



## The Magical Life and Creative Works of Paulo Coelho: A Psychobiographical Investigation

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### Abstract

*Based on a psychobiographical approach, this study addresses magical thinking across the life span of Paulo Coelho. Paulo Coelho, who was born in Brazil in the 1940s, has become one of the most sold and famous contemporary authors in the world. In his life, as well as in his books, which are mainly autobiographical accounts, magic and magical thinking, spirituality, meaningfulness, and the living of one's dream, are key themes. The aim of this study was to explore magic and magical thinking in Paulo Coelho's life and creative works. The study uses a psychobiographical single case study approach within the methodological frame of Husserl's phenomenology. The author, Paulo Coelho, was chosen as the subject of research. Documents providing both first person and third person perspectives were subjected to content analysis. The findings show that magical thinking played an important role in Coelho's creative works and in his life, in the form, for example, of ascriptions of magic to key situations in his life, the performance of daily rituals, mystic interpretations of life events, and his deep religious faith. Magical thinking is usually regarded as indicative of pathological and inappropriate cognitive and psychological behaviour, especially when found in adults in a westernised culture. However, the analysis of Coelho's life and works shows that magical thinking can be utilised creatively and be integrated into one's life to enable personal development and growth while simultaneously providing fertile ground for creative production. In Paulo Coelho's case, the intertwining of religion and magical thinking provided deep meaning that guided his personal development.*

*The night is just a part of the day.*

[Paulo Coelho in *Brida*]

### Introduction

To study the life of an individual can be worthwhile and inspiring (Schachter, 2004). Psychobiographies are qualitative studies of exceptional individuals who have gained outstanding recognition (Alexander, 1990; Van Niekerk, 2007) that allow for the study of "historically significant and extraordinary individuals over their entire life spans with the aim to uncover and reconstruct their lives psychologically" (Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2010, p. 2).

The aim of this paper is to explore magical thinking in the life and work of Paulo Coelho in order to gain new insight and understanding from a psychobiographical perspective. The paper responds to the question of what the role of magic and magical thinking is in Paulo Coelho's life and creative works across his life span. As discussed below, magical thinking tends usually to be associated with immature thought, psychopathology and irrational thinking patterns and behaviour, especially in adults in western cultures. The question is, then, how someone as creative and prolific as Coelho managed to

integrate magical thinking and belief in magic into his life. In some way, magical thinking must have played a functional role in his life, because what we see before us is a very productive and exceptional person.

Magic plays an important role in many of Paulo Coelho's (2003, 2011) books and has been explored psychologically by researchers (Eagle, 2004; Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007; Markle, 2010; Oesterdiekhoff, 2013). Despite some emotional hardship and a tumultuous inner life, Coelho had always kept alive his dream of becoming a writer. At the age of 36 years, after a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, he experienced a spiritual awakening. He wrote the book *The Pilgrimage* (Coelho, 1987/2003) which signalled the start of his career. One year later, he wrote *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 1988/2002), which evidenced his international breakthrough, after which he became one of the most famous and most read contemporary writers. Coelho describes himself as a magus and relates his success to several magical life events and situations (Coelho, 2010). This study highlights the uniqueness of the writer by exploring his development from birth to the year 2015, with special attention to psychological descriptions of his behaviour, achievements and failures in the context described (Elms, 1988). Magical thinking is found to be a crucial and enabling factor in Coelho's life that is connected to his creative works and his success. As such, in its emphasis on magical thinking as a means of psychological coping, the focus of this study represents a move away from a pathological view of the manifestation thereof.

### Psychobiography

Psychobiographies unify the study of biography and psychology (Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2005; McAdams, 2006a) and originated long before Freud's (1910/1989) exemplary study of Leonardo Da Vinci (Kóváry, 2011; Runyan, 1988a).

In psychobiographies, extraordinary individuals, such as artists and writers, are studied by using a single case study approach (Eliastam, 2011). They provide an in-depth view of a person by following a subjective and interpretative approach, thereby "making the person the focus of attention" (Perry, 2012, p. 134; Schultz, 2005).

Psychobiography has recently gained popularity, but has also had to withstand harsh criticism (Kóváry, 2011). It has been criticised for being elitist, simplistic, reductionist and holistic (Runyan, 1988a; Schultz, 2005; Stroud, 2004). Since the 1990s, however, psychobiographical research has flourished internationally (Elms, 1994; Runyan, 1994; Schultz, 2005), particularly with regard to artists and writers and their creative accounts (Holm-Hadulla, 2012; Kasser, 2013; Neumann, 2003; Runyan, 2005). The general trend has been a move away from a psychopathological to a positive psychological

perspective providing an empowering vision of personal histories by showing how creative expression facilitates personal growth (Kris, 2000; Mayer, 2015a; Schultz, 2005).

