

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Beneficial NDE-Like Aftereffects Among Camino de Santiago Pilgrims

To the Editor:

The purpose of this letter is to draw attention to the benefits of ‘exceptional human experiences’ (EHEs) that include but are not limited to near-death experiences (NDEs). These are extraordinary experiences that foster beneficial and transformative changes in the experiencer. The term EHE was coined by Rhea White (1993, 1994), who started to research them after she had an NDE in a traffic accident. She argued that EHEs are spontaneously emerging unusual experiences that can be triggered by a variety of circumstances that include not only a close brush with death but also exposure to scenes of natural beauty, visiting sacred places such as shrines and cathedrals, and engaging intensely in meaningful long-term repetitive activities such as walking.

All these elements are present among pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James) in northwest Spain. It is thus not surprising that in a qualitative and quantitative analysis of 32 Camino de Santiago travelogs that I led (Brumec et al., 2022), we found that pilgrims on the Camino reported a variety of exceptional experiences that neatly fit White’s types of EHEs. Our findings suggested that these experiences are related to the aftereffects of walking the Camino and that the EHE perspective has proven fit for the study of the pilgrims’ experiences and their aftereffects.

An established instrument for assessing the aftereffects of EHEs is the Life Changes Inventory – Revised (LCI-R; Greyson & Ring, 2004). It was created to study the life changes associated with NDEs and later expanded to measure life changes associated with spiritual or transpersonal experiences. I conducted a study (Brumec, 2022) exploring whether pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago causes similar life changes as some other types of EHEs. I compared life changes in beliefs, philosophy, and behavior reported by respondents after the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage experience ($n = 630$) with life changes reported after three other types of EHEs that were also assessed using the LCI-R: unitive mystical experiences (U/MEs; $n = 163$; Schneeberger, 2010), hypnotically-induced death experiences (HDEs; $n = 32$;

Ohkado & Greyson, 2018), and combat-related NDEs (cNDEs; $n = 68$; Goza et al., 2014).

A comparison of the results of all four studies showed that research respondents who reported having experienced U/MEs, HDEs, cNDEs, or walking pilgrimage experience reported aftereffects in several different areas of their lives. EHE experiencers often report increased appreciation of life and a deeper sense of spirituality, a heightened quest for meaning and purpose, and greater self-acceptance, together with more concern for others. Conversely, respondents reported a significant decrease in concern with worldly achievement. Religiousness is the only domain in which the effects of the related stimulus experiences differed.

Therefore, experiencing EHEs can facilitate positive life changes, encourage individuals to care for the planet and its people, and reduce their concern with personal success, control, and dominance over people and resources. Moreover, the data appear consistent enough to consider the walking pilgrimage experience as a spiritual experience that may be comparable in aftereffects to other types of EHEs. Thus, having an NDE is not the only way to experience beneficial NDE aftereffects.

References

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