

Phenomenology of Near-death Experiences: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract Near-death experiences (NDEs) include a set of subjective experiences encountered by people who were close to death or were faced with life-threatening situations. Reports have suggested that the phenomenology of NDE might differ across cultures. This article is aimed at providing an updated phenomenological perspective by comparing NDEs in a cross-cultural context. We compared the various descriptions of NDEs from a phenomenological perspective. There were similarities between particular cultures, which differed from typical western European experiences. This article concludes that although there are common themes, there are also reported differences in NDEs. The variability across cultures is most likely to be due to our interpretation and verbalizing of such esoteric events through the filters of language, cultural experiences, religion, education and their influence on our belief systems either shedding influence as an individual variable or more often perhaps by their rich interplay between these factors.

Key words cross-cultural study • near-death experience • phenomenology
• society

People who have been close to death or been faced with life-threatening situations have reported profound experiences. Similar experiences have also been reported by individuals who were thought to be clinically dead but have regained consciousness later. These phenomena have been extensively studied and were popularized by the pioneering work published by Raymond Moody (1975) who termed them near-death experiences (NDEs) (see also Hampe, 1979). Fenwick and Fenwick (1995) published a comprehensive survey based upon a large sample of British experiences, which contributed to popularizing characteristic features of NDEs. The same experiences are also seen among children (Morse & Perry 1992). While most studies have emphasized predominantly good feelings and transcendental effects, Atwater (1994) has summarized reports of unpleasant effects associated with NDEs.

The NDE reports that are available in the English literature have drawn mainly from Anglo-European experiences. A recent survey from Australia found that 8% of the general population reported a NDE (Perera, Padmasekara, & Belanti, 2005). In order to explore the phenomena as reported in other cultures, some cross-cultural studies have been performed (Carr, 1993; Ellwood, 2000; Fox, 2003; Giovetti, 1982; Groth-Marnat, 1994; Kellehear, 1996; Lundahl, 2000; Murphy, 2001; Schorer, 1985). Studies by Kellehear and Irwin (1990) and Kellehear (1993, 1996) have examined the influence of beliefs and culture on the phenomena, noting the importance of incorporating social and cultural factors alongside the biochemical and physiological explanations. Paulson (1999) has attempted to extend the theories by advocating a dimensional model in which the cultural, spiritual and physical aspects are independent factors and equally important. Athappily, Greyson, and Stevenson (2006) challenged the view NDE experience accounts are influenced by prevailing cultural models. Holden and Christian (2005) noted the relative paucity of studies in certain geographic regions, religions and among indigenous cultures. Badham (1997) suggested the value of exploring NDE in culturally diverse hospital populations.

Given the prevalence of NDE in the community, healing professionals need to be aware of how individuals from different cultural backgrounds may experience and describe the phenomena. Badham and Ballard (1996) discuss the importance of an integrated approach for dealing with people who have experienced NDEs. The current review was conducted to explore the common elements and delineate differences in NDEs among people from different cultures when compared with the prototype described by Moody (1975).

METHOD

The literature on NDE was identified by a search of five databases, Psych-Info, Medline, Pubmed, Medscape and InfoTrieve, up to December 2004. Key words used to search for the references were 'near-death experience/s,' 'culture and near-death experience/s,' and 'cross-cultural near-death experience/s.' Because this article specifically focuses on the cross-cultural aspect of NDEs, the results were limited to studies that made mention of specific ethnic or non-western cultural groups or geographic regions. Relevant books and book chapters were identified by cross-referencing. The search for narratives focussed on NDEs specifically and did not include 'death,' 'out of body experiences' (OBE), or 'death bed visions.'

RESULTS

Phenomenological details of NDEs across different cultures are summarized in the Table 1. In comparison with western NDEs, the non-western NDEs vary in several ways, particularly in the presence of specific cultural-religious figures and the distinct absence of certain core features identified in the dominant NDE prototype. There were notable similarities between the experiences of the Mapuche people and that of Hawaiians, with both having dominant themes of landmarks such as volcanoes and no evidence of any life review, or visions of light. There were also similarities between the experiences reported in Thailand and India where there did not appear to be any reports of tunnels, landmarks and visions of light. In addition, there did not appear to be a meeting of deceased acquaintances; however, a strong presence of religious figures was noted. In the studies and narratives reviewed, OBE were documented only when a study clearly described the experience as OBE.

