NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: FORTY YEARS OF RESEARCH

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THE FIELD OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES

- Field formally opened in 1975 with *Life After Life* by Raymond Moody, MD, PhD
- Descriptions of near-death experiences (NDEs) in
  - Ancient Egyptian, Tibetan, Greek, and Christian texts
  - More recent Western literature, including Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*
- By 2005, many books and >700 journal articles, incl:
  - 65 research studies
  - In US, Europe, Asia, and Australia
  - Involving more than 3,500 near-death experiencers (NDErs)
  - Studying both the experience and aftereffects.
NDEs occur most often during serious illness or injury
NDEs include three aspects:
  - **Non-material**: peaceful, floating sensation
  - **Material**: perceive material world from position outside physical body
  - **Trans-material**: perceive and interact with environments and entities not of the material world
    - Tunnel, void, preternatural environments
    - Deceased loved ones and spiritual entities; Being of light
    - Life review
PLEASURABLE WESTERN ADULT NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

- Faces analogy
- Incidence: 1/5 survivors of close brush with death
Tricia

- At interview (2008), mid-30s, community college English teacher, fully physically functional
- Grew up in Evangelical church; “pretended” participation
- At NDE (1994; 14 years before interview)
  - College student in Austin, TX; ~ 21 years old
  - Unclear career purpose (copy editor?); self-centered
  - Up early to run 10K; sleepy; car accident
  - Broken back, leg bones, etc.
  - Surgery w/ cardiac arrest; 6 months in body cast
AFTEREFFECTS OF PLEASURABLE WESTERN ADULT NDES

- **PSPS**
- **Psychological aftereffects include:**
  - Loss of fear of death
  - Profound shifts in fundamental values
  - Increased self-worth and meaning and purpose in life
- **Spiritual aftereffects include:**
  - Deeper religious/spiritual faith
  - Paranormal and mystical experiences
- **Physical aftereffects include:**
  - Changed bodily functions
  -Malfunction of electrical devices in NDEr’s vicinity
- **Social aftereffects include:**
  - Relationship stress from NDEr’s psychospiritual shifts
  - Shift toward service-oriented careers
DISTRESSING WESTERN NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: FINDING A WAY THROUGH THE ABYSS
(Bush, 2017)

- Unlike predominant emotions of pleasurable NDEs, those of distressing NDEs (dNDEs) include terror, horror, despair.
- Four types (from most to least frequently reported):
  - Variation: Same as pNDE but experienced as unpleasant
  - Isolation
  - Torment
  - Condemnation (1 case)
- In 20 studies, dNDE incidence ranged from 0% to 50%.
- Research has revealed no clear differences between pNDErs and dNDErs; it appears anyone can have a dNDE.
Children and teens of all ages have reported NDEs.
Children’s and teens’ NDEs are similar to adults’ in:
  • Content
  • Aftereffects
Children’s NDE testimonies can be particularly poignant.
Whereas many adult NDErs need focused assistance in integrating the NDE into subsequent life, even more children may need such assistance.
CHARACTERISTICS OF WESTERN NDERS

- NDEs have been reported by people of every demographic, with no consistent differences; equal opportunity transpersonal experience.
- NDErs reflect the same mental health statuses as the population at large.
- It is unknown whether possibly greater levels of a few psychological features, such as absorption, preceded the NDEs or resulted from them.
An analysis of NDEs reported at the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation website revealed contents and aftereffects of NDEs appear to be

- Universal
- With no consistent differences between NDEs of people from various cultures.

Faces analogy (again)
WORLD RELIGIONS AND NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

• NDE features can be found in the afterlife teachings of the scriptures of,
• And NDE aftereffects reflect the values of,
  • Hinduism
  • Buddhism
  • Zoroastrianism
  • Judaism
  • Christianity
  • Islam
  • Bahá’í
VERIDICAL PERCEPTION IN NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

- In apparently non-physical veridical perception (AVP), NDErs perceive phenomena during their NDEs in material and/or trans-material domains that they could not have known from sensory or rational processes yet that are later corroborated as accurate.
  - Tricia seeing step-dad vend candy bar
- Six different controlled studies of AVP in hospitals yielded no cases of AVP.
- In *The Self Does Not Die*, over 100 cases of paranormal phenomena during NDEs corroborated by credible 3rd parties (Rivas, Dirven, & Smit, 2016)
EXPLANATORY MODELS OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

• Scholars have proposed psychological, physiological, and transcendental theories to explain NDEs.
• Psychological and physiological models fail to account for all features of NDEs and their aftereffects.
• Mainstream scientists, who believe the brain somehow produces the mind, have not embraced transcendental models that include the contentions:
  • that mind sometimes functions, often exceptionally well, when brain is disabled, and
  • that mind is primary and that brain, like a cell phone, receives and transmits mind.
PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH ON NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

- Practical applications have focused on
  - Clinical considerations
  - Education
- Clinically, NDErs have reported both helpful and harmful experiences disclosing their NDEs to others
  - In a study of 88 NDErs reporting on 188 experiences of disclosure (Holden, Kinsey, & Moore, 2014),
    - On average, positive side of neutral
    - In approximately 40% of disclosure experiences, NDEr felt harmed – with no difference between medical, mental, social, or spiritual healthcare providers
    - Disclosure experiences had not improved over 7 decades
    - Worst if NDEr reported relatively sooner and/or had relatively deeper NDE.
Clinicians have generated recommended approaches for healthcare providers to work most effectively with NDErs in the immediate and long-term NDE aftermaths.

Clinicians probably less likely to harm if they hold certain knowledge and attitudes about NDEs

- Studies have shown some educational programs effective in improving healthcare professionals’ knowledge and attitudes

Knowing about NDEs can be beneficial for non-NDErs in settings such as education and grief counseling.
REFERENCES


