

Life After Death: *The Last Information Gap – Until Now*

A RESEARCH NOTE

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2004, we explored beliefs and experiential claims concerning life after death via representative samples of close to 5,000 people in the United States, Canada, and Britain. We started with an interest in tracking belief in LAD. We found much more. What is *intriguing* is the extent to which people haven't given up on the possibility that life continues after death. What is *startling* is the extent to which they believe that individuals who have died are continuing to follow what is taking place in their lives and – even more – continuing to be in contact. What is *puzzling* is that these pervasive beliefs and claims persist, despite a substantive decline in recent decades in religious involvement and beliefs in all three settings. Such findings in countries with very different religious histories underline a paradox in the Information Age: we know more than enough about just about everything in life. But we continue to know very little about life after death. Yet, the beliefs and claims are far too important and common to be ignored. We conclude the paper by arguing that it's time for social scientists to be among those who take a closer look.

Introduction

Since mid-70s : Monitoring Social Trends

* 7 Adult...1975 → 2005: > 10,000

* 4 Teen....1984 → 2008: > 15,000



■ Readings of

- Boomers * Pre-Boomers * Post-Boomers
- Teens 80s 90s 00s Now

- Together: surveys lots of information on how we have changed & not changed since 1960s

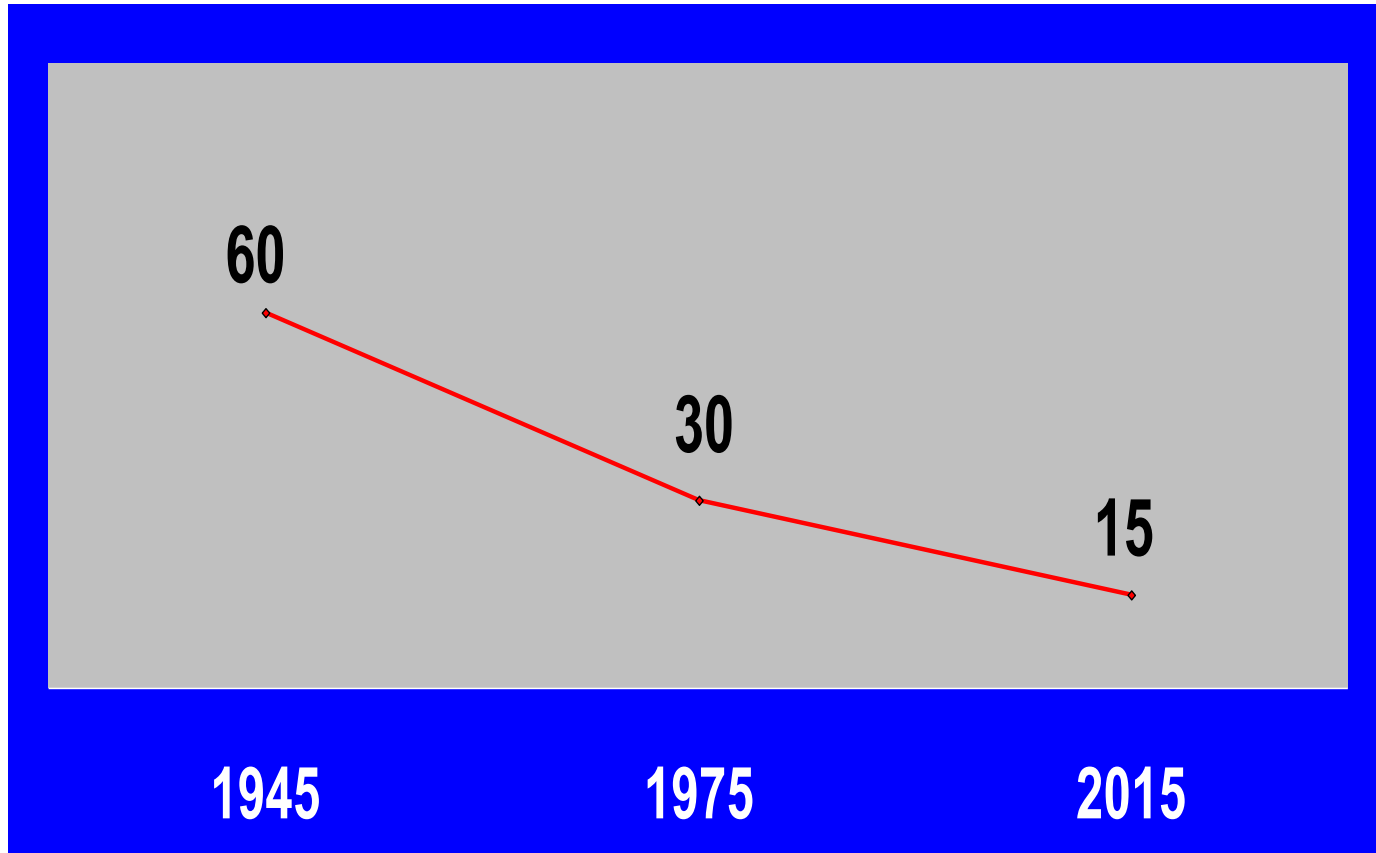


- Ongoing surveys: with Angus Reid
 - * 2013, 2014, 2015: March 3,000

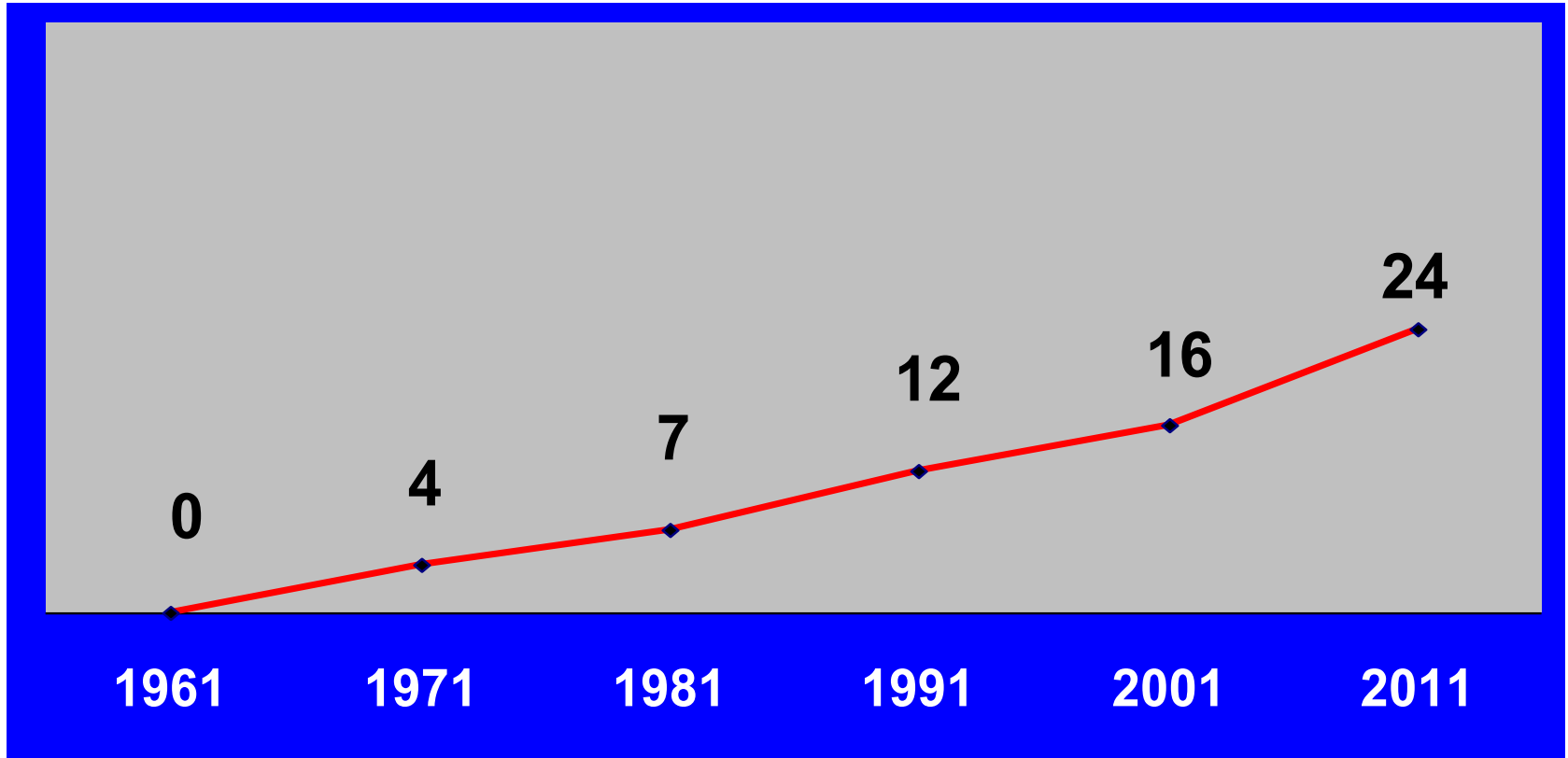


The Attendance Situation

Weekly Attendance: 1950s and Now



Adults With No Religion: 1961-2011

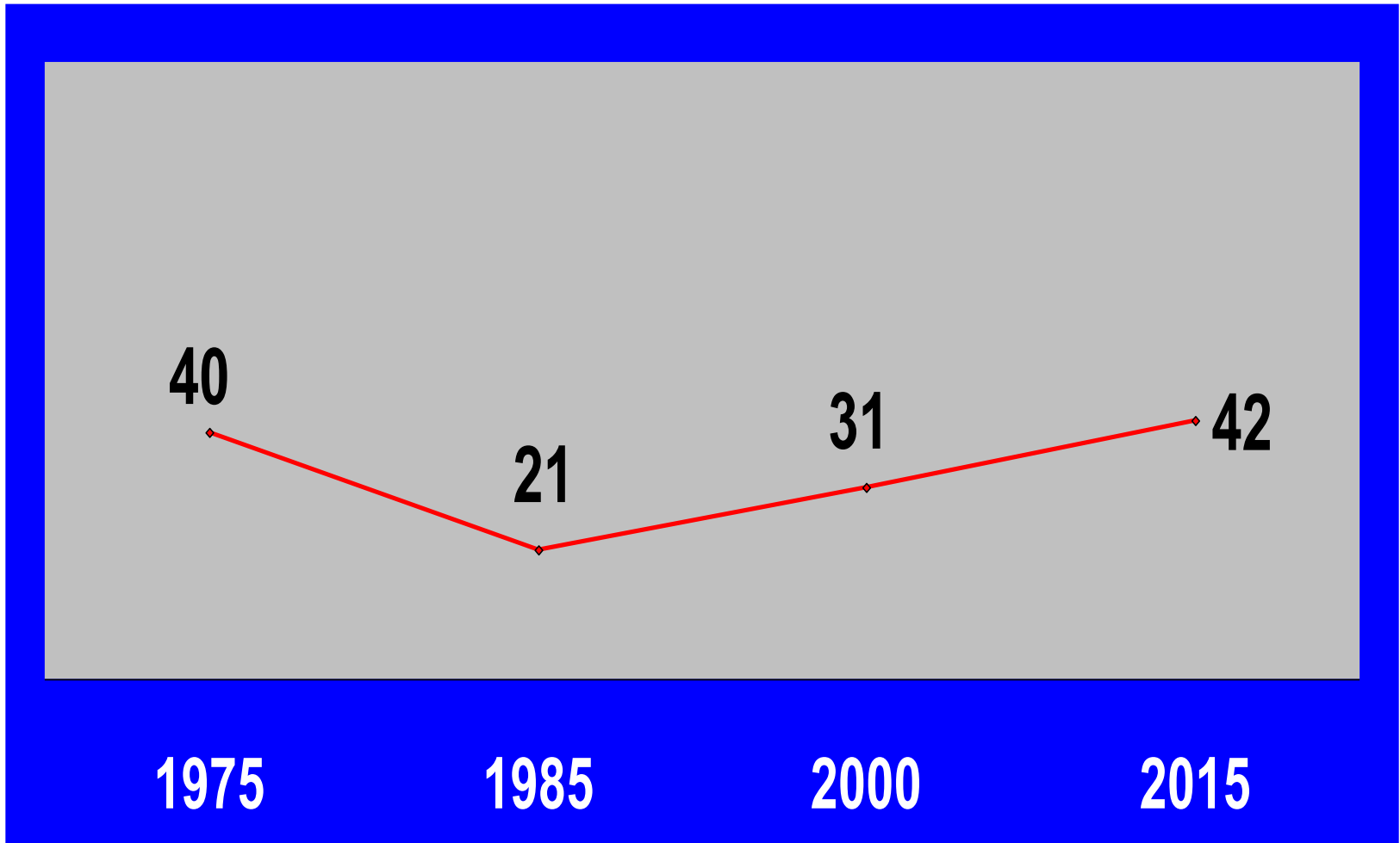


Source: Statistics Canada, Census Data.

- **One of areas have pursued over years:
life after death**
- **Interest in has remained constant,
as has belief in LAD**
- **Similar patterns stability U.S., elsewhere**
-  **little research into LAD
beliefs & behaviour...apart from ours**