### Magic and Active and Passive Magical Thinking

Magic and magical thinking are contentious concepts researched in experimental and self-report studies in different disciplines, as well as through qualitative and quantitative studies based mainly on Western samples (Markle, 2010; Oesterdiekhoff, 2013; Rachman, Shafran, Mitchell, Trant, & Teachman, 1996; Subbotsky, 2004a, 2004b; Yorulmaz, Inozu, & Gültepe, 2011; Zusne & Jones, 1989). However, as Subbotsky (2001, 2004a) points out, magical thinking is a difficult research topic because it is usually unreported due to the assumption that people ought to think and behave rationally and logically. Oesterdiekhoff (2013) encourages more in-depth research on magical thinking in order to explore how non-rational thinking and experience can facilitate personal growth.

Magical thinking is culturally embedded and generally associated with astrology, clairvoyance, spirits, telepathy and other such psychic phenomena in Western cultures (Chapman, Chapman, & Miller, 1982; Frazer, 1922/2009; Malinowski, 1978; Mauss, 2010). It has been studied in the context of witchcraft, new forms of the occult in youth cultures, religion, rituals, and secret societies (Cunningham, 1999; Danzel, 2012; Grimmes, 2003; Labouvie, 1990; Streib, 1996). In psychology it has been associated with obsessive-compulsive and borderline personality disorders outside of the context of developmental psychology (see below) (Gregory & Remen, 2008; Yorulmaz, Gençöz, & Woody, 2009). Magical thinking appears to emphasize forms of causality that "violate basic limiting principles of science" (Peltzer, 2003, p. 1420). It is characterised by attributions of causality that "defy either physical laws or culturally accepted explanations" (Bocci & Gordon, 2007, p. 1824).

In magical thinking, real life events are seen as caused by someone's thoughts or actions that are actually unconnected to the event (Zusne & Jones, 1989). Markle (2010, pp. 18 & 33) differentiates between "active and passive magical thinking". Active magical thinking is the belief that individuals are able to actively influence, control and manage causality and causal interrelationships (Markle, 2010). This is supposedly achieved by the individual or by any other meta-physical energy that is manipulated by the individual. In the latter case, a person attempts to influence a certain event through thoughts, words or actions and so to transform the normally operating laws of cause and effect by using various levels of consciousness and transformation of processes and materials (Carroll, 2005; Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007). Magic is viewed as an intuitive technique, art and science to actively control or influence people,

energies, powers, situations and events (Crowley, cited in Frater, 2011; Klass, 1995; Regardie & Francis Kind, cited in Frater, 2011).

In contrast, passive magical thinking is based on the assumption that situations and events exist that are magical in nature and that can hardly or not at all be influenced (Markle, 2010). It can impact adversely on mental health, since the individual might feel powerless to control or influence events, particularly in the case of situations related to illness or witchcraft (Kolta & Schwarzmann-Schafthaus, 2000; Mayer, 2015b).

### Magical Thinking from Childhood to Adulthood

Magical thinking develops in childhood when children ascribe causal relations to situations and events that are not necessarily connected (Oesterdiekhoff, 2013; Piaget, 1926/1928). They often connect mental processes to unconnected real-life scenarios and believe that they can control others. They also tend to think that they are “able to obtain a desired object or avoid an anticipated punishment from others (especially their parents) by wishing intensely or by performing some sort of magic” (Vikan & Clausen, 1993, p. 297). Magical thinking tends to develop between the third and seventh month when a child connects mental intentions, chronological events and physical effects. The assumption is thus made that feelings, thoughts, and desires influence situations and/or events (Piaget, 1937/1954). This is called correlational thinking, while the relatively appropriate connection of cause and effect is called causal thinking. The influence of this assumption seems to decrease in industrialised cultures from the age of seven and is almost negligible by the age of ten, when correlational thinking diminishes and causal thinking increases (Oesterdiekhoff, 2013; Subbotsky, 2004a).

Research indicates, however, that causal and logical thought processes tend to be overridden by magical thinking in unsafe situations, even in the case of highly educated adults (Markovits & Vachon, 1989; Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986). Magical thinking therefore does not correlate with level of education and cognitive maturity, but rather with personality and cultural background (Adler, 2005). Even in inherently rational individuals, magical thinking can occur occasionally (Feltham, 2011; Hendrix, 2011; Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007; Subbotsky & Quinteros, 2002). Acceptance of this is strongly bound to an accommodating cultural context (Helgadottir, Menzies, & Einstein, 2012). This does not mean that magical thinking is not present in westernised cultures, where technological thinking supposedly predominates and one would expect causal thinking to be the prevailing mode of rationality. In western societies, magical thinking is often “disguised to fit the dominant scientific paradigm” (Subbotsky, 2004a, p. 123). Religion is relatively widely accepted in westernised and scientific cultures, and, despite the

occasional clash between fundamental forms of religion and science (such as evolution versus creationism), both co-exist peacefully. Thus, dealing with bad luck or controlling inexplicable events and/or people can be readily reframed in acceptable religious terms. For example, experiencing bad luck can be reframed as circumstances challenging one’s faith (Van Wolferen, Inbar, & Zeelenberg, 2013). Also, by attributing special “properties to an item that belongs or once belonged to an admired, loved, or (in)famous person”, the item can in effect come to be used as a charm (Sierra, Hyman, Lee, & Suh, 2015).