NARRATIVE 1: MAPUCHE EXPERIENCE

He was dead for two days, and it is said that he went into the volcano and came back. He said that all his dead acquaintances, his own parents, his children, his wife, and other children he did not know were all in there. There was a German gentlemen reading and writing in big books. When the German saw him, he asked what he wanted. 'I am following my son,' said the old man. 'What is his name?' asked the German gentleman. 'Francisco Leufuhue.' He called the guard and ordered him to inform Francisco . . . And a distant voice answered . . . Then he passed through a wooden gate . . . He passed the next . . . another . . . and after the fourth, Francisco arrived at the German gentleman's table . . . 'Your Dad is looking for you.' Old Fermin approached his son . . . saying: 'You will receive me because I do not wish to live any more where I am living now' . . . 'No, Dad . . . it is not time

TABLE 1
Phenomenology of NDEs

Country	Study	No. of subjects	Nature of study	Results
Africa	Morse and Perry (1992)	15	Narrative	Deceased persons/spirits, out-of-body experience, incorrect person/time, highway, stars, negative emotions
China	Zhi-ying and Jian-xun (1992)	81	Retrospective	Religious figures – good, evil, deceased persons/spirits, visions of landscapes/realm, tunnel, light, estrangement from body, life review, out-of-body experience, sounds, scents, unusual bodily sensations
Germany	Knoblauch, Schmied, and Schnettler (2001)	82	Narrative	Heaven, deceased persons, door/gate, positive emotions, visions of landscapes/realm, negative emotions, life review
Hawaii	Kellehear (2001)	1	Narrative	Deceased persons/spirits, incorrect person/time, visions of landscapes/realm, flying
India	Pasricha and Stevenson (1986)	16	Prospective	Religious figures – good, evil, deceased persons/spirits, incorrect person/time, residual marks on body
	Pasricha (1993)	13	Prospective	Religious figures – good, evil, out-of-body experience, deceased persons/spirits, incorrect person/time, residual marks on body
Israel	Pasricha (1995)	16	Prospective	Deceased persons/spirits, incorrect person/time, residual marks on body
Mapuche	Abramovitch (1988)	1	Narrative	Out-of-body experience, deceased persons/spirits, incorrect person/time, light
	Gómez-Jeria (1993)	1	Narrative	Deceased persons/spirits, incorrect person/time, door/gate, visions of landscapes/realm
Native American Netherlands	Schorer (1985)	2	Narratives	Visions of landscapes/realm, out-of-body experience, animals, colour, fire
	Lommel, Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich (2001)	62	Prospective	Deceased persons/spirits, positive emotions, out-of-body experience, tunnel, light, colours, visions of landscapes/realm, life review
Thailand	Murphy (2001)	10	Retrospective	Religious figures – good, evil, deceased persons/spirits, out of body experience, tunnel, hell, incorrect person/time, animals

for you to arrive here by your own will. When the time comes, I myself shall go to the side of the house to look for you. Then you will come. Now, go away.' At this moment, Don Fermin woke up and opened his eyes.

(Calvo de Guzman, 1992, pp. 47–48, in Gómez-Jeria, 1993, pp. 220–221)

NARRATIVE 2: HAWAIIAN EXPERIENCE

I died, as you know. I seemed to leave my body and stand beside it, looking down on what was me . . . I gazed at my body . . . then turned and walked away. I left the house and village and walked on and on to the next village, and there I found crowds of people . . . with hundreds of houses and thousands of men, women and children. Some of them I knew and spoke to me, although that seemed strange, for I knew they were dead, but nearly all were strangers. They were all so happy! They seemed not to have a care; nothing to trouble them. Joy was in every face, and happy laughter and bright, loving words were on every tongue.