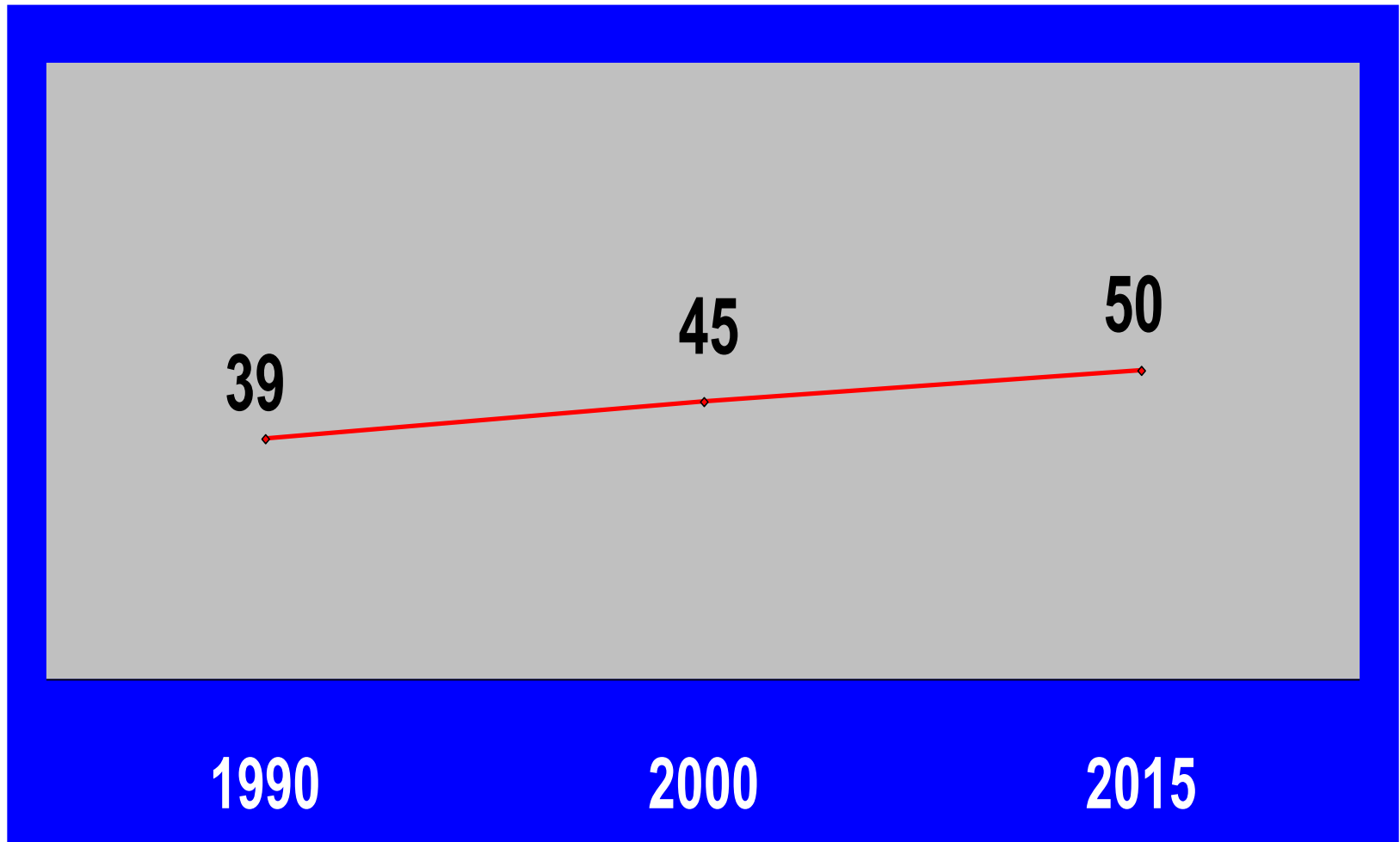
Can Communicate with the Dead

1975-2015 (%)



Can Have Contact with the Spirit World

1990-2015 (%)





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- 2014: we decided explore no. of LAD beliefs
- also: extent to which think communication occurring (*World Values Survey, c. 1980*)



March
2014



1,018



