The Deconstruction of Death: Postmodernism and Near-Death

Raymond L. M. Lee, Ph.D.
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT: The near-death experience (NDE) embodies a range of claims that challenges modern assumptions about the meaning of reality. Major publications on NDEs appeared between the 1970s and 1990s, converging with the debates on postmodernism. These debates turned modern reality on its head to offer alternative perceptions of space/time and subjectivity. By placing the discourse of the NDE within the context of postmodernism, we can address its significance as a deconstruction of the conventional view of death.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience, modernity, postmodernism, deconstruction.

A significant issue raised by Mark Fox (2003) in his insightful survey of the near-death experience (NDE) concerns how the occurrence and accounts of NDEs reflect changing patterns of belief in the West. Rather than "seeing them as windows affording us privileged peeks into our post-mortem destiny" (Fox, 2003, p. 353), NDEs could be construed as mirrors revealing the transformation of social beliefs. This line of inquiry does not address the reality of the afterlife as much as the way in which contemporary realities have been deconstructed to take on other meanings. It is not the claims of the near-death experiencers (NDErs) that are in question but the challenge of the claims to the principles on which contemporary realities are based. In other words, the NDE cannot be seen as occurring independently of the social context in which a crisis of representation has emerged.

Raymond L. M. Lee, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Malaya. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Lee at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; e-mail: raymond@um.edu.my.
The NDE was initially identified and discussed by Raymond Moody (1975, 1977). It has received public and academic attention continuously for almost 30 years. Many empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of the NDE have appeared during this period (Grey, 1984; Morse and Perry, 1990; Ring, 1980, 1984; Sabom, 1982, 1998; Valarino, 1997). This period also witnessed the emergence of three social trends that influenced the perception and interpretation of the NDE: the rise of the New Age movement within a context of re-enchantment, the growth of death awareness, and the renewal of religious faith (Lee, 2003b). Concurrent with these trends was the debate on the plausibility of a paradigmatic shift to postmodernism. It was no mere coincidence that the discovery of the NDE occurred at the same time that modern representations of reality were challenged by the protagonists of postmodernism. Discourses on the NDE and postmodernism undermined the meaning of reality as conceived and practiced within the framework of modernity. Apparent glimpses into the afterlife by NDErs and postmodern deconstruction of in situ identities converged to suggest the possibility of realities other than the one posed by the mandate of modernity. In a radical sense, NDErs and postmodernists were unwitting allies in the effort to disassemble the ontological scaffolds of modern reality.

This article argues that the NDE should be considered not only a paranormal phenomenon but also an aspect of a broader movement to disengage from the limitations of modernity. The modern outlook is in effect an outlook of certainty determined by the hard-nosed empiricism of science and capitalist-driven technology. Postmodernism represents an attempt at disparaging the outlook of certainty by a discourse of decentering that overturns all assumptions of exactitude and fixity. It maintains a rebellious attitude that does not take for granted the foundation of modern truth. Decentering is the discursive means by which any foundational thought becomes a target of relentless analysis to disclose its fragmented nature. In short, postmodernism thrives on the crisis of foundational knowledge (Docherty, 1993).

Postmodernism is also closely associated with deconstruction, the analytical technique originally introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1974, 1978) for probing the meaning of texts within texts. Deconstruction wrecks havoc on truth by demonstrating that truth is contingent on a variety of claims concealed from our eyes. It is in effect a spoiler of truth (Sarup, 1993). In that respect, the NDE can be conceived as a special instance of deconstructing the ramparts of modern existence by adumbrating the richness of postmortem
existence concealed by the apparent certitude of this life. By claiming to glimpse the afterlife, the NDEr is implicitly deconstructing the modern view of death as a nihilistic finale.

To facilitate this argument, it is first necessary to examine the meaning of death in modernity. Only by asking how death is perceived and experienced in modernity can we understand the significance of the NDE as an event that complements the emergence of postmodernism. The NDE in this sense is not just another out-of-body experience but a profound statement disparaging the nihilism of modernity.