Other research shows that females, intuitive thinkers and gamblers tend towards magical thinking more often than others might do (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2011; Hutson, 2012; Karcher et al., 2014; Savage et al., 2014). In these cases, however, magical thinking often correlates with poor differentiation between the real and the symbolic worlds: “magical thinking represents a pre-symbolic mental state that processes and organizes distressing emotions through body schema” (Gregory & Mustata, 2012, p. 1045). Magical thinking is manifested by the following: (1) ascription of power to symbols (symbolic influence) or to the remote consequences of actions (doing y will let x happen); (2) acceptance of the reality of psychic phenomena (influencing the thoughts of others); (3) belief in the eternality of souls and that anthropomorphism is real (attribution of human qualities to non-human things); and (4) the belief that everything happens for a reason and purpose (Sierra et al., 2015).

Jung’s (2001) concept of “synchronicity” also refers to the belief based on the assumption that meaningful coincidences can take place. The more industrialised a society becomes, however, the greater the emotional-cognitive gap between humans and nature, and the less inclined human beings are to utilise pre-formal types of reasoning and magic (Oesterdiekhoff, 2007; Piaget, 1937/1954).

### Magical Thinking and Mental Health

In western psychology, magical thinking in adults has tended to be judged negatively and associated with psychological disorders, such as being characteristic of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or as linked to religion as a form of magical belief (De Silva, 2006; Mauss, 2010). Goulding (2004), however, cogently dismisses the association of paranormal or magical experiences with mental health disorders. Kennedy and Kanthamani (1995) maintain that magical thinking could in fact improve mental health. In that magical thinking can increase feelings of independence, power, fantasy and imaginative role-play, it can function as a coping mechanism to deal with difficulties, unconscious desires, and wishes (Subbotsky, 2004b). It makes daily life exciting, disrupts daily routines, helps individuals

cope with uncontrollable situations (e.g., examinations or illness), and increases comprehensibility, enthusiasm, meaningfulness, and hope (Subbotsky, 2004b). It also creates a sense of coherence, particularly in combination with active magical thinking patterns (Mayer, 2015b). Magical rituals – such as finger crossing, using charms, wishing someone well, or embracing – can also impact positively on the individual's sense of self-worth, focus of attention, motivation, sense of belonging, security, safety, and human relationships (Howard, 1977; Mayer, 2015b; Shermer, 2000; Subbotsky, 2004b).

### Research Methodology

The current study used a psychobiographical research methodology and a case study design based on a person-centered single case (Elms, 2007; Yin, 2009). The study focused on Paulo Coelho's holistic description and uniqueness in terms of magic and magical thinking as revealed by means of phenomenological exploration and interpretation (Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2005; Kóváry, 2011).

Phenomenology focuses on the constructed meaning in the lived world of everyday life (Lock & Strong, 2010). In Husserl's (1913/1980) view, phenomenology emphasises the richness of experience of human beings expressing themselves via their language and discourses. Experience is the core concept of Husserl's approach to phenomenology that anticipates the world as existing and experience as pre-reflective. Meaning in Husserl's phenomenology is not based on the subject-object dichotomy, rooted in consciousness, but rather in the relation between the polarity that creates the *Lebenswelt* or "lived world".

### Sampling

The study used purposive "non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the research issue" (Oliver, 2006). Paulo Coelho was purposively chosen because (a) he is an extraordinary, successful and famous writer, (b) he integrates magic and magical thinking in his life and works, and, not least, (c) because of personal interest in his life and work as writer.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was based on both first person and third person documents (Allport, 1961), including autobiographical accounts, internet sources, journal and newspaper articles, interviews, video documentaries, scripts, and selected literary products (first person documents), Coelho's biography, an interview, and case studies (Arias, 2001; Mihály, 2012; Morais, 2009).

Content analysis of the data was based on the five-step

process of Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006, pp. 322-326), and accordingly procedurally involved: (a) familiarisation and immersion, (b) inducing themes, (c) coding, (d) elaboration, and (e) interpretation and checking. Key issues were identified and defined (i.e., themes, categories and codes) and finally validated interpersonally (Yin, 2009).

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are emphasised as crucial in psychobiographical research and include the respectful treatment of intimate details of the subject (Elms, 1994). Because the subject of the present research is still alive, respectful treatment and non-maleficence were noted as particularly important (Elms, 1994; Schurink, 1998). Ethical clearance for the study was provided by the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

### Findings

#### *The magic of life and the decline of faith – childhood and adolescence (1947-1966)*

Paulo Coelho de Souza was born to Lygia Araripe Coelho de Souza and Pedro Queima Coelho de Souza, with a complicated birth, on 24 August 1947 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Morais, 2009). Paulo's father was an engineer with a very logical, rational and clear vision and world view, while his mother was a housewife with very strong Catholic beliefs (Coelho, 1997/2006, p. 11).

