

BRIEF REPORT

Phenomenology of Near-Death Experiences: An Analysis of a Māori Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Near-death experiences (NDEs) have been recorded in the oral and written histories of virtually every culture since antiquity. Based on some of these accounts, attempts have been made to investigate whether the phenomenology of the NDE is cross-culturally variable or similar. The present article contributes to this literature by analyzing the only known historical account of an NDE reported by a Māori individual. Although this account has been previously analyzed for its association with features typically reported in Western NDE accounts, it has not been analyzed for its conformity to prevailing Māori beliefs about the afterlife. The analysis of this single case study suggests the NDE was influenced by cultural beliefs, which supports two converging viewpoints: that NDE phenomenology is universal but expressed in culturally-relative ways and that NDE phenomenology is culture-bound.

KEY WORDS: near-death experiences, phenomenology, Māori, Aotearoa New Zealand, case study, culture-bound, universal

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are evident in the written and oral histories of virtually all cultures since antiquity, with some of the earliest examples recorded in the pre-Christian era from the Sumerians and classical Greeks (Knoblauch, Schmied, & Schnettler, 2001; Schroter-Kunhardt, 1993). Contemporary research indicates the characteristic features of NDEs are consistently reported in NDE accounts, at least in Western cultures (for an overview see Kelly,

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Greyson, & Kelly, 2007). Further studies indicate these features were evident prior to NDEs becoming popularized by the work of Moody (1975; e.g., Athappily, Greyson, & Stevenson, 2006; Long & Long, 2003). This finding has led some authors to suggest that NDEs are a universal phenomenon (e.g., Atwater, 1988; Grosso, 1981).

However, other authors have argued that although NDEs have and continue to be evident across cultures, the phenomenology of the experience may be culture-bound (Kellehear, 1993; Murphy, 2001; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986; Schorer, 1985). A recent analysis by Kellehear (2009) revealed some non-Western NDEs may not be experienced or explained in the same way as Western NDEs. For example, travel through a tunnel does not appear in studied NDE accounts from India, Tibet, and Guam. Out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are not evident in NDEs reported from African and Australian Aboriginals. The life review is not apparent in cases from Hawai'i, Guam, and African cultures. Case studies from Thai (Murphy, 2001) and Melanesian (Counts, 1983) cultures provide compelling analyses of how cultural expectations may play a role in the phenomenology of NDEs.

The purpose of the present article is to analyze a single case study of an NDE reported by an individual of Aotearoa New Zealand Māori descent to investigate whether NDE phenomenology may be at least partially culture-bound. The case has been described by other researchers (e.g., Kellehear, 2001, 2009), with the features of the NDE being compared to NDE accounts reported in Western cultures and a non-Western (Hawaiian) culture. However, previous descriptions of the case have not examined whether the phenomenology of the NDE conforms to Māori cultural expectations or beliefs about what happens when one dies.

Traditional Māori Beliefs About the Afterlife

Arriving from eastern Polynesia over 1,000 years ago, Māori established practices, values, and customs that were permeated by spirituality, hierarchical leadership, safety and risk, and collective advancement (Tassell & Locke, 2012). Beliefs regarding what happens at death were also well established. The arrival of Europeans in the early 1800s facilitated a substantial numerical decline of Māori as a people, such that Māori are now an ethnic minority in Aotearoa New Zealand, comprising approximately 15% of the total population (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Years of "colonisation, exploitation, and

oppression” (Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006, p. 332) facilitated the erosion of cultural institutions, including language and traditional ways of healing and living. Despite this decline, traditional cultural beliefs and customs regarding what happens at death (such as *tangi-hanga* [funeral or death rituals]), are still evident to varying degrees (Dansey, 1992; Jacob, Nikora, & Ritchie, 2012; Nikora, Masters, & Te Awekotuku, 2012).

The heterogeneity of contemporary Māori, combined with slight variations according to *iwi* (tribe), *hapū* (sub-tribe), and *whānau* (immediate and/or extended family), make it difficult to provide a definitive overview of Māori death and afterlife philosophies (Ngata, 2005). Much Māori knowledge is intimately intertwined with notions of spirituality and *tapu* (sacredness), the content of which is beyond the scope of this article (Manihera, Pewhairangi, & Rangihau, 1992). Consequently, the following synopsis is not comprehensive and does not focus on Māori bereavement rituals, processes, and arrangements that occur following the death of an individual (for an overview, see Ngata, 2005). Rather, the focus here is on beliefs regarding what happens to the consciousness, soul, or spirit of an individual after physical death and on the viewpoint that the spirit departs its physical form at death and makes a return journey to *Hawaiiki*, the place of Māori origin.

