

Letters to the Editor

A Neurobiological Model for Near-Death Experiences

To the Editor:

Juan C. Saavedra-Aguilar and Juan S. Gómez-Jeria do not seem to have taken into account certain facts about the out-of-body experience (OBE) in formulating their thought-provoking hypothesis about near-death experiences (NDEs) that they presented in this Journal (1989). For example, they wrote that veridical out-of-body perceptions can be explained "by assuming that before and after the episode the individual perceived a fragmentary reality (for example, somebody's face or the color of a dress), and later the verbal system provided a more or less logical and coherent report" (pp. 216-217).

But that was one of several assumptions that Michael Sabom (1982) found untenable in many cases of the NDEs he investigated that included veridical out-of-body perception. I think Saavedra-Aguilar and Gómez-Jeria should have substantiated their argument by showing how it applies to such cases. Since they have not done so, they create the impression that they are trying to explain away the puzzle of out-of-body sight rather than explain it.

Saavedra-Aguilar and Gómez-Jeria have suggested a role for endogenous endorphins in the absence of pain during the NDE (p. 214). I doubt whether that is an adequate explanation in light of Sabom's observation (1982, pp. 171-172) that, while analgesia from experimentally administered beta-endorphin may last several hours, NDErs report that physical pain, for example from injury, returns abruptly as soon as the experience ends.

Although Saavedra-Aguilar and Gómez-Jeria have said that it is beyond the scope of their work to elucidate the possible purpose of NDEs, their hypothesis would be more complete if they would do so in their future work on these phenomena. Many human experiences are found to serve a purpose, and NDEs, which according to the authors are always accompanied by a stressful situation, are unlikely to be an exception. To me they appear, by and large, to be biological devices with a protective function (Krishnan, 1985).

References

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- Sabom, M.B. (1982). *Recollections of death: A medical investigation*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

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