Paulo barely survived his birth (Morais, 2009) and, as a devout Catholic, his mother prayed to St Joseph to restore the life of her son. As through a miracle, Paulo survived, and out of gratitude his mother dedicated his life to St Joseph (Morais, 2009, p. 38). Coelho attached strong significance to this miraculous event and to his patron saint, St Joseph (Morais, 2009). His birth was, therefore, the origin of his magical thinking, because his survival was attributed to prayer and St Joseph. During his early childhood, Paulo continued to have a strong relationship with his guardian angel, referring to him at times and blaming him for his misbehaviour: "Do you know why I am being naughty today, Mama? It is because my guardian angel is not working" (Morais, 2009, p. 39). Paulo's childhood was strongly influenced by his relationship with God and his prayers. These were reinforced by his parents and the religious schools he attended that promoted strict Catholic values, such as faith, respect, and hard work (Morais, 2009, p. 41). By grade two, however, Paulo focused on reading books and stories and lived in his own world, having lost all interest in schoolwork (Morais, 2009, p. 51).

At the age of 12, Paulo started writing a diary and soon after developed the *idée fixe* of becoming a writer (Morais, 2009, p. 62). Until then he had grown up in a strict Jesuit tradition at secondary school and started

struggling with his relationship with God, which was predefined by discipline and the religious dogma of the church. The sudden death of his grandfather deepened his spiritual crisis, because he lost trust in the God who had taken away this beloved family member. He was afraid of losing his faith, did not recognise the magic of life any more, and finally became an atheist (Arias, 2001, p. 13).

Attending the school's annual Jesuit retreat, however, filled Paulo with the courage to renew his relationship with God and to familiarise himself with the mysterious rituals of religion and magic (Morais, 2009, pp. 55, 58-59). However, he continued to doubt. His parents felt that their son was insane because he wanted to become a writer, and because of their negative views of the impact of his friends (artists, left-wingers and homosexuals), Coelho's struggle in school, and his emotional instability. They had him admitted to a mental hospital three times between 1965 and 1967 (Jeffries, 2013). These experiences left their mark on Coelho to such an extent that he doubted his sanity. He only recovered in his twenties when he decided to stand on his own two feet.

#### *Black magic – the twenties (1967-1976)*

In his twenties, Paulo started consuming cannabis and withdrew into his own world free from parental control. He gained some success with theatrical productions and continued writing (Morais, 2009, p. 173). Along with his increasing drug intake, Paulo was introduced to the occult, witchcraft, and Satanism. He started believing in predestination and that the devil had an impact on his life (Arias, 2001). He believed he was "a magician preparing for his dawn" (Morais, 2009, p. 181). He became focused on the magical world to such an extent that he lost touch with reality (Morais, 2009).

During this time, he met his first wife, Gisa, and when she fell pregnant, he convinced her to undergo an abortion. He also encouraged her in her intention to commit suicide, deeply believing that she had to go to the dark forces she had called into her life (Morais, 2009). However, Gisa survived and they both became even more obsessed with sects and magical rituals, such as summoning the wind or breaking objects such as an ashtray telekinetically. It was then that Paulo met Raul Seixas, a music producer; the two of them delved into the occult together while producing music involving black magic (Morais, 2009, p. 214). Coelho, in a sense, maintained his erstwhile magical belief, but now transferred it from white to black magic. Because he was frustrated to still be an unknown writer, he made a pact with the devil or the "Prince of Darkness" and promised him his soul if the devil made all his dreams come true (Morais, 2009, p. 221). Yet, not even an hour later, Paulo cancelled the pact and aimed at overcoming the dark temptations (Morais, 2009, p. 222). He still,

however, engaged with the devil to increase his success and monetary funds until he experienced a "black cloud phenomenon" in his apartment, which was a magical initiation rite from his satanic sect (Arias, 2001, pp. 118-121). He panicked and promptly turned to the Lord and returned to his "childish religious beliefs" based on Christianity (Arias, 2001, pp. 119 & 120).

In 1974, Paulo and Gisa were kidnapped and tortured by a paramilitary group in Rio de Janeiro, for as yet unknown reasons, and were released after a few days (Coelho, 1997/2006, p. 103). Gisa then decided to divorce Paulo.

To publically announce his return to Christianity, Paulo celebrated a mass of thanksgiving at the church of his protector St Joseph in 1975. He celebrated his gratitude for the miracle of his survival (Morais, 2009, p. 276). Shortly afterwards, he married his second wife but was divorced again within a year. He started focusing on reality and his dual professional career as a lyricist and executive. Magic became less important.

#### *The magic of the long walk – the thirties (1977-1986)*

In 1978 Paulo visited the place of a Saint called Nhá Chica and witnessed a fatal accident on his way back home (Coelho, 1997/2006, p. 135). He believed that Nhá Chica had saved him from the accident scene and connected his dream of becoming a writer directly to her: If he became a recognised and successful writer he would come back to Nhá Chica's church when he was 50 years old to thank her; and this is what he did when the time came. This is a good example of how Paulo connected different events. He strongly believed in the Saint's magic influence on his success and in this way utilised and integrated events in a meaningful way.

