

Near-Death Studies, 1981-82: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Near-death studies published in major scientific journals during 1981-82 are grouped by subject matter and briefly reviewed.

Near-death research has diversified in scope and intensified in sophistication in the past two years. This paper reviews near-death studies published in major scientific journals during 1981-82. In the interest of brevity, I have excluded from this review articles from the nonscientific literature, as well as books and book chapters. The latter omission was justified by the separate publication in *Anabiosis* of reviews of important books, which during this period included Michael Sabom's *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* (see Michael Grosso's review in *Anabiosis*, 1981, 1, 172-176) and George Gallup Jr.'s *Adventures in Immortality: A Look Beyond the Threshold of Death* (see Kenneth Ring's review in *Anabiosis*, 1982, this issue).

The purpose of this review is to assemble, organize, and compare new studies published in 1981-82 in a variety of journals of varying accessibility. I will consider first, articles presenting new data on near-death experiences (NDEs) and related phenomena; next, papers addressing methodological and sociological issues in near-death research; and finally, articles discussing interpretations of the NDE.

Near-death researchers continued to accumulate data on the incidence of NDEs among various geographic and specialized populations. James Lindley, Sethyn Bryan, and Bob Conley (1981) reported a study from the Pacific Northwest of 50 NDEs that partially replicated Ring's five stages. They concluded that NDEs are not influenced by demographic factors, that NDEs produce profound positive personality changes, and that parts of the NDE may be related to endorphins.

Paola Gioveti (1982) described a study from Italy of 120 near-death and deathbed experiences, including 46 cases of perceptions of deceased acquaintances, 17 cases of perceptions of a border or point of no return, 29 out-of-body experiences (OBEs), 21 cases of percep-

tions of heavenly landscapes, 11 cases of paranormal phenomena observed by others at the deathbed, and 1 unpleasant suicide-related NDE.

Kenneth Ring and Stephen Franklin (1981-82) reported a study of 36 suicide attempters, 17 of whom (47 percent) described NDEs that did not differ from NDEs reported in other contexts. They discussed therapeutic implications of this finding, and the paradoxical suicide-inhibiting effect of NDEs.

Eugene Thomas, Pamela Cooper, and David Suscovich (1982-83) reported a survey of 305 volunteers, of whom a quarter had been close to death and a third reported having had an intense spiritual experience. Although they noted that near-death events and spiritual experiences tended to be reported by the same individuals, they did not report whether these spiritual experiences occurred during the near-death events.

Richard Kohr (1982) examined the relationship between NDEs and various dream, meditation, and paranormal experiences, among 547 volunteers from a paranormal/human-potential organization. He found that the 84 NDErs in this sample tended to report paranormal and related experiences more frequently than did those who had come close to death without NDEs or those who had never come close to death. Kohr raised the question of whether psychically sensitive individuals tend to have NDEs, or whether NDEs tend to focus individuals' attention on their psychic and related phenomena.

Advances have also been made in the classification of NDEs and in their differentiation from other states. Glen Gabbard, Stuart Twemlow, and Fowler Jones (1981) compared 34 OBEs occurring near death with 305 other OBEs. They reported no features unique to the near-death state, although certain phenomena, including positive after-effects, were more often associated with near-death OBEs than with other OBEs. Twemlow, Gabbard, and Jones (1982) described these 339 OBEs (the 34 occurring near death plus the 305 others) in terms of the conditions surrounding the experience, phenomenological features, and subsequent impact. They reported that subjects who had had OBEs did not differ from control subjects in terms of psychological health or background. Twemlow, Gabbard, and Lola-fayne Coyne (1982) reported a multivariate analysis of 33 NDEs that isolated 5 clusters of preexisting near-death conditions: low stress, emotional stress, intoxicant, cardiac arrest, and anesthetic. They proposed that this statistical technique is particularly suited to near-death studies with few subjects and many variables.

