LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Investigating Iranian Shiite Muslim Near-Death Experiences: Background, Methodological Considerations, and Preliminary Comments

To the Editor:

Extensive prior near-death experience (NDE) research suggests that NDEs are explainable only by consciousness occurring independently from the functioning of the physical brain. Despite this evidence, authors who are skeptical of NDEs continue to believe a materialist explanation that NDEs are entirely due to physical brain function. If physical brain function alone caused NDEs, then it would be reasonable to expect that the contents of NDEs would significantly reflect the cultural and religious backgrounds of the near-death experiencers (NDErs). Contrarily, if the contents of NDEs from very different cultures and religions are significantly similar, this finding would support the concept that NDEs are bona fide experiences of an unearthly immaterial realm and would argue against a materialist explanation of NDE. Thus, investigation of NDEs from non-Western countries provides important evidence in the ongoing materialist vs. non-materialist debate about why NDEs occur. Non-Western NDEs may be defined as NDEs from countries that are not of predominantly Jewish or Christian heritage (Holden, Long, & MacLurg, 2009).

In the first 30 years of NDE research, it was estimated that at least 65 research studies were published that investigated nearly 3,500 NDErs, predominantly from Western countries (Holden, Greyson, & James, 2009). During those same 30 years, investigations of only approximately 275–300 non-Western NDEs were published (Kellehear, 2009). Studying non-Western NDEs is difficult (Long, 2010, pp. 160–162). Most previously published non-Western NDE studies had recognized methodological limitations. These limitations included issues of accessing non-Western NDErs, language translation, differing definitions of NDE, inclusion of second-person NDE accounts, and a lack of use of Greyson’s (1983) NDE Scale (Long, 2010, pp. 154–158). A recent analysis of the published scholarly periodical literature on NDEs in-
icates that a dearth of attention to Muslim NDEs persists (Loseu, Holden, Kinsey, & Christian, 2013). Thus, there is an ongoing need for investigators to conduct studies of non-Western NDEs with methodology that, to the greatest extent possible, addresses the difficulty of studying these NDEs and overcomes the methodological issues inherent in studying them.

In a 2009 Guest Editorial in this Journal, Joel Kreps concluded that Muslim NDEs “appear to be quite rare in fact” (Kreps, 2009, p. 84). In a later Journal issue, two separate investigators responded with reports on Muslim NDEs. In the first article, Michael Nahm and Joachim Nicolay (2010) reported eight Muslim NDEs and concluded that “although the documentation standard of the available cases is generally low, these accounts indicate that structure and contents of NDEs from many non-Western Muslim communities are largely similar to those reported in the Western NDE literature” (p. 255). In the second article, Cheryl Fracasso, Seyed Aleyasin, Harris Friedman, and Scott Young (2010) reported on a survey of Muslim NDErs in Arak City, Iran. These investigators concluded:

> Our results suggest that Muslim NDEs may actually be quite common, as they are in the West, and may not be especially different in their key features from Western NDEs and therefore not heavily influenced by cultural variations, including prior religious or spiritual beliefs. (p. 271)

Recently, one of us (Ghasemiannejad) began investigating Iranian Shiite Muslim NDEs as part of studies toward obtaining a Ph.D. in Psychology at the Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz in Iran. Participation in the study was solicited by announcements in Isfahan University. As part of this investigation, a website (www.irande.org) was established and posted in the Persian language to help educate Iranians about NDEs and encourage participation in the study. The study questionnaire is posted on the irande.org website. The questionnaire asks a variety of demographic questions and includes the NDE Scale translated into Persian (Lange, 2004). Prior investigators have described development of a Persian NDE Scale (Fracasso, Aleyasin, Friedman, & Young, 2010a). For those interested, Google has an application that allows automatic translation of non-English websites into English (http://toolbar.google.com).

To develop the Persian version of the NDE Scale for this study, the questions in the NDE Scale were translated into Persian and the translated version reviewed by two professors at Isfahan University.
After their corrections, the draft of the Persian version of the NDE Scale was sent to Farnoosh Nouri, an Iranian American NDE scholar in Dallas, Texas, whose Ph.D. dissertation research addressed electromagnetic aftereffects of NDEs (Nouri & Holden, 2008) and who now teaches at the University of North Texas and Argosy University. Nouri's and others' reviews were incorporated into the final version of the Persian NDE Scale that was used for this study. We recognize that translation of the somewhat complex NDE Scale questions may inherently result in some differences in the meaning of the questions between the English NDE Scale and the Persian NDE Scale.

Our survey included demographic questions regarding age, gender, educational level, length of time since the close brush with death, and circumstances around the experience such as type of accident, illness, or injury. For study participants who scored 7 or higher on the Persian NDE scale, we calculated mean scores for the total NDE Scale and the four subscales (cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental). We also calculated the percentage of NDEs with specific NDE features, for example, out-of-body experience, seeing an unearthly light, and/or life review.

As of the time of this writing, 39 participants have completed the survey. Of these, 26 scored 7 or higher on the Persian NDE Scale. After additional NDErs complete the survey, we plan a detailed analysis of the NDE narratives and responses to the survey questions. Preliminary results from our investigation of Iranian Shiite Muslim NDEs suggest that Muslim NDEs do occur and that they are not rare. This study is too preliminary to form conclusions about any possible similarities or differences in comparison of the NDEs of our study group with typical Western NDEs.

An important purpose of this letter is to encourage researchers with an interest in studying non-Western NDEs. We believe that carefully designed studies can attract enough non-Western NDErs to allow important and meaningful results from the investigation. Another purpose of this letter is to encourage communication among people with an interest in scholarly cross-cultural study of NDEs and non-Western NDEs. Those with such interests are encouraged to contact the authors of this letter at the email addresses listed below. It might be helpful to future investigators of non-Western NDEs to have access to the Persian language version of the NDE Scale used in this study. The NDE Scale has been translated into over 20 different languages on the Near Death Experience Research Foundation website (www
nderf.org) and is freely available to any investigators interested in the scholarly cross-cultural study of NDEs. NDERF is committed to increasing awareness of scholarly cross-cultural NDE investigations and can assist by posting contact information for such studies on the appropriate language section of the NDERF website.

It is hoped that this and future investigations of non-Western NDEs will advance understanding of them. NDErs in non-Western cultures might face specific challenges as a result of having their experiences in cultures that are not widely aware of NDEs. If so, studies of non-Western NDEs may advance appreciation of these NDErs’ challenges and hopefully help them address such challenges to the greatest extent possible.

Results from previously published studies suggest that there may be a striking similarity in the content of NDEs worldwide, including in non-Western countries (Long, 2010, pp. 160–170). If this finding is substantiated by further investigations, the awareness that people from all cultures have similar experiences at the time of death could be an important tool for cross-cultural understanding and dialogue. NDEs might be an important spiritual concept that could help humanity toward understanding and global peace.

References


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