Traditional Māori view dictates that all individuals are imbued with a *wairua* (spirit) that leaves the physical body at death (Ngata, 2005). The Māori custom of not leaving the body unattended until burial (Dansey, 1992; Nikora et al., 2012) is derived from the belief that the deceased’s *wairua* remains disembodied but in close proximity for several days after physical death. The return journey of the individual’s *wairua* to *Hawaiiki* is believed to commence once the physical body has been laid to rest by burial. This return journey takes a specific direction: always towards the northernmost point of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, to a place known as *Te Rerenga Wairua* – the Leaping Off Place of Spirits.

Once the *wairua* has traveled to *Te Rerenga Wairua*, it is believed to make a ritualistic descent to the underworld via a specific route. Firstly, the *wairua* cleanses itself in the spring known as *Te Waiora ā Tāne* (Life waters of Tāne). Traditional Māori believed that if the *wairua* journeyed beyond this spring, there could be no returning to the physical body, suggesting the spring serves as a border between the spiritual and physical realms, or a point of no return. After bathing in *Te Waiora ā Tāne*, the *wairua* plunges down the rocky cliff that is the northernmost tip of the North Island, to *Te Aka*. *Te Aka* is the

term used to refer to a root of the sole pohutukawa tree that clings to the edge of the cliff and that is rumored to be centuries old. Having descended down Te Aka, the wairua finally meets the ocean where, just beneath the surface, the place known as *Maurianuku* is located. Maurianuku is believed to be the entrance to the underworld and the afterlife. From Maurianuku, the wairua travels to Te Manawatawhi (“last breath”), which is the largest of the Three Kings Islands, and takes a final look back at Aotearoa New Zealand before continuing on its journey to Hawaiiiki (Mitcalfe, 1961). The remainder of the journey of the wairua is unknown.

The Case

The case to be analyzed is that of an indigenous Māori woman named Nga. Notably, it is the first known published NDE account of a Māori individual. Described by Michael King (1985), the experience apparently occurred in the early 1960s after Nga became seriously ill, although it was recounted to King in the early 1970s. The account given to King is quoted here in full:

I became seriously ill for the only time in my life. I became so ill that my spirit actually passed out of my body. My family believed I was dead because my breathing stopped. They took me to the marae, laid out my body and began to call people for the tangi. Meanwhile, in my spirit, I had hovered over my head then left the room and travelled northwards, towards the Tail of the Fish. I passed over the Waikato River, across the Manukau, over Ngāti Whatua, Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa and Te Aupouri, until at last I came to Te Renga Wairua, the Leaping-Off Place of Spirits. I cleansed myself in the weeping spring and then descended to a ledge from which hung Te Aka, the pohutukawa root. Here I crouched. Below me was Maurianuku, the entrance to the underworld, covered by a curtain of seaweed. I began to kāranga to let my tūpuna know I had come. Then I prepared to grasp the root and slide down to the entrance. But a voice stopped me. It was Mahuta. “Who is it?” he asked. “Ko au,” I said. “It is I, Ngakahikatea.” “Whom do you seek?” he questioned me further. “My parents. My old people. I have come to be with my tūpuna.” “They are not here,” said Mahuta. “They do not want you yet. Eat nothing and go back where you came from until they are ready. Then I shall send for you.” So I did not leap off. I rose and returned to my body and my people in Waikato. I passed over all the places and things I had seen on the way. My family and those who had assembled from Waahi for the tangi were most surprised when I breathed again and sat up. So it is that I live on. Because the spirits of my dead will not claim me. I shall not die until they do. (King, 1985, p. 87–88)

Congruence with Māori Beliefs

A number of features of Nga's NDE conform to traditional Māori beliefs about what happens to the wairua at death, whereas several others do not. Firstly, Nga described her spirit leaving her body and travelling northwards towards the "Tail of the Fish." These aspects of the NDE conform to Māori belief that the wairua, or spirit, becomes disembodied at death and eventually makes a journey northwards. In Māori mythology, the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand is referred to as a large fish, with the northernmost part of the island representing the fish's tail, which is known as *Te-Hiku-o-te-Ika* in the Māori language (Mills, 2005). Therefore, Nga's reference to the direction of her departure suggests her wairua was traveling toward the northernmost tip of the North Island, to Te Rerenga Wairua.