In 1979, Coelho met Cristina Oiticica, his life partner, who assisted him to finally withdraw completely from the dark forces and return to Christianity (Arias, 2001, pp. 91 & 303). They started their new artistic career together and travelled through Europe, where Paulo experienced his calling to become a writer while listening to church bells tolling. He saw an apparition and heard an unknown voice speak to him (Arias, 2001, p. 141). He ascribed these experiences to magic, also because he had just made a promise to the relic of the infant Jesus of Pragueto to return to his sanctuary in the event that he became a famous writer. Magical thinking is also clearly involved in the way Coelho connected events made significant in his mind. It had a religious overtone but with magical intent, and it is ritualistically based: if one does or says x then a deity would ensure y.

Shortly after the visit to Dachau, Paulo was recruited as a member of *Regnus Agnus Mundi* (RAM) by a man called J. Paulo felt he had seen J before in Dachau and

J highlights that what Coelho had seen might have been an “astral projection” (Morais, 2009, p. 320). RAM is a small ancient Catholic order known for its magical and feminine traditions, symbolic language, magical rituals and exclusive membership (Arias, 2001, p. 93, p. 145). Paulo became a member of RAM with J as his spiritual master. He started to use RAM’s symbols (e.g., the snake ring) and practised energy, healing and magical rituals based on the Old Testament (Morais, 2009, p. 323).

In 1986, Paulo was admitted as a Master of RAM, but failed during the last and final ritual to gain “the sword” of the Master (Morais, 2009, pp. 340-341). J sent him on a journey to Spain to walk the Road to Santiago, an old Catholic pilgrimage. On the way he was guided through magical rituals and meditations, found his sword and became a Master. Afterwards, he fell into a deep depression until he came upon a white pigeon feather in a park and interpreted it as a sign from God to start writing his first book; *The Pilgrimage* became a world bestseller (Coelho, 1987/2003).

From then onwards Paulo described himself as a magus: “Yes, I am a magus, but so is everyone who knows how to read the hidden language of things in pursuit of their personal destiny” (Arias, 2001, p. xix). He interpreted the wonders of the day as “omens”, saw humanity veering “towards the search for spirituality”, and realised that there is “a language that goes beyond reality” (Arias, 2001, pp. 7 & 8). From then on, he experienced various “omens” in his life that served to guide him, such as the apparition of the French Saint Theresa who appeared to contribute to his success (Arias, 2001, p. 8).

#### *Magical writing and magical life – the forties (1987-1996)*

Paulo’s fourth life decade was characterized by his becoming established as a writer and his spiritual development, which had commenced with his walk to Santiago mentioned above (Coelho, 1987/2003). He integrated magic rituals, trance and meditative states into his daily routines to explore his unconscious and develop further. He dealt with his shadows, appreciated nature, understood the feminine within God and himself, and experienced the rebirth of his spirituality (Coelho, 1987/2003, p. 29). His spiritual walk assisted with his dream of becoming a writer (Coelho, 1987/2003, p. 34). Conversely, writing supported his spiritual development. For Coelho, to follow his dream meant following God (Coelho, 1987/2003).

Coelho then travelled to Egypt where he experienced another magical moment. He saw the apparition of a woman with a clay pot on her shoulder that faded mysteriously (Morais, 2009, p. 357). It was this moment that inspired him to write *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 1988/2002). He also consulted the I-Ching, an oracle, because

of having self-doubts. He was encouraged with the visionary message: “The great man brings good luck” (Morais, 2009, p. 358). *The Alchemist* subsequently became his most successful work.

In 1988 J provided Coelho with a new spiritual task to challenge Coelho’s self-destructive tendencies and break “the curse” of destroying his dream when reaching it. This task led him to spend 40 days in the Californian Mojave Desert, practising St Ignatius Loyola’s spiritual exercises that include meditations, prayers and other contemplative practices. These practices are based on the Catholic Saint’s teachings and are focused towards deepening one’s relationship with God (The Autograph, 1914). Coelho enabled his own development by means of practising magical rituals. He subsequently wrote *The Valkyries*, which is based on his magical and visionary experiences in the desert (Coelho, 1992).

After Paulo’s experience in the desert, J advised him to travel the “Road to Rome”, during which he met his guardian angel twice. Given an opportunity to express a wish, Paulo wished for his books to be read (Morais, 2009). Once again, magical thinking was intertwined with his writings and his success. He also met a woman who was on a similar spiritual journey. Together, they experienced the ritual of fire, an ancient Wiccan ritual. These experiences, as well as the character of the woman, were major themes in *Brida* (Coelho, 1990). He described his experience with RAM, the discovering of the feminine side of God, and the miracle of his experiencing himself as a whole being based on the Wicca magical tradition. He explored the ways of becoming a witch or wizard and how to learn magic (Coelho, 1990, p. 10). In *Brida*, Coelho (1990) described his experience of being initiated into the secrets of RAM, magic traditions and the challenges of accepting the bridge between the visible and the invisible worlds (Coelho, 1990, p. 201). Coelho associated learning magic with the exploration of the heart (Coelho, 1990, p. 217). Also, magic implies recovering the feminine in the masculine world, finding a compassionate God in nature, in cosmic resonances and in love, and, finally, experiencing meaning in life (Coelho, 1990, p. 57).