**Modernity and Death**

In the film *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999), a murdered psychologist continues to exist in disembodied form without realizing that he no longer possesses a physical body. He exemplifies a modern professional whose very existence is rooted in his grasp of reality in the here and now. Even after a deranged patient shoots him dead, he has no immediate conception of his death. He wanders around imagining he is still alive. Only a psychically gifted child can see and talk to him. Even the child does not realize the psychologist is dead. Their relationship comes to assume a therapeutic routine as though it is transacted in the world of the living. Only at the conclusion of the film does the dead man awaken to the meaning of his mortality. This film provides the ultimate statement on the modern alienation of death. It suggests that modernity is a condition that produces a numbing effect on death consciousness: the dead cannot come to terms with their own demise. What is it about modernity that has produced a consciousness that nullifies death? To answer this question, we need to consider briefly pre-modern notions of death and their transformation in modernity.

In reviewing anthropological writings on death, John Hick (1976) surmised that pre-modern peoples believed in something insubstantial that survived bodily death. This was termed *ghostly survival*, a type of postmortem existence that threatened the living and needed ritual response as symbolic appeasement. To quote Hick:

Thus the primitive mind was not conscious of a general liability to death such as is expressed by the proposition that all men are mortal. Death was thought of as being due to particular and contingent causes; people did not just die but were killed. Such a view of death in primitive society is not however at all astonishing, since it must so
largely have corresponded with the facts; for it has been estimated that prehistoric man's average life-span was only about eighteen years, death being usually due to violent causes. (1976, p. 57)

The primitive conception of death was one of continuity into the next life characterized by more or less the same inequalities experienced before death. Citing the work of Edward Tylor (1903), Hick concluded that primitive beliefs in the afterlife were not influenced by the hope in compensation or reward. There existed a sense of immortality but it was regarded neither as positive nor desirable.

However, the belief in a desirable afterlife was also evident in pre-modern times, particularly in ancient Egypt, Vedic India, and classical Greece. In those societies, such a belief arose with the “emergence of individual self-consciousness and as a correlate of faith in a higher reality” (Hick, 1976, p 73). The quest for a better incarnation or reunification with the divine was possible because the idea of a soul surviving death took on the quality of an inner self that possessed moral consciousness. The application of this consciousness to an already existing belief in the afterlife became the condition for envisaging the possibilities of spiritual enhancement after death.

From this brief review, we can see that in pre-modern times there was already a dynamic transition from mere belief in the afterlife to active search for a better afterlife. Fear of death in primitive times, which Hick (1976) addressed as a reaction to an absence of desired immortality, did not disappear but became attenuated because the growth of moral consciousness raised hopes of liberation or escape from suffering. Later developments in pre-modern times invested people with the idea that personal conduct determined individual destiny. One might fear death but possessed the opportunity to rectify earthly existence through moral actions in order to sublimate fear into a higher identity.

Fear of death was not repressed in pre-modern times because of strong beliefs in the afterlife and the overt concern with one's destiny after death. But to meet this fear necessitated the development of a philosophy that anticipated the ascension of being beyond the pains of earthly life. Thus, Plato in The Republic (2000/4th century B.C.) and Phaedo (1993/4th century B.C.) argued for a fuller existence in a transcendent realm after death. Fear and grief would not affect those who saw death as the ultimate liberation from the bonds of this life. Similarly, in the Upanishads (Radhakrishnan, 1969) that formed the concluding portion of the Indian Vedas, the philosophy of the true or transcendent self (atman) provided a view of death as a path to divine
union. Such philosophy brought relief to those who did not equate the ego with the self that "is immortal, self-luminous, self-proved and beyond doubts and denials" (Sharma, 1987, p. 21). Death of the ego as a finite entity would not be feared since the transcendent self is never affected by this event.