1,013



2,010

- ✓ Started with interest in tracking beliefs in LAD
- ✓ Found much more

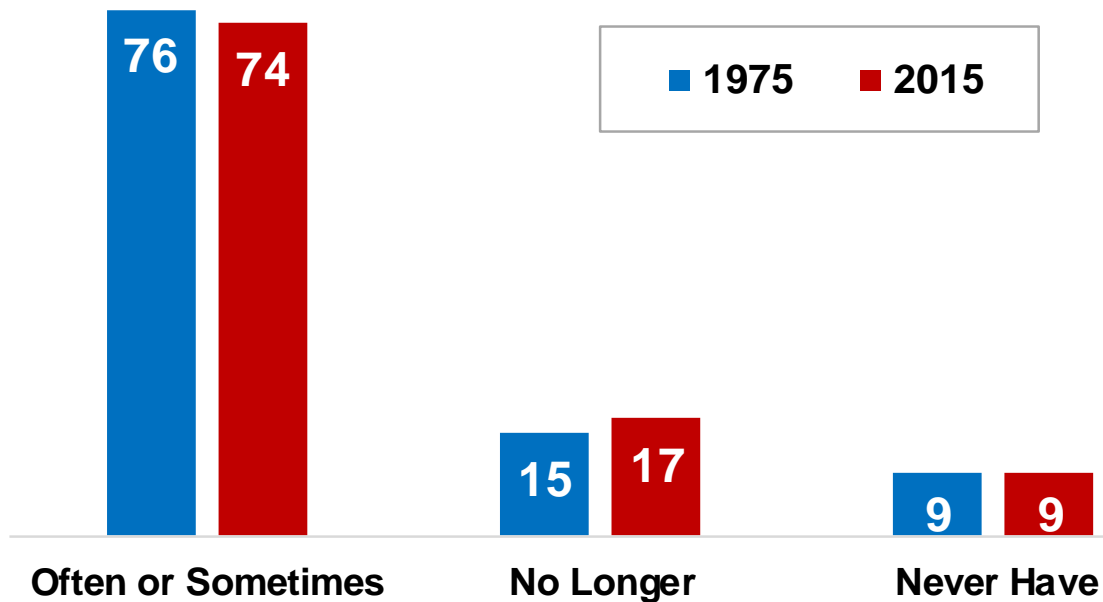
The LAD Question

Data from an array of sources, including the World Values Survey, Gallup, and Pew, along with our own surveys in Canada, show that interest in the question of life after death persists pretty much globally.