Paulo’s success continued during his forties with works such as *By the River Piedro I Sat Down and Wept* (Coelho, 1994). This book gained positive recognition from the clergy due to its Catholic symbols, description of rituals and magical themes, focus on the importance of joy and mindfulness, view of life as a transition, and the recognition of God’s miracles as the “moment when all the power of the stars becomes a part of us and enables us to perform miracles” (Coelho, 1994/1996, p. 8). Another book, *The Fifth Mountain*, based on the Biblical story of the prophet Elijah, deals with the magical guidance of God and the miracle of synchronicity (Coelho, 1996/1998). The novel describes Paulo’s own struggle with faith, his doubts and dreams, and ends with

Elijah's success in freeing Israel from the false prophets and his return to heaven (Coelho, 1996/1998, p. 240). The book provides a powerful metaphor for Paulo's progression from his pact with the devil to his return to his new and compassionate God.

*The manifestation of magic through self-reflection and success – the fifties (1997-2006)*

In his fifties, Coelho reflected on his experiences in the mental hospital and described them in *Veronika Decides to Die* (Coelho, 1998/2000), which is a story about insanity, finding one's identity, and the miracle of experiencing God's magic by living in the present (Coelho, 1998/2000). As with most of Coelho's books, it also conveys a spiritual message, namely, to be aware of the miracle of life, upholding the slogan *carpe diem*, and embracing challenges and tackling them fearlessly.

In this phase of his life Coelho also published *The Wanderer* (Coelho, 2007). The book contained ideas about the relationship with God and its daily practical application. Coelho also integrated Indian cosmology and Christian, Muslim and Oriental spirituality with Jewish mysticism, syncretism, and mixed doctrines (Lätzel, 2007). Reciting mantras, practising yoga and meditation were also addressed (Arias, 2001, p. 108).

His next book was *The Devil and Miss Prym* (Coelho, 2000/2002). It deals with the negotiation between light and shadow in humankind and the ethics of decision-making. Once more, this story reflects Coelho's inner struggle with good and evil, referring through the main characters to magical insights and practices. Coelho opens up magical thinking for the layperson and emphasises the ability of every person to become a magus (Arias, 2001, p. 105).

In real life, Paulo used his magical knowledge for his career development; he applied for a seat in the Brazilian Academy of Letters, a prestigious Brazilian writers' society. However, his attempt failed and he used the I-Ching when he reapplied, following its advice to travel until the decision was made by the society without his actively promoting himself (Morais, 2009, p. 421). He was subsequently accepted by the society and ascribed his success openly to the oracle's magic consultation (Morais, 2009, p. 424). Coelho is a good example of the practical application of spiritual messages in daily life.

Coelho's book *Eleven Minutes* (2003) became the second-most sold book after *The Alchemist*. This book deals with non-magical topics, such as lust and love. However, the message is again spiritual: "Life always waits for some crisis to occur before revealing itself at its most brilliant" (Coelho, 2003, p. 50).

Spiritual messages frequently featured in this decade

of Coelho's life. Spiritual messages abound in *The Manual of the Warrior of the Light*, which highlights the potential of each individual (Coelho, 1997/2006, p. 166). The same goes for *The Zahir*, where obsession and love are addressed (Coelho, 2004). During the entire decade Coelho undertook new tasks for RAM, developed disciples and mastered tests such as praying, abstaining from sex, walking barefoot and without a shirt through bushes, looking at a tree for five minutes every day, and undergoing fasting rituals and processes (Morais, 2009, p. 436).

During 2006, Paulo travelled for three months on the Trans-Siberian railway through Russia as part of the contract with J while publishing *The Witch of Portobello* (Coelho, 2007). The story is based on spirituality, referring to magical concepts and witchcraft (Coelho, 2007). It is the story of a woman who follows her personal spiritual path and becomes a witch. Throughout the book, the main character talks to others about God (the Patriarch and the Compassionate), His feminine side and the ways of reaching out to God through music, dance, painting and positive thoughts (Coelho, 2007, pp. 180-181).

*Doubts, depth and balance within the magical Lebenswelt – the sixties (2007-2015)*

The sixth decade of Paulo Coelho's life started with his sixtieth birthday, which he celebrated not on the date of his birth, but on St Joseph's day, and in Spain. This acknowledgement of his survival at birth as being due to the saint's intervention (Morais, 2009) demonstrated the force of his magical thinking.

During this decade Coelho published *The Winner Stands Alone* (Coelho, 2008), a socio-critical work which deals with materialism, fame, the "true" dream, and the misuse of power. In this book he moved from the magical realm to his reality as a celebrity and the current problems of society.

