

*Guest Editorial*

## **Thomas Kuhn Revisited: Near-Death Studies and Paradigm Shifts**

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**ABSTRACT:** Near-death studies can be viewed within a theoretical framework of "paradigms" and "paradigm shifts" as explicated by Thomas Kuhn (1962). Assuming the validity of Kuhn's model, I hypothesize that the paradigm of today's "normal science" is shifting to a new paradigm to accommodate data from near-death studies.

One of my respondents recently shared a vision she had of her mother after her mother's funeral. My respondent was driving along in her vehicle when suddenly she saw her mother go through a dark tunnel and come out in a light. Her mother was met by Jesus, and she asked Him, "I made it here?" Jesus laughed and said, "Yes. Come." They went into an area with blue sky. A white light illuminated her deceased parents, who welcomed her to that place. Then other spirits joined the woman as they walked on grass, with trees and a lake nearby.

Another respondent related a vision that occurred while she thought she was asleep. She saw her recently deceased father in Hell. "He was so real," she wrote. There were many people in Hell, which was a lot like a great lake with high "horrible" flames. People were screaming

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and extending their hands in a pleading fashion. There was only one path, without an exit, leading to the fiery lake. A black-robed figure approached her father and said, "You are next to go in." Her father then said to her, "You never warned me about this place." My respondent referred to her father as a "vile" man "who mocked Christians," and indicated that he was an alcoholic who abused her.

How are we to explain these two visions? We could invoke what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called "normal science," science as we know it today. For example, Paul Kurtz asserted that near-death experiences (NDEs) can be best explained by "ordinary science" (1988, p. 15), with the explanation residing in well-known phenomena such as hypnagogic or hypnopompic states; "reasonable" physiological interpretations relying on cerebral anoxia, anesthetics, fever, hallucinations, or phosphenes to account for the light experience; and depersonalization, a concept commonly accepted by the psychological and psychiatric communities.

Using the concepts of "ordinary science," perhaps the first vision described above is really a wishful fantasy, a daydream, in which my respondent is hoping for the best for her recently deceased mother, wanting her to go to Heaven and be with Jesus. And maybe the second vision is an ordinary dream in which the respondent has the power to punish her father who punished his powerless daughter abusively in "real" life.

### **Anomalies For "Normal Science"**

Or do we have here what Kuhn would call an "anomaly" for normal science (or "ordinary science" to use Kurtz's phrase)? Do we have valid phenomena that cannot easily be accounted for by the prevailing paradigm of science? Kuhn likened a paradigm to an inflexible box into which anomalies do not neatly fit. Do these two visions provide data that cannot be placed easily inside the box of ordinary science?

If these were the only two visions of this kind ever reported, then normal science could readily accommodate them. But since the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), the "anomalies" have continued to mount. Hundreds of near-death experiences, death-bed visions, and related paranormal experiences have been reported in the literature, so that perhaps the paranormal is actually normal, and the anomalies only appear anomalous given the current paradigm of Western science.

According to Kuhn, "philosophies of science have repeatedly demon-

strated that more than one theoretical construction can always be placed upon a given collection of data" (1962, p. 76). Kimberly Clark (1984) wrote she had very solid evidence for the phenomenon of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) in her NDE account of Maria, who described a tennis shoe she had seen on the third floor ledge of the hospital during her OBE. And yet Kurtz has countered with another theoretical construction: rather than thinking of OBEs as actual departures from the body, they may be "twilight states we pass through between waking and sleeping" (1988, p. 15).

A historian of science, Kuhn said that prior to a paradigm shift, one often finds resistance, suppression, and skepticism from the practitioners of the prevailing scientific paradigm. As these scientists conduct normal science within that paradigm, they have a tendency, according to Kuhn, to take that paradigm for granted. There is the unchallenged assumption that the paradigm actually describes how the universe works and can account for all things, anomalous or not.

Then, according to Kuhn's theory of paradigm shift, along come scientists who are younger or new to the field, who see things differently and do not necessarily take the accepted paradigm for granted. They conduct what Kuhn called "extraordinary science" (1962, p. 82).

In the field of near-death studies, Moody and Kenneth Ring both fit Kuhn's prediction of "extraordinary scientists." Moody began collecting NDE accounts while a graduate student of philosophy, before his medical school training. And Ring, having been "burned out" after a decade as a social psychologist, then came to near-death studies with a fresh perspective and a renewed energy. Moody and Ring conducted "extraordinary science," that is, science outside the paradigm of the normal science at that time, a time in which normal scientists were highly skeptical of phenomena such as NDEs.

