

H. J. Irwin Responds

To the Editor:

V. Krishnan's letter contains a number of interesting observations but I will focus here on comments pertaining directly to my own research.

It would appear that Krishnan and I basically are in agreement on the course of sensory information processing during an OBE. A minor

misunderstanding evidently has arisen from our different interpretations of the term "sensory deprivation." Like other psychologists I take sensory deprivation to entail a circumstance in which stimuli impinging on the individual's sense organs are both minimal and unchanging. It was under that definition of the term that I suggested that sensory deprivation might not be the fundamental cause of the OBE. Krishnan on the other hand wants to include sensory bombardment and extreme elation under the rubric of "sensory deprivation" because these situations also are known to be associated with decreased "input to the brain." What both Krishnan and I are saying here is that the OBE is characterized by an attenuation of sensory information processing by the brain and that this may be due either to the low level of stimuli impinging on the sensory receptors or to inhibition of the flow of sensory information at the level of the reticular system. I have depicted this process in terms of the cognitive construct of absorption (Irwin, 1985), but it is of course equally legitimate to seek to formulate it in a neurophysiological context. The current advantage of the absorption model is that there are hard data on individual differences in both the capacity and the need for absorbed mentation and on the pertinence of these individual differences to the OBE.

For reasons educed in my original paper (Irwin, 1987) I do not believe the perceptual quality of OBEs of people with partial visual deficits will substantially illuminate the nature of the OBE. It is on that ground that visual OBEs in those totally blind from birth are of such theoretical interest. In this regard I would like to acknowledge a letter from Henry W. Pierce (personal communication, February 13, 1988) drawing my attention to an apparent OBE experienced by the totally blind and deaf woman Helen Keller (1972, p. 71). Keller very briefly describes her impression that her "soul" had visited Athens while her body had been sitting quietly in her library. Some researchers might be inclined to argue that this case supports the ecsomatic theory of the OBE, but unfortunately for this view Keller's account does not make any reference to *visual* sensations during her experience. The case therefore can be accommodated also by some form of imaginal theory, particularly one that takes cognizance of kinesthetic and somaesthetic imagery (Irwin, 1985).

References

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