As a celebrity he highlighted his Catholic identity, the mysteries of the Catholic Church, the ritual of mass, and his study of magic since the age of 25 (Coelho, 2010, 10:19 min.). He still saw himself as a magician (Coelho, 2010, 11:55 min.), but as an integrated being: "Dark means that all the light is not reflected. White is rejecting all the light. There is darkness in my soul and ... I am learning how to live with it" (Coelho, 2010, 12:40 min.). In *Aleph* (2011) Paulo did exactly this; he dealt with the dark past of his previous life and explored questions of reincarnation, the mystical and sacred space (Mihály, 2012). The sacred space of *Aleph* is "this point where he sees everything at the same time: all people, all the jungles, the rivers, all the universes" (Arias, 2001, p. 148). The exploration in *Aleph* reflected an experience during the Trans-Siberian railway trip resulting from a crisis of faith and spiritual growth while aiming for

a connection with the divine, nature, and humanity (Furqon & Mustofa, 2014; Purwandoyo & Kurnia, 2013). Based in previous incarnations, Coelho opened the mystical space of *Aleph* to magically resolve spiritual problems and heal his soul (Furqon & Mustofa, 2014). The book reveals that Coelho employed many magical actions during his RAM days such as prayer rituals at fixed times, using imaginary light circles as protection, believing in sacred spaces, and carrying charms (Furqon & Mustofa, 2014).

One year later, Coelho (2012) published *Manuscript Found in Accra*, providing readers with a powerful exploration of personal growth, everyday wisdom, and joy, in the context of fears, hope, and comfort. Coelho's (2014) book *Adultery* describes a journalist's inner despair, as well as her deep-rooted boredom and frustration with marriage and Swiss society. In the book, she learns that love and faith are sources of resilience (McAlpin, 2014).

Several of Coelho's books deal with socio-political criticism. However, *Aleph* is one of the most personal accounts of Coelho's magical thinking regarding what can happen with one's relationships, life and development when one is prepared to go the extra mile. His books describe the celebrity Coelho at the surface and the magician Coelho at the foundation. He describes the two different *Lebenswelten*: his comfort with a Western jet set lifestyle, but also his deep longing for magic, the connection to the whole, God, nature, and individuals.

### Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

In this study, the life of Paulo Coelho was reconstructed psychobiographically in relation to magic and magical thinking (Fouché & Van Niekerk, 2010, p. 2). The reconstruction responds to the question: *What role does magic and magical thinking play in Paulo Coelho's life and creative works across his life span?* The study provides new insights and an in-depth view on how Paulo Coelho, as a writer, reconstructs himself in the context of magic across his life span and in his creative works (see Kasser, 2013; Kris, 2000; Runyan, 2005; Schultz, 2005). In this regard, we utilised a positive psychological approach, not a psychopathological one (Mayer, 2015a; Schultz, 2005). This implies that the usual perspective on magical thinking as inappropriate in adults and usually indicative of pathology is set aside, for the moment, in order to explore its positive role in an individual's life.

A born and bred Brazilian writer, Paulo Coelho grew up with his parents, themselves steeped in Westernized values based on logic and rationality (Morais, 2009). We can thus assume that rational and logical thinking were basic values in the family context (Subbotsky, 2001, 2004a). However, magical thinking and actions were not therefore unreported by Coelho (2010), who regarded

his spiritual development as highly important as well as constructing his identity as a magus (Oesterdiekhoff, 2013). On the one hand, Coelho, thereby, combines a rational approach to his writing career with magical belief. On the other hand, he combines magic with clairvoyance, telepathy, spirits, witchcraft, RAM, saints, traditional Catholic belief systems, and ritual practice (Chapman et al., 1982; Cunningham, 1999; Grimmes, 2003; Labouvie, 1990). For Coelho, magical thinking does not violate the principles of science but rather complements them (Peltzer, 2003).

Coelho uses active as well as passive magical thinking in his life and creative works (Markle, 2010). Among other things, he practises magical rituals and influencing the wind. At the same time, he experiences the impact of passive magical thinking, for example, when he is initiated into the satanic sect and feels the power of the devil on his mind and body (Arias, 2011; Morais, 2009). In his thoughts and books he defines magic as art and science (Crowley, cited in Frater, 2011). He aims at controlling events and circumstances and strongly believes in the impact of his wishes and thoughts. Piaget (1926/1928) and Oesterdiekhoff (2013) report similar magical thinking patterns in children.

The cultural influence on the magical thinking of Coelho cannot be clarified completely in this study (Oesterdiekhoff, 2013; Subbotsky, 2004a). However, it can be assumed that Coelho grew up in a Brazilian cultural context that was strongly influenced by Westernized thinking through the pervasive religious influence of the Roman Catholic Jesuit school. His parents, similarly, had a western influence on his life. The present study supports the findings of Markovits and Vachon (1989) and Rozin, Millman and Nemeroff (1986) who indicate that magical thinking tends to be practised by individuals in crisis situations, regardless of their educational level or usual rational inclinations (Feltham, 2011; Hendrix, 2011). Our study shows that magical thinking seems to be strongly connected to Coelho's personality and his Catholic background, with reading the Old Testament against the backdrop of the RAM and the mystical order's interpretation (Adler, 2005).