## **A Paradigm Shift for Near-Death Studies**

I hypothesize that from a historical perspective, near-death studies are a part of, and are in the middle of, a transition from one paradigm of normal science to another. To account for the data from near-death studies, a paradigm shift is not only necessary but well underway.

Kuhn wrote, "When . . . an anomaly comes to seem more than just another puzzle of normal science, the transition to crisis and to extraordinary science has begun" (1962, p. 82). After enough extraordinary science has been completed successfully, a paradigm shift occurs. The new paradigm replaces the old, and with time the new becomes ac-

cepted and embraced by practitioners of the old. A transformation of world view occurs, and the scientific revolution is completed.

Some transformations of world view have taken place, but these are not widely recognized nor generally accepted. One indication of this lack of recognition is the statement still commonly made by NDErs to the effect that they are afraid to tell loved ones or medical providers about their NDEs for fear of being labelled "crazy," "strange," or "weird." The respondent with the second vision above wrote, "It helps to be able to relate my bizarre experiences with you. If I told them out here, I'd be a candidate for the funny farm!" These labels suggest that the NDE is still considered a deviation from the norm and the accepted, even in the minds of NDErs.

If we lived in a culture in which what we now call the paranormal was taken for granted and was an integral part of the prevailing paradigm, then NDErs would not fear being labelled; it would not even be an issue. NDEs would be considered "normal."

Ring's *Heading Toward Omega* (1984) was a harbinger of transformation on two levels. The book chronicled the personal transformations of NDErs who have had the most robust NDEs, documenting how their lives have fundamentally changed in a spiritual way. But *Heading Toward Omega* also presaged the transformation of the paradigm of "normal science." We cannot accept Ring's findings on personal change without also accepting the legitimacy of the "extraordinary science" that led to those findings.

As the paradigm shift continues, we are finding evidence of greater acceptance of NDEs in the common culture, as they and similar paranormal experiences appear as the topic of radio and television talk shows and in movies and works of fiction. The fact that NDEs are becoming more accepted in the general culture is an indication that the paradigm shift is underway.

## The New Normal Science

Kuhn's model of scientific revolution posits that once the new paradigm has become more acceptable and is moving to supplant the old, then new normal science becomes practiced within the newer paradigm. The new normal science attempts to answer questions and solve puzzles not even fathomed under the old scientific paradigm.

We can see some evidence for the supposition that we are operating as if the new normal science is already in place. For example, Margot Grey (1985) has begun to explore negative NDEs, still an enigma for

near-death research. The original models for Moody and Ring described the NDE as a positive experience for the most part. While these two researchers recognized the anomaly of negative NDEs, Moody (1988) dealt with them mainly by citing the quite low percentage of such experiences, while Ring (1980) wrote primarily of Maurice Rawlings' fundamentalist Christian agenda as an explanation for Rawlings' (1978) observations of negative NDEs.

The negative NDE did not fit neatly into the models proposed by Moody and Ring. And yet using the very same scientific methodology that elicited so many positive experiences, we are now finding negative NDEs as well. So one challenge then for the new normal science, which conceptualizes NDEs not as paranormal but as normal phenomena, is somehow to account for the anomaly of negative and Hell-like NDEs.

In a similar vein, Ian Stevenson, Emily Williams Cook, and Nicholas McClean-Rice (1989-90) have presented evidence that NDEs occur to some people who are not at all close to death. They perhaps facetiously have called these "fear-death experiences" (1989-90, p. 53). If their finding holds up, then again, the new normal science somehow will have to account for this anomaly, or it will have to change.

### **A New Paradigm For Paradigms?**

And if the new paradigm, which accepts NDEs as valid and legitimate phenomena, must change, as Kuhn predicted all paradigms inevitably do, then what might its successor look like? Many NDErs have written that the lessons of their NDEs were to love others unconditionally; to forgive, especially those who have been most injurious to us; and to seek knowledge, particularly about things spiritual. It is difficult to imagine the new normal scientific paradigm having to shift to encompass something beyond these lessons. But then perhaps that is an anomaly for Kuhn's paradigm of scientific revolutions, with the answer being that there may be an end point to paradigm shifts. Ring (1984) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1959) have called this end point the "Omega Point."

As we witness the paradigm shift in Western science to accommodate near-death studies, we may also be witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm about paradigms. The anomaly of an end point to paradigm shifts may change our thinking about the inevitability of paradigm shifts. On the other hand, perhaps I am simply so immersed in the new paradigm I have hypothesized that I am unable to see what the paradigm beyond this new one might look like.

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