These philosophical teachings of the pre-modern era exemplified the type of rational confrontation with death that produced panaceas for the fear of death. The afterlife, as a widely accepted belief, was not represented at all as a continuation of mundane existence but as more real and more illuminating than this life. There was no fear of death for those who were philosophically and morally prepared to face death as entry into an afterlife of higher knowledge.

In the modern era, however, the plausibility of the afterlife has receded. Despite the persistence of this idea in religious teachings that have come down to us in modern times, the organization of attitudes and behavior in response to afterlife existence is tenuous. Indeed, the fear of death in modernity has not abated but neither has the cavalier reception of the afterlife. One reason for this skepticism toward the meaning of the afterlife has to do with the predominance of the ego concept. Despite being treated as something finite and enclosed, the ego has come to increase its scope of influence by becoming a knowledge seeking entity destined to understand and master the vicissitudes of this world. The ego overshadowed the transcendent self to assume an exclusive position for dealing with the complexities of this world. As the ego came into its own as the modern self, the transcendent self took on a mythic quality that relegated it to an understated position outside the sphere of empirical reality. Its redemptive value fell and with it the notion of the afterlife became irrelevant. Hence, the modern fear of death is not explicitly concerned with consequences in the afterlife. Rather, it has to do with the termination of the ego and along with it the aspiration to world mastery.

The work of Sigmund Freud on death illustrates the length to which modern thinkers have gone to repress the notion of the afterlife. In positing the concept of the death instinct, Freud (1975) juxtaposed it to the sex instinct that underlay the will to life and survival. The death instinct negated the sex instinct by inculcating in the organism a striving toward a return to inanimate status. Freud's idea of the death instinct was marked by pessimism that resulted in a failed attention to the question of human consciousness in the death process (Clack, 2002). His focus on death as a return to inanimate existence
suggests the total absence of thought given to the meaning of the afterlife. People and living things just died without any trace of consciousness remaining. Upon perishing the ego became lifeless like a doornail, rendering it needless to argue for the possibility of continued existence in the afterlife.

Thus, the modern fear of death is rooted in the embellishment of what Hick (1976, p. 52) called *individual egoity*. The modern self is this ego placed on a pedestal of world mastery, concentrating its energy on the here and now as the definite course to knowledge and control. Distance arises between world mastery and death to produce an attitude that disenchants the self from the belief of existence after death. The disenchanted self finds affinity with the nihilism of death, the very source of its fear of death (Lee, 2002).

The modern conditions of dying have also contributed to a nihilistic attitude that gives no credence to the notion of the afterlife. The impersonal nature of dying in modern institutional settings accentuates the loneliness of exiting the world without any consideration of the person’s state of mind or the possibility of its survival after death (Elias, 1985; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Sudnow, 1967). Under these conditions, death becomes a commodity to be processed by bureaucrats, doctors, and undertakers. There is no latitude in this process for taking into account the meaning of a person’s consciousness at death. Medical and bureaucratic routines are enacted to ensure an unproblematic transition from the deathbed to the cemetery. Death rituals are performed to fulfill the customary process of bereavement but not necessarily for the enhancement of death consciousness.

Yet within this modern approach to death and dying, it is advanced medical technology that has made possible the resuscitation of patients some of whom were discovered to be NDErs. Indeed, the NDE as a return-from-death discourse can be construed as an unanticipated outcome of modern medical developments intended to save and prolong lives. The NDE itself is paradoxically a denial of what modern medicine cannot do: to raise the consciousness of the dead. But the modern context in which the NDE became known is not particularly receptive to the ironies of technological advancement in medicine. It has not facilitated a full acceptance of such technology to be a means for reaching beyond the limits of this life. If modern medicine is concerned mainly with saving and preserving lives in the here and now, which implies delaying death, then the NDE is merely considered a sideshow occurring on the margins of modernity. It can then be dismissed with impunity as a “curious matter” or “another
instance of American millennial hysteria” (Bloom, 1996, pp. 32 and 135).