Russell Noyes (1981) described responses of 189 victims of life-

threatening accidents as factor analyzed into dimensions of depersonalization, hyperalertness, and mystical consciousness. He identified meaningful interpretations of these phenomena in terms of physiological, psychological, and mystical approaches to the NDE.

Several authors addressed themselves to specific components of the NDE. Kevin Drab (1981b) analyzed 71 descriptions of apparent movement through a tunnel-like space. He concluded that these rather varied tunnel experiences are neither an objective reality nor a metaphorical transition between states of consciousness, but are most likely hallucinatory events. C.T.K. Chari (1982) proposed a typology of tunnel experiences based on their apparent structural complexity and function. He concluded that tunnel experiences may be in part paranormally induced events subconsciously constructed to bridge the gap between the ordinary perceptual world and a pseudohallucinatory visual realm.

Ring (1982) described two types of possibly precognitive phenomena that occur in NDEs: apparent visions of the experiencer's personal future ("personal flash-forwards") and apparent previews of planetary-wide events ("prophetic visions"). He discussed the potential significance of these possibly precognitive visions, as well as various interpretations. Ring (1981) also proposed that certain NDE features – the OBE, the encounter with a "presence," the life review, and the "world of supernal beauty" – are best explained by a new model of psycho-spiritual functioning, and suggested one such model based on the existence of interpenetrating physical, astral, and causal bodies.

Moshe Spero (1981-82) compared the life review as a developmental task of the person facing death with the rabbinic conception of preparation for death through creative repentance. Though he did not allude to NDEs, he described therapeutic functions of the life review preceding death.

Researchers have also focused attention on the alleged positive personality transformations following NDEs. Bruce Greyson (1981a) reviewed the literature on suicide-inhibiting effects of NDEs and presented several psychodynamic hypotheses to account for this apparently paradoxical effect. Charles Flynn (1982) reviewed previous literature on value transformations following NDEs and presented preliminary data suggesting that NDEs enhance concern for others, religious interest, and belief in an afterlife, while they decrease fear of death, material desires, and need for approval of others.

John Alexander and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1982), in a study not specifically related to NDEs, documented positive changes in spirituality, as self-reported, in 244 attendees of 13 five-day workshops on

Life, Death, and Transition.

The underlying assumptions and possible directions for further near-death study were addressed in several papers. Stephen Vicchio (1981a) briefly reviewed books and articles on NDEs, OBEs, and deathbed visions, and derived seven generalizations about this literature that he suggested merited further study. Vicchio (1981b) also discussed five logical problems relevant to near-death study, and suggested five questions worthy of further study regarding NDEs.

Drab (1981a) reviewed approaches to near-death research and their underlying assumptions, and outlined a cognitive conception of the NDE as a variety of discrete altered configurations of consciousness. Craig Lundahl (1981) described near-death research as moving in three directions: scientifically derived accumulation of knowledge about near-death phenomena; examination of the question of post-mortem survival; and clinical applications of near-death study.

Sabom (1981) reported a study of 116 near-death survivors, of whom 36 claimed to have observed their physical bodies during an OBE. He demonstrated with one case a method by which the accuracy of these OBE observations may be checked, and proposed further study along these lines.

An active focus of interest in the past two years has been the correspondence between contemporary near-death reports and various religious and cultural traditions regarding deathbed experiences. Carl Becker (1981) described the central role played by NDEs in Pure Land Buddhism, the predominant Buddhist school in China. Lundahl (1981-82) described the perceived other world as revealed in Mormon literature on NDEs, and discussed the influence of the Mormon frame of reference.

Bodo Reichenbach (1982) described the view of Bô Yin Râ, early 20th-century German author, that NDEs are subjective glimpses of the afterlife, and discussed this view in terms of Bô Yin Râ's extensive observations on near-death states from a spiritual perspective. Leon Rhodes (1982) compared NDEs with descriptions of a spiritual existence found in the writings of the 18th century Swedish scientist and mystic Swedenborg.

