

BOOK REVIEW

Adventures in Immortality: A Look Beyond the Threshold of Death
by George Gallup, Jr. with William Proctor – McGraw Hill, \$12.95.

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Near-death researchers and others interested in the NDE phenomenon can breathe easier after reading *Adventures in Immortality*. The respected and prestigious Gallup Poll has given its imprimatur to the NDE and certified it as *real*. And as a “real thing” the NDE seems to be as prevalent as “Coke.” According to Gallup’s findings, the incidence of the NDE among Americans is actually much greater than many of us had suspected. For researchers used to hazarding conclusions based on small and non-representative samples, the data presented in Gallup’s landmark book dissolve all qualms about the existence of the NDE: never again can there be any doubt that the phenomenon is authentic, widespread, and significant. No more can it be contended by critics that the NDE is an isolated and unusual event whose importance has been exaggerated by a small band of researchers. By conducting a methodologically rigorous survey on the NDE, Gallup has established in a single work what the entire corpus of literature in near-death studies had so far failed to do: to *legitimize* it using standards acceptable to the scientific and medical community. In this sense, the publication of *Adventures in Immortality* represents the culmination of the descriptive phase of near-death studies that began with *Life After Life* (1975). And the evidence shows plainly that whatever the limitations of Moody’s book, *he was right*.

The strength of this book and its special contribution to near-death studies lie, of course, in the sheer mass of demographic information that Gallup’s organization was able to collect and analyze. The major focus of Gallup’s investigation was on American beliefs about and conceptions of life after death, but by the fourth paragraph of the book, it is clear that Gallup will recognize the role of NDEs in his work:

A special focus of this study has been the involvement of Americans in “near-death” or “verge of death” experiences. This aspect of our investiga-

tion required in-depth questionnaires calling for open-ended, detailed descriptions of any sort of unusual or “mystical” encounter people may have had when they were at death’s door (page 2).

Gallup is true to his promise. The “special focus” he refers to is really the heart of his book. Most of the fourteen chapters that comprise it are either directly concerned with statistical data bearing on NDEs or opinions about them. Other chapters consider the role of beliefs and expectations about the afterlife in shaping the NDE. Throughout there is no question who is the star of this demographic play: the NDE.

In collecting his data Gallup not only undertook the standard survey of about 1,500 adult Americans typical of his polling methods, but he carried out as well two “small scale but statistically representative surveys” of two special groups of utmost relevance to the readers of this journal: national leaders in science and medicine. All surveys were conducted between early 1980 and September, 1981, and collectively this series of polls constitutes, in Gallup’s words: “the most comprehensive national survey on beliefs about and experiences with the afterlife and near-death encounters that has ever been undertaken.”

What did Gallup find?

Of particular interest to persons involved in near-death studies are his data on the *incidence* of NDEs. According to Gallup’s figures, about one in every *seven* adult Americans has been close to death at least once. And approximately one in *twenty* adult Americans, or about 5 percent of our population, has had an NDE.

How do these fractions translate into numbers?

Given an American adult base of roughly 160 million, this means that approximately *8 million* people in the U.S. have had NDEs. And some 23 million have in their own judgment been close to death.

From the figures already given, it can be determined that about 35 percent of individuals who come close to death report NDEs. This NDE incidence rate is consistent with those already given in earlier studies by near-death researchers with much smaller samples (e.g., Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982).

Unfortunately, the wording of Gallup’s key question to determine the incidence of NDEs is poorly phrased and leads to some difficulty in interpreting his data. Because this is such a crucial issue for near-death researchers, however, I wish to linger here for a moment to

consider this point before discussing some of Gallup's other findings. Gallup asked:

Here is a question about unusual experiences people say they have had when they have been on the verge of death or have had a 'close call' such as experiences of continued life or an awareness after death. Have you, yourself, ever been on the verge of death or had a 'close call' which involved any unusual experience at that time?

The ambiguity of the questions stems, of course, from that last "or." Phrasing the question in that way is sure to lump together persons who have been involved in near-death *incidents* with those who have had NDEs in connection with such encounters. This critical distinction between a near-death *encounter* and a near-death *experience* (which was made originally by Moody, 1977, p. 124) is thereby lost and results in unnecessary confusion. For example, since 15 percent of Gallup's national sample replied in the affirmative to this question (an additional 2 percent were not sure), Gallup uses this figure to extrapolate to the population at large and concludes that there are about 23 million people "who have had a verge-of-death or temporary death experience." But he goes on to say that of that number about "eight million have experienced some sort of mystical encounter along with the death event." Obviously, this latter figure seems to be the one to use when speaking of the NDE, and it is the one on which my own interpretation of Gallup's other data is based. This matter is muddled throughout Gallup's book, however, and therefore a critical reader must re-interpret his figures with care. Such an easily avoidable lapse in questionnaire technique is surprising from an organization as sophisticated in polling as Gallup's. It doesn't take a near-death researcher to point it out, but it makes this one regret that, apparently, no near-death researchers were consulted when this study was being planned.