If death has replaced sex as a modern taboo, then the NDE has yet to be unambiguously regarded as providing new insights into the meaning of death and the afterlife. On the contrary, the NDE has become more vulnerable to modern debunkers intent on addressing the phenomenon as part of what Carol Zaleski (1987) described as the image-making and image-bound character of human beings. But when placed in the context of postmodernism, another dimension of the NDE is revealed. The NDE takes on a deconstructive image that challenges the meaning of death in modernity. It becomes the mirror for reflecting the anxiety of death in modernity.

From Denial to Deconstruction

The crux of modernity lies in the quest for world production. The modern meaning of the world is generated through the drive to create and preserve as actions that empower the unfolding of world mastery. Loss of life, whether intentional or not, exemplifies loss of creativity and, therefore, contradicts the means by which the world is produced and reproduced. For that reason, death in modernity is treated as the end of life, the termination of production. A gulf exists between death and modern concepts centered on life as production. Only by denying death can modern individuals pursue their quest for world mastery.

However, postmodernism as a disputation of the foundations of modernity can be construed as a means for deconstructing the denial of death (Lee, 2003a). Since deconstruction is a method of reading texts by breaking up texts, its application to the question of death entails an attempt in dismantling the assumption that death is the reversal of production. In other words, is death a mere fading from life and a descent into oblivion? To take dying as a form of disappearance is not unreasonable, but on further reflection we can see that such an assumption is both simplistic and nihilistic. If birth as the entrance to life is fraught with complexities, death as the opposite must surely be a less than straightforward process of leaving the world. The interaction of physiological, psychological and social conditions underlying birth suggests that each person’s identity reflects the multiple levels of experience that determine his or her emergent path of consciousness in the world. When this path of consciousness exits the world, it is no less complicated than its coming into being.
at birth. Thus, dying cannot simply be a collapse of consciousness into nothingness because such nihilism cannot account for the emergence of identity in the first place.

If dying does not necessarily imply an absolute loss of identity but its transformation, the next question to ask is how can we understand the process by which this transformation takes place? Philosophically, we can inspect the condition of being at death. Being means consciousness coming into its own to form a particular identity. Being a person means maintaining a particular identity, but not necessarily one bounded only by physical characteristics. These characteristics may only provide a putative identification of personhood, but are not the central source of that identification. Thus, physical breakdown at death would only suggest the unraveling of the physical components of personhood. If personhood is more than the sum of its physical parts, then physical death cannot be equivalent to the termination of being. Put another way, the composition of an individual's identity is not based exclusively on his or her physical makeup. Is the arm, leg, hand, heart, liver, or some other organ the source of a person's being? If so, then when these physical attributes wither, what happens to being?

We can imagine being as unaffected by the same decay that afflicts the physical body, its mutability untouched by the death of physical form. Being is its own power for transforming. But since the advent of Cartesian dualism, the separation of mind and body has generated attitudes that belittle the question of how being transforms at death. When the relation between mind and body is treated as inconceivable, bodily decay at death implies that we cannot say anything about how it affects the state of mind. Similarly, even if the mind or consciousness remains intact at death, we are in no position to speculate on its transformation based on a withdrawal of physical action. In other words, the perceived spuriousness of mind-body relationship has limited our understanding of consciousness and being in the post-physical state.

The discourse on the NDE offers another approach to the question of identity transformation at death. The NDE deconstructs the modern assumption of life as world production by identifying death as another level of world production. But the post-physical level of world production is framed within other notions of reality that parallel those found in postmodernism. In postmodernism, the alteration of reality due to the spatialization of time deconstructs the meaning of progress as the inevitable unfolding of linear time (Harvey, 1989). When space is experienced as a sphere of action devoid of the pressure of time,
a new kind of freedom is imagined to be possible. Such new freedom has been described by some NDErs. Under these new conditions of reality, the self is no longer perceived as constricted by or limited to its given identity. The NDE seems to provide an opportunity for the deconstruction of subjectivity not unlike that found in postmodernism. By exploring these two themes of space/time compression and altered subjectivity, we will see how the NDE converges with postmodernism.