***The age-old question posed by the writer of the book of Job (14.14) continues to be asked:
“If a man dies, shall he live again?”***

Raising of the Question

Figure 1.
Raising of the Life after Death Question:
Canada, 1975 and 2015 (%)



Answers to the Question

**Table 1. Belief in Life after Death, 2014 vs Earlier:
United States, Canada, and Britain (%)**

	Yes	No	Uncertain	Totals
USA	66	12	22	100
1975	69	---	---	100
1961	74	---	---	100
1945	76	---	---	100
Canada	49	21	30	100
1975	48	17	35	100
1960	68	19	13	100
1945	84	12	4	100
Britain	35	30	35	100
1975	43	---	---	100
1961	56	18	26	100
1939	49	33	18	100




Earlier year
sources:

U.S.: Gallup
Britain: Brown 2006:29; 1939-1961; Gallup
Canada: Gallup; Bibby PC 1975

Beyond the Initial Question

Seeing People Again

**Table 2. Believe Will See People Again Who Have Died:
United States, Canada, and Britain (%)**

			
Will definitely see them again	30	18	11
May possibly see them again	27	21	18
Will never see them again	18	32	46
I don't know	25	29	25

*Contact with Those
Who Have Died*

**Table 3. Believe in Contact with People Who Have Died:
United States, Canada, and Britain (%)**

*“Yes, I definitely do”
or “Yes, I think so”*



**Could be aware of what is
taking place in our lives**

66

54

46

**Possible to communicate with
people who are no longer alive**

50

42

37

**Have felt that you were in touch
With someone who has died**




44

37

33

Responses to Death

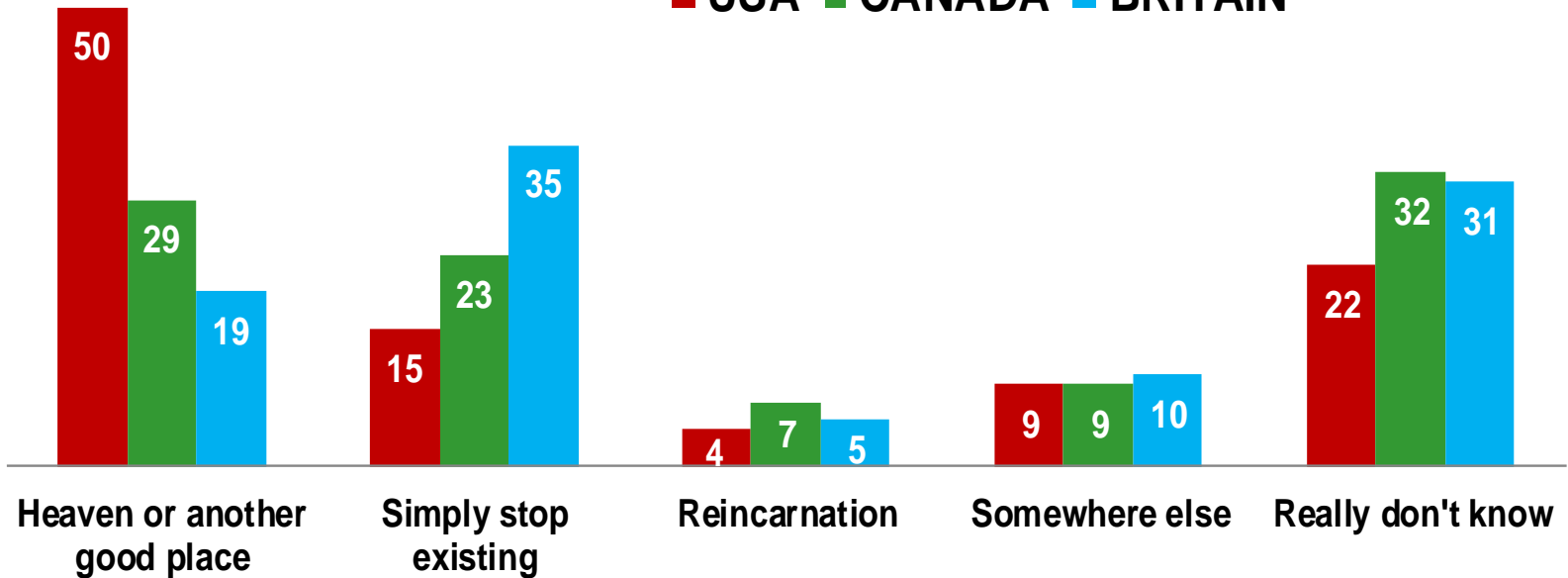
**Table 4. Primary Responses to the Idea of Death:
United States, Canada, and Britain (%)**