The narrative indicates Nga's family took her to the *marae* (traditional gathering place) and laid her body out for her *tangi* (also referred to as *tangihanga* by Māori). Such customs are typical in Māori culture with regard to arrangements for the deceased (Ngata, 2005; Nikora et al., 2010). However, it is unclear whether Nga observed these events from a disembodied state; whether they were recounted to her; or whether, upon regaining consciousness, she made assumptions about what had occurred. If she had observed the events from a disembodied state, this experience would suggest Nga's wairua remained in close proximity to her physical body for several days, thereby conforming to Māori beliefs. If, however, the events were recounted to her, or she surmised what occurred to her physical body without observing them from a disembodied position, this implies Nga's NDE departs from the traditional Māori belief regarding the wairua remaining near the deceased's body until burial.

Nga described travelling over a range of geographical locations and traditional iwi regions. The order in which she identified these regions conforms with their sequence when travelling northwards from the geographical location where Nga was residing, to Te Rerenga Wairua (for a map of iwi areas see Te Aka Kumara o Aotearoa, 2013). Although Nga's narrative indicates her wairua traveled over these regions, it is uncertain whether she had any imagery or other perception of the physical features of each, thereby allowing her to identify them, or whether previous knowledge informed her descriptions of the areas she would have expected to pass by on a journey northwards.

Upon reaching Te Rerenga Wairua, Nga explained how she cleansed herself in the weeping spring before descending to Te Aka. Although

the spring is not specifically identified by Nga as Te Waiora ā Tāne, it is assumed it is the same spring that the Māori refer to, where ritual cleansing should take place before descent to Te Aka. The act of cleansing followed by the descent to Te Aka are consistent with Māori views about the sequence of occurrences at this stage of the wairua's journey. However, in contrast to the traditional belief of the spring as a border, beyond which if one advanced one would be unable to return to one's physical body, Nga's wairua reportedly progressed beyond Te Waiora ā Tāne and still returned to her body.

After reaching Te Aka, Nga described her wairua crouching at the entrance to the underworld and commencing a *kāranga* (call) to her *tūpuna* (ancestors). The *kāranga* is a traditional act performed to announce one's arrival or to greet visitors, such as during the process of *pōwhiri* (ceremonial greeting), and may also be performed at various other occasions, including tangihanga (Karetu, 1992). It is congruent with cultural expectations for Nga's wairua to perform this act at this point of the journey, to indicate her arrival at the entrance to the underworld.

Nga identified the voice that had questioned her wairua as belonging to Mahuta. It is not known exactly who Mahuta is in this account, but it is likely Nga was referring to the god of the forest, Tāne Māhuta. In Māori mythology, Tāne Māhuta is implicated in the creation story, facilitating the separation of his parents Pāpātuanuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father) and, thus, bringing light to the world. He also facilitated the creation of the first human by fashioning earth into the shape of a woman and breathing life into her (Marsden, 1992). The presence of Mahuta as an authoritative figure instructing Nga at this point of the journey is congruent with Māori mythology in which Tāne Māhuta is represented as a commanding and effective leader as well as an instigator, facilitator, or determiner of physical life.

Discussion

NDEs are typically described by those who have them as profound, life-changing experiences, the content of which is often difficult to explain in words (Moody, 1975). Given their ineffability, it is logical to suggest the phenomenology of NDEs is similar across cultures but explained using the cultural models individuals have available to them. It is equally plausible that the perception one has died leads the NDE to be constructed in a way that sensibly conforms with cultural beliefs and expectations about death and the afterlife, thus providing more

comfort and meaning to the individual. This current analysis suggests Nga's NDE supports both of these viewpoints.

