LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A Research Proposal Concerning a Fundamental Assumption About NDE Research

To the Editor:

A recent issue of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (33[1]) presented unusually prominent examples of an assumption that is widespread among practitioners of near-death experience (NDE) research as well as many others who follow research findings with great interest. The assumption can be generally stated thus: If people worldwide became well informed about NDEs and, particularly, the spiritual-philosophical implications of NDE reports collectively, they would behave more kindly toward each other and thereby increase the prospects of world peace.

For example, in the article titled *Iranian Shiite Muslim Near-Death Experiences*, Ghasemiannejad, Long, Nouri, and Farahnakian (2014) stated: “NDEs might be an important spiritual concept that could help humanity toward more mutual understanding and mutual peace (p. 41). In Bryan Stare’s (2014) review of Penny Sartori’s book *The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences*, he stated: “She concluded her book by discussing how a change in society’s view of NDEs can further benefit humanity as a whole” (p. 45). These are typical examples of the assumption, and they are widespread. Qualifiers such as those above—that NDEs “might” be an important spiritual concept, and how a change in society’s view of NDEs “can” benefit humanity—do not much diminish the assumption’s deep resonance—which I consider equivalent to religious “belief”—among the broad audience who feel deeply affected by knowledge of NDEs and their implications.

Anyone who has read more than a few NDE reports and followed associated research findings more than cursorily over many years is similarly likely to assume that loving attitudes and peaceful effects must necessarily result from learning about spiritually profound experiences—which can even include personal encounters with God. Moreover, we are likely to assume that transformative aftereffects apply to virtually all near-death experiencers as well as, by and large, to most of us non-experiencers who have merely read extensively in the field. Experiencers and well informed others are both likely, over
time, to shape their personal inclinations, beliefs, and behaviors in ways that help others, that certainly do not intentionally harm others, and that value and contribute to loving world peace. But all of this is assumption.

In the same Journal issue, Michael Grosso (2014) powerfully challenged that assumption in his review of the book The Immortal Mind by Ervin Laszlo with Anthony Peak. Following an objectively fair review of the book’s contents, Grosso logically stated:

It is true that science may eventually provide a more sophisticated and compelling conception of postmortem experience. But would this development inspire noble values and make people more thoughtful, more responsible, more compassionate? I think it might for people who have had some direct encounter with transcendent power—people who have tasted the mystical nectar of immortal consciousness. But for most people, I doubt if it would produce really significant changes. Why should a scientific imprimatur of the belief be any more effective than a theological one, that is, as far as eradicating the savagery and mendacity of the human species? If anything, a more scientific account will eliminate the traditional scare tactics of hell, so the certification of continuity beyond the grave could be dangerous. It will make things much easier for fanatics of all stripes to practice martyrdom for the sake of their beloved causes—however ethnocentric in nature those causes might be. The scientific ratification of an afterlife is just as likely to bring the worst as the best out of people. (pp. 50–51)

People who share the widely held assumption that finding a unifying interface between science and spirituality would inherently promote a more peaceful world should take pause from Grosso’s logical argument. A more peaceful result is not “inherent” at all, and—given the historical record of human behavior—certainly is not guaranteed. Continuing nevertheless to be strongly swayed by the assumption (as I am) despite Grosso’s (2014) splendid counterpoint—and equally committed to fair scientific objectivity—I think the issue should be placed more overtly before the NDE research community so that some intrepid researcher might perhaps be moved to explore the matter. As one of the most deeply held assumptions in the entire field of NDEs, it seems also to be one of the least questioned. Here is an imagining of the type of logical path such research design might employ:

1. Have aftereffects of your NDE changed you toward more positive attitudes regarding life, your life purpose, and behavior toward your fellow humans than the attitudes you held before experiencing the NDE?
If “yes” to #1:
2. With the passing of time have you felt any diminishing of those positive attitudes?
3. Since taking on the more positive attitudes, have there been occasions when you exhibited behavior toward fellow humans that was clearly negative or inconsistent with your more positive attitudes?

If “yes” to #3:
4. How many occasions of such negative behavior do you recall?
5. Is your present behavior toward your fellow humans the same as your behavior toward them before you experienced the NDE?

References


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