(Thrum, 1907, pp. 59–60, in Kellehear, 2001, p. 32)

. . . they said, 'You must go back to your body. You are not to die yet.' I did not want to go back. I begged and prayed to be allowed to stay with them, but they said, 'No, you must go back; and if you don't go willingly, we will make you go.' I cried and tried to stay, but they drove me back, even beating me when I stopped and would not go on . . . I was driven over the road I had come, back through all those happy people . . . they were still joyous . . . but when they saw that I was not allowed to stay, they turned on me . . . I went, weeping . . . till I reached my home and stood by my body again.

(Thrum, 1907, p. 61, in Kellehear, 2001, p. 32)

NARRATIVE 3: ISRAELI EXPERIENCE

. . . They said that I had had a heart attack; they said that I was in an Intensive Care Unit; that I had been unconscious for an extended period . . . I did not believe I was unconscious. I remember that as I sank down, I felt that I was sinking and rolling . . . as I continued to sink, the darkness around me thickened. Fear took hold of me! . . . But all around me was only the void. I surrendered to my fate . . . With a broken heart, I cried out, 'From the depths I call to you o Lord. . . ?'

(Psalm 130, in Abramovitch, 1988, p. 177).

. . . The fall turned into a soft gentle landing . . . I saw nothing . . . I shouted for help, but heard nothing, not even the sound of my own cry. Suddenly . . . even the slightest motion . . . propelled me upwards . . . There I was again. Everything was familiar. . . I noticed someone was lying there on the floor . . . I knew him . . . He was none other than myself.

Suddenly I realised I was not alone. Many like me began to appear . . . I was surprised by the brilliance of light that had no source . . . I felt good. I was happy to be there with them, among them . . . through thinking alone, we understood one another. He explained to me that there is no 'up' and no

'down' . . . no space and no time . . . I remembered that self of mine, that had been. I felt sorry, for I knew that he could not stand such mystic experiences without being hurt . . . As I approached the hill, I noticed somebody was standing on the peak . . . It was my father . . . behind him stood my brother . . . Father looked at me . . . 'What are you doing here?' . . . I asked of him, 'Please father, help me, stretch out your hand and pull me up.' 'What are you doing here?' he repeated. 'I brought tools with me . . . I want to paint and to engrave on the rock of this hill the verse "Remember, you shall love the stranger, the orphan and the widow."' 'What nonsense,' he said . . . How can material objects convey a spiritual idea? Father's face grew furious and he reapproached me, 'You and your foolishness! Now? At this time? The hour is very late. Go back, my son, lest it be too late.'

. . . I lost my balance. I slipped and fell. I turned my head. I looked at Father. A gentle smile passed over his lips and his image began to dissolve and disappear, as well as my brother's image.

(Abramovitch, 1988, pp. 177–180)

NARRATIVE 4: THAI EXPERIENCE

I thought of my family, but I could not see any way to get back to them. The voice told me that I would not see them . . . Then I saw a woman wearing green clothes. She had long hair, and spoke so sweetly. She said to me: 'This is your food. Please eat. We have a long walk ahead of us.' . . . There were fried eggs, an omelette, beef curry, chicken curry, and candied eggs . . . prepared just as my mother had made them for me . . . I became thirsty. I told this woman that I wanted some water. She said that there was no water for me here, because I had never donated anything to drink to the monks or to a temple . . . I would [sic] never forget to donate cool drinks to the monks I went to visit. After a long walk with this angelic woman, I came home, where I revived. I was so thirsty.

(Suwannathat, n.d., pp. 171–203, in Murphy, 2001, p. 165).

NARRATIVE 5: INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Four black messengers came and held me. I asked: 'Where are you taking me?' They took me and seated me near the god. My body had become small. There was an old lady sitting there. She had a pen in hand, and the clerks had a heap of books in front of them. I was summoned . . . one of the clerks said, 'We don't need Chhajju Bania (trader). We had asked for Chhajju Kumhar (potter). Push him back and bring the other man. He (meaning Chhajju Bania) has some life remaining.' I asked the clerks to give me some work to do, but not to send me back. Yamraj (the god of death) was there sitting on a high chair with a white beard and wearing yellow clothes. He asked me, 'What do you want?' I told him that I wanted to stay there. He asked me to extend my hand. I don't remember whether he gave me something or not. Then I was pushed down and revived.

(Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986, p. 167)

NARRATIVE 6: AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

I was attacked by a lioness in the bush. I had seen beautiful cubs behind a shrub and without much thinking I tried to catch one of the cubs. Suddenly from behind me came the lioness leaping in the midair. Before I realized what was happening, the lioness had dug its claws into the right side of my chest and was beginning to tear me apart. Fortunately my elder brother who was with me threw a spear coated with some poison at the lioness. It struck the lioness right in the throat. The lioness suddenly became limp and fell to the ground. My brother came to my side and tied the wound up with his shirt to arrest the bleeding. He asked me if I was all right. As I was trying to say, 'yes,' I could see myself going into some kind of a trance. A highway suddenly opened up before me. It seemed to be going endlessly into the sky. Along it were a lot of stars, also spreading up to the sky. Each time I tried to get on the highway the stars would block my way. I just stood there not knowing what to do. After a while the highway and stars disappeared. I woke up and found myself in a hospital bed. [I believe] it was a bad omen, because when my brother got home he found my mother very ill and she died the next day.

(Morse & Perry, 1992, p. 122)

DISCUSSION

The literature on NDE is difficult to interpret due to the varied nature of the samples, small sample sizes, lack of objective means of collecting data, and lack of discussion of cultural context. In addition, translations of NDE narratives into English may have lost cultural meanings that are evident in the original language (Groth-Marnat, 1994). At present there are no external validating criteria against which these experiences could be verified.

Several theoretical frameworks, primarily from biology, have been invoked to explain NDE phenomena (Blackmore, 1993a; Peake, 2004). Karl Jansen (2000) offered a biochemical explanation for NDE based on the effects of exposure to ketamine (Jansen, 2000). Blanke and colleagues (Blanke, Ortigue, Landis, & Seeck, 2002) reported phenomena similar to NDE with stimulation of right angular gyrus of the brain. Woerlee (2004) explained NDEs following cardiac resuscitation on the basis of human physiology. Several studies have confirmed the existence of core NDE elements suggesting a biological basis (Lange, Greyson, & Houran, 2004; McLendon, 2005).

Other writers have emphasized the cultural shaping of NDEs (Ellwood, 2000). Carr (1993) noted that a distinct difference between Euro-American NDEs and the literature reflected in the Tibetan books of the dead, is the emphasis in the former on God's forgiveness and loving acceptance in contrast to Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on Karma's fear

inducing judgment. Carr (1993) and Lee (2003) argue that the dominant views of the Christian church have shaped the content of people's NDEs over history.

A study conducted by Gómez-Jeria (1993) examining NDEs in the Mapuche people in South America explored how religious beliefs and historical events contributed to individuals' reports of NDE. Many narratives had themes relating to a volcano where 'dead people' were found. The Mapuche believe that life continues beyond death in a body that is an exact double of the body during life, preserving all the characteristics of the individual at the time of death, including the same needs. Visions of deceased friends and relatives together with other people were common features of their NDE.

The Mapuche narrative presented here included a vision of a 'German gentleman' in the after life. This feature may reflect the German colonization in 1850 of the part of Chile from which this narrative came (Gómez-Jeria, 1993). Similar influences are seen in the experience of an American who had a NDE while with Sai Baba in India, who reported that he was brought back to life by Sai Baba (Sandweiss, 1975). Clearly, both past and current cultural environments may contribute to shaping the content of NDE experiences (Shiels, 1978). However, Abramovitch (1988) described an Israeli account of a NDE, which was culturally dissonant, demonstrating how personal experience and cultural beliefs may clash.

