Letter to the Editor

Near-Death Experiences Before and After 1975

To the Editor:

In the Fall 2003 issue of the Journal, an excellent study by Jeffrey Long and Jody Long appeared, describing their Internet survey comparing near-death experiences (NDEs) occurring before and after 1975. They concluded from analysis of a questionnaire posted on their website that there was no appreciable difference with regard to near-death demographics, experience elements, or aftereffects between cases that occurred before the publication of Raymond Moody's seminal book, *Life after Death* (Moody, 1975), and afterward.

The study they conducted freed the research community to pursue older as well as newer cases, and established Internet survey methodologies as valid. What concerns me are some of their other comments, especially in regard to "copycat" or plagiarized or fraudulent accounts. These do happen, and have happened on their website: one of my own cases fell prey to a "copycat" submitted to them, which they in turn recommended to Kenneth Ring, and which unfortunately was not discovered until after Ring and Sharon Cooper had published the fraudulent account (Ring and Cooper, 1999). Long and Long's statement that it is highly unlikely such incidents happen in any significant number is probably true, but then that leaves us begging the question of what number is significant. It only takes a few "bad apples" to spoil the mix. I am certain they would agree with me that researchers need to remain vigilant and cross-check their sources.

I remain sensitive to this issue because of my own experience as a researcher of near-death states, a career that has spanned more than a quarter of a century. During that time, there have been notable changes in some elements, not in aftereffects nor in general patterning, but rather in imagery and how it is described. Let me cite a few examples:

The first national survey conducted by Gallup Poll (Gallup and Proctor, 1982), reported the frequency of those who experienced seeing
or going through a tunnel at 9 percent. Fifteen years later, I found a figure of slightly less than a third, based on nearly 3,000 cases from my own research base (Atwater, 2000). The only researchers I know of who found claims of a tunnel to be significantly higher (more than 70 percent) were those who conducted their work with support groups for near-death experiencers sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies. It is obvious to me that the popularity of "tunnels" has increased in tandem with the popularity of the near-death phenomenon, perhaps because experiencers now have a word they did not have before to describe what they encountered, or perhaps they have inadvertently molded what they encountered to fit the imagery suggested by the word.

Second, cultural differences and language constraints have had and continue to have a marked effect on the "color" of imagery encountered during the near-death scenario and how that is described. For example, regarding a religious figure, someone from Thailand might say it was a Yamatoot, a servant of the Lord Yama; someone from Wyoming might say it was an angel; someone from Florida might say it was Jesus; someone from France might say it was a priest; and so forth. The way I dealt with this was to have the individual draw the "greeter." When I compared the various drawings, I could not tell them apart. They all looked like the same bright being of light. They may have had different names and descriptions, but they were basically the same figure. Variations had more to do with who was doing the talking and where he or she lived.

Third, at the beginning of near-death research there were very few cases of unpleasant and/or hell-like experiences reported. Whether or not this was because people were too embarrassed to speak of them, the fact is the "Moody model" seemed to determine what researchers were looking for and how they went about their search. As more cases were discovered, more people came forward, changing how researchers conducted their work. Thus, types of scenarios evolved as the field evolved.

Fourth, this same peculiar evolution occurred with the aftereffects. In the early days of near-death research, few experiencers reported the radical changes we now know can follow near-death states. Thinking followed the descriptions of aftereffects in Moody's book: people were unafraid of death afterward, became easier going, more loving and generous, and more spiritual. Today, a larger pattern of both physiological and psychological aftereffects has been identified; my finding that it takes a full seven years to integrate the experience.
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

has been verified by a recent Dutch study (van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich, 2001).

The point I am trying to make here is that, although the basic patterning of near-death states has remained consistent over time and throughout the world, both before 1975 and after, we cannot say that all aspects of NDE reports have remained as consistent. The field of study has evolved, and with that evolution have come changes in word use, descriptions, and scenario types and in how these are viewed.

From my own experience as an investigator, it was much easier in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s to trust the information I was given by the experiencers I encountered. I double-checked anyway, including interviews with significant others whenever possible. In the 1990s, however, the research climate changed, especially after the publication of popular books by near-death experiencers Betty Eadie (Eadie and Taylor, 1992) and Dannion Brinkley (Brinkley and Perry, 1994). Experiencers were not nearly as cooperative with me after that; a number of them demanded payment for their story or refused to share much, lest they put their copyright at risk. I could not duplicate today the work I previously did, as a result of this change in the climate of research.

The Internet may indeed be the next frontier in the scope of research that can now be conducted, perhaps not as thorough as face-to-face interviews such as I once did, but nonetheless valuable, and Long and Long are leading the way. They have done a splendid job and I look forward to more reports from them.

References


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