If we proceed to examine what Gallup found concerning the *content* of the NDE, we again find ourselves on familiar ground. It is Moody with statistics. Like other near-death researchers, Gallup follows Moody's practice of enumerating the elements of the experience though he labels the sections of NDE pie somewhat differently. Since there is nothing new here, I will simply list below each of the features Gallup distinguishes along with its corresponding (re-interpreted) percentage among NDErs.

Element	Percent
OBE	26
Accurate visual perceptions	23

Audible sounds or voices	17
Feelings of peace, painlessness	32
Light phenomena	14
Life review	32
Being in another world	32
Encountering other beings	23
Tunnel	9
Precognitions	6

In some cases, the textual comments seem to imply that some of these figures may be underestimated (e.g., the feelings of peace and well being). Supplementing the statistical data for each category (the labels above are my paraphrases for them) are illustrative examples from respondents that will have the ring of familiarity to readers of *Anabiosis*. Some of these categories subsume facets of NDEs that have been singled out by other researchers as cardinal features of the experience. For example, under the OBE category, Gallup introduces the concept of the decision (“This apparent ability to choose to stay in the extradimensional world or to come back is a thread that runs through . . . near death accounts.”) In my own work, I devoted an entire chapter to this phenomenon (see *Life at Death*, Chapter 4).

In the voluminous material Gallup arrays throughout his book, there is much that confirms *relationships* (or the lack of them) between NDEs and other variables that have previously been reported by other near-death researchers. For instance, Gallup states (p. 11) that there is no correlation between religious orientation and NDEs. His chapters on beliefs and expectations concerning the afterlife make it clear that although there is overlap between the former and NDEs, the latter *cannot* be interpreted as a simple function of the former. Gallup’s nearly 40-page statistical appendix demonstrates once again that sociological variables (e.g. sex, race, occupation, education, religious affiliation, etc.) are largely unrelated to NDE incidence. Even some extremely tentative findings from earlier studies receive support here. One that struck me is that a higher proportion of near-death survivors subscribe to a belief in reincarnation compared to the general public (31 percent vs. 23 percent; Gallup doesn’t say whether the difference is statistically significant, however). I had reported similar *post hoc* findings in *Life at Death*.

There is of course a cornucopia of data dealing with beliefs in immortality in different segments of American society (and some interesting cross-national comparisons) and a good deal of other data too vast to summarize here, but surely of paramount interest to those of us involved with near-death studies will be the opinions and beliefs of leading members of the scientific and medical communities

surveyed, as mentioned earlier, in special polls.

Gallup's data here make it evident that professionals in these fields are very much *less* likely to profess a belief in an afterlife (32 percent for physicians and only 16 percent for scientists compared to 67 percent for a national sample). Not surprisingly, physicians and scientists are characterized by a general tendency to dismiss, disparage, or explain away the reported findings dealing with NDEs. Some of the quotations Gallup provides — and his book is studded with them — are precious: “Journalistic fiction or delusions!” “They are very sincere, but usually the descriptions are plagiarized or borrowed from others.” “Most of these have not really been ‘near-death’ . . .” Although some views are certainly sympathetic or at least open-minded, the typical retort, to paraphrase Henry Ford, seems to be close to “NDEs are bunk.” The explanations for NDEs given by these physicians and scientists tend to reflect this general bias, but Gallup toward the close of his book quotes with apparent approval the remark of an authority on death and dying to the effect that natural explanations (of NDEs) are really as speculative as religious ones. In any case, Gallup's findings tend to buttress my feeling that for those of us interested in getting a hearing for NDEs in professional settings, there is still much more for us to do. Gallup's book, though not likely in itself to erode those resistances, will certainly be helpful to us on this front.

Altogether, then, Gallup has written an extremely useful and important book — for the public at large as well as for those of us specifically concerned with near-death studies. Despite my high regard for Gallup's contribution, I feel that I must close this review with a few cautionary comments directed to the professional reader. First, Gallup's book is not intended to be a scholarly one; it is written for the general public and though it is indeed engrossing and reads easily, the book lacks the usual appurtenances of academic publications. Second, consistent with the tone of the book and with popular polling techniques, this is not a book that probes very deeply into the issues that NDEs raise despite its surface concern with religious traditions and philosophical inquiry; its chief virtue is its data and not its reflections on them. Finally, it is extremely surprising that there is virtually no explicit reference to any of the literature in the field of near-death studies despite the fact that the author is plainly aware of it. Even Moody is mentioned only in passing in the quotations of others. Perhaps Gallup did not want to associate himself with this work in order to preserve his “neutral” status as a pollster, but it is obvious that mere citation of other research does

not imply endorsement of it. At all events, this omission seems as puzzling as it is unfortunate.

These reservations notwithstanding, I can still highly recommend *Adventures in Immortality* to everyone interested in near-death studies who wishes to acquire a firmer grasp on the sociological and religious dimensions of the NDE. An indispensable reference, Gallup's book is sure to become a classic of its genre.

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