Murphy (2001) examined ten NDEs collected in Thailand and explored the notion that phenomenology of NDEs is not determined by a person's culture, but rather reflects that person's expectations of what death would be like. In contrast to other accounts of NDEs, the Thai accounts had clear differences in the content and themes, including references to Karma and to temples, monks and traditional foods. Interestingly, there was a sense of punishment portrayed in this experience, which could possibly be construed in a variety of ways depending upon the meaning placed upon the terms 'judgement,' 'lack of donation,' and the statement 'sentenced me to many rebirths.'

Differences between NDEs in western and eastern cultures are highlighted by the experience of overwhelming love and bliss in the presence of the Light and the individuality of western NDEs compared to features that predominantly reflect a feeling of estrangement from the body, particularly evident in the Chinese studies (Bailey, 2001; Becker, 1981; Carr, 1993; Zhi-ying & Jian-xun, 1992). As mentioned, most Tibetan accounts emphasized fear and concern about being reborn through emotional attraction to visions of their future parents (Carr, 1993). According to Zaleski (1987), these ideational shifts generally relate to the level of fear versus love expressed in European NDEs. Euro-Americans also typically reported seeing a golden colour light (Ring, 1980) compared with

the clear light seen by Tibetans. These studies highlight similarities between contemporary NDEs and ancient shamanic practices and Buddhist beliefs.

A large survey designed to compare deathbed visions, found that Indian NDEs commonly included religious visions and people were generally unwilling to follow the spiritual beings sent to take them further (Osis & Haraldson, 1977). By contrast, Americans typically had visions of deceased relatives and followed them into an after-death state. Further differences between the two cultures highlighted in this study were that the panoramic life reviews, tunnels, out of body experiences and transcendental elements commonly reported in the west were not present in Indian NDEs (Pasricha, 1993, 1995). However, Blackmore (1993b) explored NDEs in India and found that there were NDE accounts comparable with those reported by Moody (1975), which included visions of tunnels, dark spaces and bright lights.

Cultural variations in the concept of death may explain the emphasis on specific features in NDEs. For example, Counts (1983) indicates that in a Melanesian society, death is not considered to be the natural conclusion of the life cycle, but results instead from an external source, such as sorcery. While North Americans and Europeans commonly see a beautiful garden, the Kalai of Malanesia experience an industrialized world of factories, highways and urban sprawl. By contrast, experiences in Thailand and India do not report visions of 'paradise,' but instead have experiences that include visions of religious figures and the experience of Karma and judgement.

Another interesting issue documented in the literature has been that transformations experienced by individuals following a NDE, who have reported being better able to cope with life or have experienced other positive changes in attitudes, beliefs and values (Greyson, 1994; Pennachio, 1988). Groth-Marnat and Summers (1998) observed that common changes after an NDE include greater concern for others, a reduction in death anxiety with a corresponding strengthened belief in an afterlife, a reduction in materialism and an increased self-worth and greater appreciation for nature. Greyson (1994) concludes that despite evidence of positive personality transformation, most experiencers do not report greater satisfaction with life associated with depth or type of NDE. However, the extent of change found among near-death experiencers does appear to be greater than among those who merely encountered life-threatening situations (Groth-Marnat & Summers, 1998).

The features of NDEs across cultures highlight similar and dissimilar themes among different cultures. Local motifs seemed to play a dominant role. While there is acceptance of being 'dead' and hence estranged from the body, the transcendence of the western European model is not as prominent in the material from other cultures we have reviewed. However,

these NDEs had more pragmatic themes such as the offering of food, being sent back because of errors and a greater focus on good and evil. Meeting deceased relatives were also more common. There are aspects of NDEs that are clearly influenced by culture, but there are also features that are universal such as altered states of consciousness and generalized visions. The content and meanings of NDEs may also vary historically, depending upon the level of influence and involvement between religion and society. Although there may be a core component to NDE, cultural influences must be considered when attempting to interpret individual narratives. Further studies are needed to elucidate the effects of culture, religion and society on the NDE phenomena. Study of published materials in their original languages, working with multilingual professionals and expansion of the literature search to include religious/spiritual, ethnographic, anthropological studies could produce a body of materials useful for examining the interplay of cultural meaning systems and neurobiology in NDEs.

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