Near-Death and Space/Time Compression

In modernity, space is dominated by time. This leads to the experience of progress, the occupation of space, and the cultivation of its elements against the linear movement of time. Consequently, the perception of space cannot be rendered meaningful unless coupled to the unfolding of time. Time is the fulcrum for the logical interpretation of all historical movement, as space is annihilated by the past, consumed in the present, and symbolized for the future. In modernity, the value of space cannot be considered until it is subjected to the ravages of time. For instance, property values are dependent on the nature and treatment of the area before its present development and for future speculative purposes.

In postmodernism, it is the spatialization of time that leads to a kind of space/time compression, for which there is no clear sense of boundaries to demarcate the movement of time. This does not imply that time has been obliterated, but that we seem to live in an “eternal present” marked by ephemerality, speed, and volatility. There is an exaggerated sense of mobility, in which being here and there has more to do with the lack of a center than with the clock ticking away. Time is no longer the principal determinant of identity. The feeling of who we are is subsumed by the objects of pleasure and displeasure circulating with no regard to spatial barriers. In other words, we can easily find ourselves “swept up in a series of events and political shifts which [have] no obvious boundaries” (Harvey, 1989, p. 262). It is the sense of adriftness that defines how we relate to the world.

How does the postmodern space/time compression relate to the NDE? Although the NDE and postmodernism are not causally related, both share a ground of experience that challenges the modern meaning of space and time. The deconstruction of the linear conception of space/time constitutes one aspect of this challenge. George
Ritchie clearly described the deconstructive experiences with space/time compression in his book *Return from Tomorrow* (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978). Ritchie, a psychiatrist, gave a detailed account of his NDE that occurred in 1943 when he was clinically dead for nine minutes. At the time of his NDE, he was a 20-year-old recruit in Texas. He had fallen ill with a very high temperature and was being transported to the ward at the army camp when he fell unconscious. When he awoke he did not realize that he had "left" his body. All he could think of at that moment was he had missed the train to Richmond and had to find a way to get there. Instantly, he found himself speeding along toward his destination in an unexplained way. As he put it:

Almost without knowing it I found myself outside, racing swiftly along, traveling faster in fact than I'd ever moved in my life. . . .

Looking down I was astonished to see not the ground, but the tops of mesquite bushes beneath me. Already Camp Barkeley seemed to be far behind me as I sped over the dark frozen desert. My mind kept telling me that what I was doing was impossible, and yet . . . it was happening.

A town flashed by beneath me, caution lights blinking at the intersections. This was ridiculous! A human being couldn't fly without an airplane — anyhow I was traveling too low for a plane. . . .

I was going to Richmond; somehow I had known that from the moment I burst through that hospital door. Going to Richmond a hundred times faster than any train on earth could take me. (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978, pp. 38–39)

Ritchie was incredulous that his thought of movement was movement itself, blending time and space without the domination of one over the other. There was no counting of seconds or minutes as he felt himself covering vast stretches of space just by the thought of going to Richmond. Later, when he realized that he was no longer in the body, he turned back toward Camp Barkeley to "look" for his body. While searching for the room where his body lay, he wandered into the x-ray department, where he saw the technician, who was the last person he had spoken to. He tried to signal him, but to no avail. Ritchie wrote:

Was it only a few hours ago that I had been carried into this room on a stretcher? Surely that was weeks ago. Years ago. Or . . . was it only minutes? Something was strange about time, too, in this world where rules about space and speed and solid mass were all suspended. I had lost all sense of whether an experience was taking a split second, or whether it was lasting for hours. (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978, p. 45)
Ritchie was trying to figure out the experience of space/time compression in his NDE, something that he had never encountered before in his ordinary life. The familiar sense of time moving in linear sequence along with the occupation of space in a logical manner was replaced by a completely unusual experience of time and space undifferentiated from each other. He experienced again the fusion of time and space when he saw a replay of his entire life. This occurred after he "found" his body in a small room, where he also encountered a being of light. In his words:

For into that room along with [the Being's] radiant presence ... had also entered every single episode of my entire life. Everything that had ever happened to me was simply there, in full view, contemporary and current, all seemingly taking place at that moment.