The most numerous, and most controversial, articles in near-death study in the past two years have been those addressing various interpretations of the NDE. Several authors have argued the merits of a subjectivist versus an objectivist interpretation of the phenomenon. John Gibbs (1981) criticized Ronald Siegel's view that NDEs are only subjectively real, and presented data from the literature that cannot be explained by Siegel's "naturalistic" explanations. Ian Stevenson

(1981) also criticized Siegel's view by elucidating logical fallacies in Siegel's argument and appealing to corroborative data ignored by Siegel. Siegel (1981) in response defended his view of NDEs as only subjectively real by appeals to parsimony and by dismissing the supportive data presented by Stevenson as indistinguishable from fiction.

James Alcock (1981) briefly reviewed arguments for the interpretation of NDEs as "glimpses of the afterlife" and as "reverie in a disturbed or dying brain," and concluded that the afterlife hypothesis is based solely on faith and cannot be supported by evidence from NDEs. Mark Woodhouse (1981) outlined the subjectivist and objectivist interpretations of the NDE, and described their relationships to dualism and scientific materialism.

Several researchers have focused on psychological interpretations of near-death phenomena. Roy Kletti and Russell Noyes (1981) published the first English translation of Oskar Pfister's seminal 1930 article, in which he suggested that persons faced with death exclude reality from their perceptions and seek refuge from their danger in pleasurable fantasies. Uri Lowental (1981) suggested that NDEs are one example of regression in the face of death, and may reflect either preverbal memories or fantasies of the infant's bliss under the mother's loving protection.

Greyson (1981b) proposed several psychological interpretations of NDEs that can accommodate the phenomena's universality, paranormal component, and beneficial effects. He concluded that NDEs may serve a number of psychological functions. Harvey Irwin (1981) formulated published hypotheses about psychological functions of OBEs in terms of Henry Murray's conceptual system of manifest needs. He presented data suggesting that students reporting OBEs are more attentive to their mental processes than are other students, and have low needs for achievement and for deference.

Scott Rogo (1982) reviewed those psychological theories of OBEs and NDEs (which he considers a category of OBE) that attempt to explain the paranormal component of these experiences. He concluded that, while some of these theories have merit, they are incomplete and cannot explain the scope of the OBE as well as do theories of actual mind-body separation.

Becker (1982) reviewed the theory, popularized by Carl Sagan, that NDEs are recollections of birth memories. He concluded that birth memories have no bearing on the ontological reality of NDEs, are of questionable reality themselves, and could not explain many important aspects of the NDE.

Other researchers have considered various models for the NDE or its component parts. Daniel Carr (1981) proposed that certain NDE features — euphoria, life review, dissociation from the body, and hallucinations — are suggestive of a “limbic lobe syndrome” and may be precipitated in a near-death state by the release of beta-endorphin and related brain peptides. Carr (1982) subsequently elaborated this theory that endorphins or related peptides released under stress provoke hippocampal neuronal activity and thereby trigger a limbic lobe syndrome, providing a physiological basis for some features of NDEs.

Stephen Braude (1981) reviewed Ring’s theory that NDEs involve a holographic domain or state of mind. He concluded that holographic models, particularly as applied to NDEs, are “fundamentally incoherent and confused.”

Grosso (1981) asserted that the NDEs’ universality, paranormal component, and beneficial effects cannot be explained by current theories of the experience. He proposed a nonreductionistic Jungian approach that could explain these aspects of the phenomenon, and noted that the survival hypothesis may also accommodate these phenomena.

Finally, V. Krishnan (1981) argued that transcendental feelings and OBEs in near-death states may serve protective functions, and should not be regarded as evidence of post-mortem existence.

In summary, near-death studies during 1981-82 have covered a wide range of subjects, including new data on the incidence of NDEs in various populations, classification of NDEs and their differentiation from other states, intensive analyses of specific components of the NDE, alleged personality transformations following NDEs, underlying assumptions and possible directions for further research, cross-cultural and religious perspectives on NDEs, and various interpretations of near-death phenomena. Given the rapid expansion of interest in NDEs among the scientific community, we can expect further diversifications of near-death studies in the next couple of years.

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