Specifically, previous analysis of this case (see Kellehear, 2001, 2009) indicates features of the experience are similar to those typically described in NDE accounts. These include one's consciousness functioning apart from the physical body, observing the physical world, sometimes traveling away from the vicinity of the physical body, encountering spiritual entities, and being told by spiritual entities that it is not one's time to die and that one must return to physical existence.

Nga's NDE occurred and was recounted before the publication of Moody's (1975) work, when the characteristic features of NDEs became popularized, suggesting the elements she described could not have been reconstructed as a result of exposure to common information about NDEs. Similarly, Nga herself reported having little contact with European individuals or society prior to meeting King and recounting her experience (King, 1985). This cultural isolation suggests Nga's account could not have been reconstructed based on an ideal Western perception about what an NDE should constitute. Instead, the features of Nga's experience are similar to those typically described in other NDE accounts but were explained in a way that made sense to Nga according to the cultural environment she resided in. This point supports arguments and previous research about the phenomenology of NDEs being similar across cultures and thus possibly universal, although the *interpretation* of the experience is in accordance with cultural belief systems (Atwater, 1988; Grosso, 1981; Osis & Haraldsson, 1977; Ring, 1980).

Alternatively, this single case study suggests the NDE was *influenced* and possibly constructed by Māori cultural expectations regarding what happens at death. With a few exceptions, features of Nga's NDE closely complied with Māori cultural beliefs related to the spirit leaving the physical body and making a journey to Te Rerenga Wairua. Nga had little contact with European individuals or society at the time of her NDE, suggesting the socio-cultural environment she lived in was based on traditional Māori cultural values, philosophies, and customs. As a result, Nga is likely to have been heavily exposed to and endorsed beliefs about death and the afterlife. This enculturation would have given her a psychological frame of reference about what to expect when one dies, from which the NDE could have been created and informed. This point supports the argument and previous research that her NDE was constructed according to cultural condi-

tioning (Sutherland, 1995) and that the phenomenology of the experience was culture-bound (Kellehear, 1993; Murphy, 2001; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986).

Although this analysis appears to support the convergent viewpoints that NDEs are universal and that they are culture-bound, certain concerns limit the extent to which this single case study can be interpreted. Among these concerns is that no researcher has conducted organized studies or even presented other case studies describing reports of NDEs by Māori individuals. Because of this void in the professional literature, it is difficult to determine whether Nga's NDE is representative of the phenomenology of NDEs experienced by other Māori during the same historical period.

As Kellehear (2001) indicated, methodological issues restrict the extent information derived from historical accounts can be interpreted. For example, the NDE is reported by Nga retrospectively and described by a non-Māori individual, suggesting the re-telling and interpretation of the experience may be subject to bias. Given Nga's lack of exposure to Europeans, it is likely *Te Reo Māori* (Māori language) would have been her language of communication. It is possible—even likely—that Nga recounted her NDE to King and that he subsequently translated it to English. If so, the account could be subject to misinformation due to translational difficulties, which may explain some discrepancies between Nga's NDE and Māori beliefs, such as the ability of Nga's wairua to proceed past Te Waiora ā Tāne and still return to her physical body.

Generalization more widely as representative of Māori NDEs, whether historical or contemporary, is also limited. The historical period when Nga's NDE occurred differs substantially from the cultural milieu of contemporary Māori. Since Nga's time, the influence of colonization, education, experience with racism, lack of access to culturally knowledgeable people, and acculturation may have rendered traditional beliefs about the afterlife not meaningful to, known by, or endorsed by all people affiliated with the Māori cultural group in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand society (Nikora et al., 2012). For example, urban dwellers may be hindered more than rural dwellers from exposure to such beliefs (Durie, 2008). Some Māori strongly endorse concepts of the afterlife espoused by Christianity more than traditional Māori beliefs, whereas others combine both belief systems or do not endorse either (Elsmore, 1989). All these factors could influence the phenomenology of more contemporary Māori NDEs.

Future researchers who investigate the extent to which contempo-

rary Māori NDE reports conform to traditional and/or Westernized beliefs would provide more information on NDE phenomenology and the degree to which it is culture-bound. Similar research conducted with other indigenous and non-Western cultures around the globe could also advance knowledge in this area of scholarly inquiry. Such inquiry can help to clarify the extent to which NDEs are culturally constructed and/or point to universal phenomena that people everywhere might expect upon their deaths.

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