				
	1975	2015		
No particular feeling	24	25	22	28
Mystery	24	23	20	16
Sorrow	18	20	15	24
Fear	18	16	12	20
Hope	16	16	31	12

What's Going to Happen

Figure 2.
What Will Happen to You After You Die? (%)




■ USA ■ CANADA ■ BRITAIN



Variations

*Variations in Beliefs
and Responses*

**Table 5. Beliefs About Death by Service Attendance:
United States, Canada, and Britain (%)**

						
	Monthly Plus	Less	Monthly Plus	Less	Monthly- Plus	Less
Life after death	87	55	79	41	70	30
Will see people again	75	47	68	32	59	23
Aware of our lives	73	63	64	51	62	43
Possible communicate with	53	48	41	42	45	36
Felt in touch someone who died	48	42	39	37	47	31
Primary response: hope	49	21	44	10	34	8
Expect go heaven similar place	75	37	67	20	52	14

Discussion

**Findings: document reality of death
being very much on the minds of people...
U.S, Canada, Britain...and elsewhere**

- ✓ ***Intriguing***: extent to which haven't given up on possibility of life continuing after death
- ✓ ***Startling***: extent which people who have died continuing follow what is taking place in our lives
- ✓ ***Even more***: continuing to be in contact

So what does it all mean?

We think various responses are fairly predictable...

1. Cultural response:

- * Interpret death through **cultural lenses**, including religious **subcultures**
- * **Beliefs** & alleged **experiences**: culturally instilled



2. Clinical response:

- * Views & claims: **help people** deal with death
- * Also **created to** do so



3. An empirical response:

- **If** one...five...one hundred...several thousand...
- Such **is the case** these days with respect to at least some **beliefs & claims** about **LAD**

Currently...

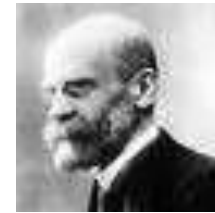
- LAD & Interaction questions
 - * largely ignored by **academics**
 - * even **religious groups**: often little to say
- Extensive **market**:
left largely to channelers & charlatans
- Result: **claims** are trivialized,
claimants stigmatized
- **Most** people: remain largely **in the dark**



- Obviously: **clear-cut answers elusive**
- Nonetheless: much **more attention** needs be given LAD issue
- More **discussions**...even more **exploratory research**
- Topic **too NB** to be treated as **taboo**
- **It's time to take a closer look!**

✓ Emile Durkheim...

“Science moves too slowly”



✓ Rodney Stark...

“Are some questions only the gods can satisfy”



But that does not mean that science shouldn't try.