

# CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Gary Groth-Marnat

The relationship between culture and near-death experiences (NDEs) is reviewed. Focus is given to the patterns and contents of NDEs reported in different contemporary cultures (particularly India), ancient cultures, and children. The limitations of the current research are outlined along with a discussion of which aspects of NDEs appear to be universal as opposed to unique to, or at least highly influenced, by culture.

Research on near-death experiences (NDEs) has clearly established its phenomenology, incidence, and impact on the person. What is far less clear is why the phenomenon occurs. Indeed considerable controversy has been associated with explanations. In particular, controversy has surrounded the degree to which NDEs can be explained due to cultural influences.

Early researchers were inclined to state that NDEs were invariant across different demographic factors including culture. This has often been referred to as the "invariance hypothesis" and has been supported by noting such findings as the fact that atheists were just as likely to have NDEs as people with strong religious beliefs (11-13). Additional factors which were cited as not influencing the experience were age, sex, race, area of residence, education, strength of religious beliefs, previous knowledge of NDEs, personality, or length of time between it being experienced and reported (5). In contrast, is the "cultural conditioning hypothesis" which purports that culture plays a significant factor in the occurrence and variation found in NDEs. Persons supporting such a position point out that persons from quite different cultures do seem to report significant variations in their NDEs (4,10). In addition, American children, who might be considered relatively less affected by culture due to less time being acculturated, report somewhat different NDEs than American adults (7).

## NDEs from different cultures

Studies from highly dissimilar cultures pro-

vide us with the clearest contrasts in the variations of reported NDEs. The most extensively studied so far are NDEs from India. Osis and Haraldson did an early large scale survey of the deathbed visions of dying persons as observed by the health professionals who were present during their dying moments (8,9). Their survey was designed to specifically compare the deathbed visions of Americans as opposed to Indians. They found that the major differences were that Indians had religious visions and were generally unwilling to follow the spiritual beings who were sent to take them to and from death. In contrast, Americans were more likely to have visions of deceased relatives and were typically quite willing to follow these deceased relatives into what they believed would be the after-death state.

Pasricha and Stevenson studied 16 cases of Indians who reported having NDEs (10). The following case of a 40 year old man (Chhajju Bania) who became unconscious due to a fever and was thought to have died is representative:

"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

---

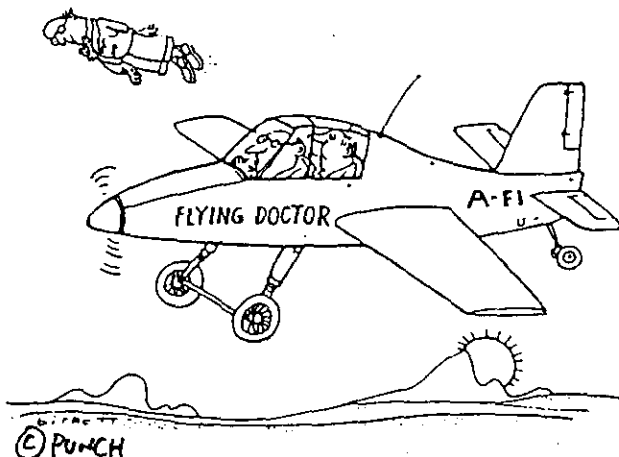
**Are NDEs invariant across cultures, or does culture play a significant role in the occurrence and variation found in NDEs?**

---

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." (p. 167).

The above NDE has some features which are highly characteristic of Indians but are unusual to find among Americans. In particular, Indians who reported NDEs often describe that some mistake had been made in that the wrong person had been selected and the NDEr is then sent back to life once again. In addition, the being/person who was sent to escort the "dying person" is typically a Yamdoot, which is a messenger from Yama, the god of death in Hindu folklore. Notably absent from Indian NDEs are panoramic reviews of their lives (life reviews) and out-of-body experiences (OBEs) in which the experiencer observes his or her own body (autosopic hallucinations). In addition, transcendental elements are typically not included. In contrast, life reviews, OBEs, and transcendental elements are all frequently present in the NDEs from Western populations (5,6).

The above Indian studies suggest that NDEs are quite different when compared to American NDEs. Some of these differences might be tentatively explained by considering some of the features of their culture. Clearly the existence of Yamdoots has been incorporated into the NDEs due to cultural beliefs regarding death. Perhaps the unwillingness to return to the living state is because death among Hindus (and southeast Asians in general) is more likely to be seen as a release from the fragmented state of living and into a more unified and liberated after-death state.



"It's that bloody flying bath-tubber again!"

## Notably absent from Indian NDEs are panoramic life reviews, out-of-body experiences and transcendental elements

This might also be supported by the harsher living conditions generally found in India. The absence of transcendental features in Indian NDEs might be accounted for due to transcendental and altered experiences already being a feature of their culture. Since transcendent and altered states are found within the belief systems and spiritual practices, there may be no need to or expectation that they will occur during the after-death state. Explaining the absence of life reviews and OBEs in Indian NDEs is more difficult.

Counts has reported three Melanesian NDEs among the Kalai of West New Britain (4). She interprets much of the content based on the influence of their culture. For example, since the major explanation of death among the Kalai involves sorcery, the NDEs reported by her Melanesian subjects typically incorporates images of sorcerers who are often judged for causing death to others. Additional culturally relevant images include village scenes, walking down paths, going towards well known mountains in the region (Mt. Kavilvil or Mt. Andewa), and healing practices such as spitting ginger on a wound. The following NDE is representative:

"I think I died for about 5 minutes. I saw a group of aulu (ancestor spirits) who showed me a road. I followed it and saw a man with white skin and long white robes, a beard and long hair. He was bright, as though there were a flashlight focused on him, and although he did not light up the area around him, his light seemed to be directed at me. He had large hands which he held up, palms toward me, blocking the road. He moved his middle fingers, motioning me to stop, and stared at me. Then he motioned to me to turn around and come back.

