surpassing mere commemorative remembrance, the deceased retained a continuous presence that supported survivors through their life-reconstruction process.

## Discussion

This study extends existing understandings of agency and continuing bonds by demonstrating that such connections can emerge even in the absence of prior acquaintance, as seen in the survivors' continuous reflective and emotional engagement with the deceased victims of terrorism. Unlike grief rooted in established relational histories, the survivors of the Paris and Nice attacks reported a persistent sense of the presence of the deceased through traumatic recollections, ethical imperatives and remembrance-oriented actions. These experiences were not just psychological remnants. Instead, they represented an ongoing relational dynamic through which the deceased continued to shape the survivors' affective and existential realities. In line with IPA's focus on lived experience, these accounts highlight

the depth and complexity of meaning-making processes that underpin post-traumatic adaptation.

The findings further illuminate the normative dimensions of these bonds. The survivors frequently described a felt responsibility to live purposefully in honour of the deceased, framing their survival as a “second chance” at life. This ethical orientation appears to emerge from the intense entanglement produced during moments of terror, which temporarily dissolved conventional social boundaries and fostered a form of *communitas* (Turner 1961/1991). In these liminal, anti-structural spaces, the emotional intensity of the terrorist attacks generated an unexpected form of relationality, evidencing that continuing bonds can be forged through shared vulnerability and exposure to an existential threat.

Crucially, these bonds were enduring rather than ephemeral. The survivors reinterpreted identity changes and life decisions in light of the ongoing influence of the deceased. While previous research has largely framed the influence of the dead in symbolic, affective, or mnemonic terms (e.g., Bennett – Bennett 2000), the present study suggests a more direct, agential role of the deceased, in which their felt presence and emotional recall actively informs the survivors’ long-term coping. Recognising the deceased as relational agents—and interpreting their ongoing influence through the lenses of the continuing bonds model and *communitas*—offers a novel perspective that broadens existing conceptions of trauma, resilience, and post-traumatic growth.

While this study offers original insights into the relationship between survivors and deceased victims of terrorism, it does not explore the survivors’ religious or spiritual interpretations of this connection. This limitation stems primarily from the limited information provided by the interviewees, which may reflect the predominantly secular context of their countries of residence, as well as a conscious effort to avoid juxtaposing their own reflections with the religious framing of the perpetrators’ acts. Future research could therefore explore the “higher meaning” dimensions of such agential relationships between victims and survivors in contexts of political violence and mass-casualty events.

## Conclusion

In the aftermath of terror, the dead do not recede into silence, but take on new forms of presence that press upon survivors in unexpected ways. Their agency unfolds not through intention but through the meaning-making labours that the survivors carry forward. Their posthumous presence is equally registered in ethical commitments and reconfigured life trajectories

that reinforce the survivors' anchoring in the world, despite the lingering trauma. The findings further demonstrate that bereavement is not the only condition under which continuing bonds can form. The chaotic, boundary-dissolving terrain of a terrorist attack can become the foundation for an emergent *communitas*—a brief collapse of ordinary social structure in which strangers become bound together, and the dead become companions in the work of reconstructing life.

Together, these insights invite a broader understanding of relational agency and the diverse pathways through which bonds with the dead take a form beyond conventional frameworks of mourning. Paying attention to how the dead continue to influence the world of the living also encourages us to rethink the survival of terrorism itself. Instead of viewing it as a solitary project of endurance, a different picture emerges when we approach it as a condition marked by ongoing relationships with those whose absence nonetheless continues to make claims upon the living.

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