How this was possible I didn't know. I had never before experienced the kind of space we seemed to be in. The little one-bed room was still visible, but it no longer confined us. Instead, on all sides of us was what I could only think of as a kind of enormous mural – except that the figures on it were three dimensional, moving and speaking ... 

There were other scenes, hundreds, thousands, all illuminated by that searing Light, in an existence where time seemed to have ceased. It would have taken weeks of ordinary time even to glance at so many events, and yet I had no sense of minutes passing. (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978, pp. 49-51)

Ritchie's description of the space/time compression in his NDE is also evident in the experiences of other NDErs (Ring, 1984, pp. 37, 57, and 75-77). This corpus of experiences with space/time compression does not necessarily imply that there is something postmodern about the NDE. Rather, it is the experiential deconstruction of space and time in the NDE that authenticates the postmodern concern with the fragility of our normal perception of space and time.

The space/time compression in postmodernism is experienced partly as a function of rapid technological developments in communications that transcend boundaries around the world. The increased speed of communications tends to reduce the distinction between space and time to the extent that we are beginning to take for granted the minimization of time by space. Great distances pose no barriers to contemporary communication that seems to consume time. But the collapsibility of space and time in the NDE is generally not taken for granted, since NDEs are not daily occurrences, unlike the effects of communications technology. Thus, space/time compression in the NDE is more potent, in the sense that deconstruction is not mediated by any technological means. The NDEr is directly sensitized to the
arbitrariness of the space/time relationship that in postmodernism is likely to be a post hoc critique of reality.

**Near-Death and Subjectivity**

The modern subject is one who speaks with a definitive voice, a rational being who determines empirical truth from the viewpoint of the ego. Self-identity is the identity of this ego rooted to the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") from which has also arisen the sense of an integrated self. The world is therefore encountered and made known from the perspective of this integrated self (Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989). Postmodernism takes a critical stab at the notion of the integrated self. It does this by disparaging the subject as the central reference of all thoughts and actions. Basically, the subject becomes decentered to lose its sense of integrated self-presence.

Deconstruction makes "it impossible for [the] subject to refer to itself in any consistent way," thus "the subject is doomed to perpetual exile from itself" (Løvlie, 1992, p. 124). Subjectivity without a center does not necessarily spell the annihilation of the self, but provides an alternative sense of being that is relative. It means that the hubris of the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* is replaced by a playfulness of changeable roles, each role without the integrated self-presence so vital to the maintenance of modern subjectivity. In practice, the postmodern critique of the subject suggests the transformability of all roles without an obsessive clinging to a fixed identity. As Løvlie put it, "The [postmodern] self is this proliferation of roles, the progressive showing of (sur)faces" (1992, p. 125).

In what way is the decentered subjectivity of postmodernism related to the NDE? Certainly, the NDE itself does not constitute an experience of self-annihilation. Most NDErs are conscious of their own identities as they navigate the nonphysical dimension. They are able to relate to deceased relatives and friends allegedly existing on the "other side," thus suggesting that the NDE does not obliterate self-identities in relation to the presence of significant others. NDErs generally do not lose their sense of subjectivity. On the contrary, they tend to report an increased sense of focus and well being. But their identities undergo a transformation that produces a level of perceiving without ego attachment. Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti (1976) referred to such experiences as *depersonalization*, a syndrome in which individuals seemed to become distanced from their own subjectivity.
In one of their examples concerning a young woman who attempted suicide, they clearly described the experience of equanimity alongside a sense of removal from a fixed identity:

I would be filled with the wisdom of things I'd wondered about but would be myself no longer. I would diffuse, burst apart. . . . My experiences were close to being in no time at all, almost as though time were at a standstill. . . . My strength was centered but scattered. I was stronger because of being more whole, because I was no longer me as I had once known myself. I had a feeling of becoming part of a greater whole. . . . It was a loss of identity, and not a feeling I could relate to the realm of human experience. (Noyes and Kletti, 1976, p. 22, italics added)