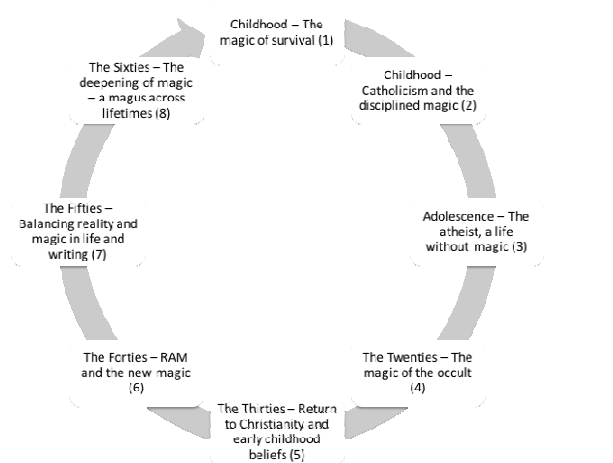
Although his parental background did not allow for it, Coelho strongly developed his magical thinking. This shows that the acceptance of magic within a cultural background is not required in order to explore and maintain magical thinking during adolescence and adulthood (Helgadottir et al., 2012). One can speculate that magical thinking was employed by Coelho, as an intuitive thinker, to survive mentally in a strictly rational family environment, along with a suppressive father (Savage et al., 2014). Catholicism and the very strict Jesuit schools Coelho attended merely exacerbated his magical thinking tendencies. Magical thinking could also have functioned as a coping mechanism for dealing



with the traumatic situations he encountered such as multiple hospitalisations, and kidnapping and torture by a paramilitary group. Magical thinking can assist in gaining a sense of some intra-psychological control over challenging situations.

Coelho does not differentiate between the real and the symbolic worlds (Gregory & Mustata, 2012). Coelho is a very good example of someone integrating magical thinking into real world experience and using it actively to forward his career. He even ascribes his success to his magical belief, practices and rituals (Sierra, Hyman, Lee, & Suh, 2015). Coelho ascribes power to symbols, magical consequences to actions, assumes the reality of psychic phenomena, the eternity of souls, anthropomorphism, and magical concepts of reason and purpose. Coelho also makes use of Jung's (2001) concept of synchronicity, attributing meaningful coincidences to life situations (such as the visionary messages of the I-Ching).

Through his magical thinking Coelho finds a way back to basic spirituality, thereby overcoming the increased emotional-cognitive distance created by industrialisation (Oesterdiekhoff, 2007). At the same time, magical thinking provides a legitimation for Coelho to follow his dream and become successful, despite his parents associating his behaviour with a psychological disorder during adolescence (De Silva, 2006). However, having lived through different stages of magical thinking, Coelho uses this thinking to become both independent and empowered (Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995) and to deal with unconscious desires and wishes (Subbotsky, 2004b). Using the I-Ching and following its instructions provides Coelho with hope and meaningfulness, while ritual practice assists him in coping with uncontrollable situations, constructing meaningfulness, manageability, comprehensibility, security and safety, sense of belonging, and the connectedness of human relationships (Mayer, 2015a, 2015b; Shermer, 2000; Subbotsky, 2004b).



**Figure 1: The Magical Circle**

Figure 1 charts the development of Coelho's magical thinking. His magical thinking progressed from (1) a strong childhood magical belief, introduced by his mother and strengthened by his survival at birth, towards (2) a strict Catholic and Jesuit belief and a rationalised relationship with God as a strict, judging and patriarchal God figure. In a countermovement, (3) he became an atheist during adolescence and lost his magical belief when confronted with insanity and disorientation. He regained (4) a practical approach to magic during his twenties by turning to Satanism and the occult, which provided him with practical rituals in order to cope with inabilities and unfulfilled desires. Through (5) the experience of overwhelming passive magical thinking and the impact of the power of the devil and evil in his life, Coelho returned to Christianity and the roots of his early childhood beliefs. In his thirties, however, magical thinking developed to (6) a new level based on the RAM practices. He consistently completed exercises to widen his transcendental consciousness and improve active magical thinking as a magus, as well as a member and Master of RAM. During his forties, Coelho applied his influence through active magical thinking towards his career development and success. He utilised active magical thinking to develop personally and as a writer, while also developing further spiritually. During his fifties, Coelho turned (7), on the one hand, to earthly issues, social criticism and his creative works, while, on the other hand, he deepened his magical approaches through daily magical routines. Finally, (8) in his sixties, Coelho reconfirmed himself as a magus and applied active magical thinking on a daily basis to integrate the light and shadow sides of his personality. He deepened his magical belief by transporting it across life times with his belief in reincarnation and the resolution of negative karma. Coelho continues on his spiritual path by deepening the interconnectedness of magic and reality in his life and creative works in a balanced and integrated way. The question is where the next phase in his life might lead.

The findings of this study lead to some theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, this study could serve as an example of how future psychobiographies can focus on the exploration of magic and magical thinking in extraordinary individuals. We hope to have provided some guidance for the exploration of magical thinking concepts and developments and the influences of active and passive magical thinking on the life and careers of artists and writers.

On a practical and therapeutic level, the conscious and active exploration of magical thinking in individuals can be used to improve the self-understanding, the self-development and the self-actualization of the individual. Understanding the relationship between spiritual development and magical thinking can contribute to mental health and wellness. Reflection about magical thinking can assist with self-exploration on an individual and self-

reflective basis, but can also be helpful during practical work in counselling and therapy. Psychobiographies of extraordinary individuals focusing on how magical

thinking contributes to personal development can, thus, be used as examples of the productive integration of reality and the magical.

## Referencing Format

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