This case is not about the fleeting nature of roles addressed by postmodernism, but it accentuates the meaning of decentered subjectivity at the point of death that closely resembles an NDE. The apparent self-fragmentation described by the subject is not unlike the deconstructive approach in postmodernism toward the concept of the integrated self. Her “loss of identity” exemplifies a falling away of a fictitious center to reveal a fluidity of being. Deconstruction of the integrated self facilitates an experience of detachment that eliminates perception on the level of the ego.

In the same article, Noyes and Kletti described a majority of their subjects who survived moments of extreme danger as having a sense of detachment. They quoted a mountain climber who fell 30 feet as saying, “It is difficult to describe the odd third-person viewpoint I seemed to have during the fall” (1976, p. 24). In other words, the experience of detachment allows observations to be made from outside, rather than from within the body. It resembles an out-of-body perspective that has been described by many NDErs. These accounts can be found in the major works on NDEs cited earlier.

The experience of detachment is deconstructive in the sense that a person is able to look at the world without ego involvement and to make observations devoid of the subjectivity found necessary in everyday behavior and relationships. It is as though a person becomes an outsider to his or her own actions without incurring value judgments on his or her observations. Since the perspective of the ego is absent, it is possible for all observations to be taken as objective components of a larger narrative rather than subjective events intrinsic to one’s life. The life review process reported by many NDErs could be construed as an episode of deconstruction in which a person’s entire life can be viewed with total detachment.
The decentered subjectivity of an NDE, whether it is considered depersonalization or detachment, has never been described as an effect of postmodernism. Yet, the "loss of identity" in an NDE, as in Noyes and Kletti's case of the attempted suicide mentioned above, approximates the way first-person subjectivity has been disprivileged in postmodernism. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suggest that the decentered subjectivity of an NDE is an experiential analog of literal deconstruction in postmodernism. What a NDEr expresses as the surreal estrangement of the self, an advocate of postmodernism adumbrates as the absence of unqualified self-presence in textual analysis.

Conclusion

The NDE not only addresses the meaning of death and the afterlife, but also implicitly provides a critique of modern reality through the experiences of space/time compression and decentered subjectivity. However, postmodernism is an intellectual movement representing the conjunction of critical thought from various fields such as art, architecture, philosophy, linguistics, and sociology. It seems to be a provocative paradigm that challenges the assumptions of modernity and has nothing to do with the concerns of death and dying. Yet by inferring parallels between the two, we come to see that there is an intricate relationship between them.

This relationship can be examined as a link between two orders of deconstruction. The NDE represents a first-order deconstruction, since experiences of space/time compression and decentered subjectivity are direct, immediate, and unmediated. Although NDErs are not by definition critics of modern reality, their experiences may put them in a position where they no longer take this reality as a given. For many of them, direct realization through the NDE of transcendent realms constitutes a transformative encounter with a greater reality that surpasses modern existence. On the other hand, postmodernism disputes the truth of modern reality through abstract discussion of the rules underlying normative behavior and perception. Because of its analytical approach to the meaning of reality, postmodernism actualizes a second-order deconstruction that is removed from the experiential mode of encountering phenomena. It treats space/time compression and decentered subjectivity as conceptual problems to be understood as alternatives to the meaning of linear space/time and ego-centered subjectivity.
Yet, both orders of deconstruction are complementary. Without postmodernism as signaling the limits of modern reality, the NDE would likely be considered another anomalous spectacle consigned to the wastebaskets of science. This is not to say that postmodernism is indispensable to the plausibility of the NDE as an insight into transcendent realities. Rather, postmodernism as a second-order deconstruction of modernity provides a mirror image for the NDER's first-order deconstruction of the mundane world. In that respect, both the NDE and postmodernism address the need to reconsider the question of death as an inquiry into the ramparts of modern existence that prevent us from accessing alternative realities.

References