Then Alois (a fellow villager who had died some time before) cut my leg and spit ginger on it. It was as though I were asleep, but my eyes were open. I saw a group of men singing and dancing and an old man whose name was Kasiru. He said to me: 'Who do you think did this to you? You climbed mount Kavilvil and your knee is tight so you must die.' Then the others scolded him for poisoning (ensorceling) me and they made a song which has in it the words Kasiru and 'knee is tight.' When I came to myself I remembered the song and I have taught it to the others." (p. 118-119)

## Native American NDEs included typical culturally unique objects such as a "war eagle," deer, moose, bow and arrow and moccasins

Although any generalizations should be tentative based on the small sample size, there appear to be both similarities and differences between these three Melanesian NDEs reported by Counts (4) and American NDEs. Similarities, include apparitions (deceased relative, fellow villager, mythic/religious figure) and a reluctance to return to a living state. However, there were also some significant differences. There were no clear, well defined OBEs in which the subject reported seeing their bodies and/or floating in space. In addition there were no reported feelings of joy, love, peace, exaltation, or any other strong emotions. Although there were some judgments made, there were no life reviews and there were also no reports of tunnels. Rather, the experiencers described their journeys as being on foot, going down a path or road, and they were in their own normal bodies.

A consideration of Native American stories suggest that there was a fascination with NDEs. Schorer has reported two what are probably NDEs which were passed down based on an oral tradition (14). There are some features which are similar to NDEs as reported by contemporary white Americans and some which are different. The first NDE includes OBE/autoscopical features and the second involves transcendental aspects. The second NDE is as follows:

"A village chief who died and came back to life recounted his travel through paradise, with beautiful groves and numerous animals, to the City of the Dead, veiled in silvery mists. He turned back to his grave in order to get his gun and on his way he met many people carrying their funeral paraphernalia. Reaching his grave, he jumped through a fire blocking his way and in the effort came alive. He concluded his account with a lecture on limiting burial objects to those requested by the deceased person." (p. 112)

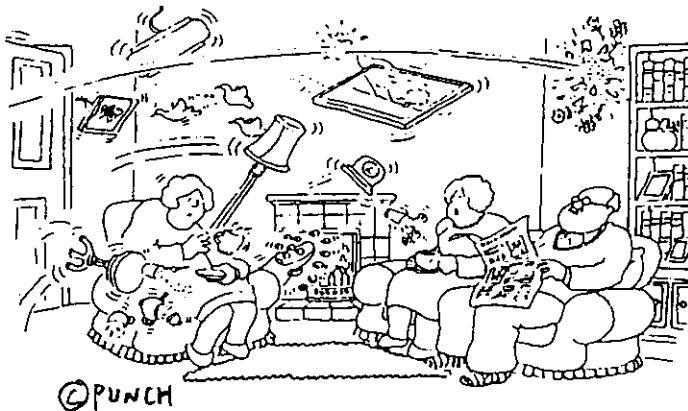
This, and the other NDE described by Schorer included typical culturally unique Native American objects such as a "war eagle," deer, moose, bow and arrow, and moccasins. However, transcendental and OBE features, which are also found among white American NDEs, are also

present in the reports by Native Americans. Noteworthy features which were absent include a life review, passage down a tunnel, and an extra-terrestrial quality.

### Studies from ancient cultures

One approach towards studying culturally different NDEs is to consider NDEs reported in previous historical times. Such accounts would necessarily be from quite different cultures due to the considerable lapse of time and ensuing cultural changes which have occurred. Zaleski has described visions and other deep inner experiences reported by persons in medieval Europe, many of which either were, or can be presumed to be, NDEs (15). These "NDEs" had both life reviews and tunnels. However, what were conspicuously absent were white lights, voids, or the person being greeted by deceased relatives. It would be interesting to know when (and why) the latter features began to occur in Western NDEs. However, the generalizability of such reports should be made quite hesitantly since the sample may be quite biased and the elapsed time of reporting and recording is considerable.

One ancient tradition of death and near-death experiences is the *Tibetan book of the Dead* (1). It is believed to have been first developed in the 8th century and was derived from both the descriptions of dying persons and the experiences of yogis in trance. The book was intended to be read to a dying person as a guide on how to best deal with the dying person's complex sequences



"Take no notice - it's only the poltergeist coming back from the pub"

of visions and experiences. It provides a detailed description and explanation of the experiences of consciousness between death and rebirth (*the bardo state*). For most people, these experiences are said to occur over a period of up to 49 days.

The description of the dying process in its early stages is of most interest to the study of NDEs since, it is during this period, that it can be presumed that the *Tibetan book of the Dead* is referring to what western researchers have come to call the near-death experience. The first thing which is described is that there is a tremendous roaring and crashing sometimes accompanied by flashes of light with periods of darkness. These are explained as being the physical side effects of the body dissociating its consciousness from the body. Next, the soul departs from the body. The soul or subtle body can observe its physical body and freely travel long distances. This is followed by a "swoon" in which there is a loss of consciousness immediately followed by what the book refers to as the "Clear Light of the Void." The dying person is encouraged to identify with the clear light and, it is at this point that the person has their best chance of achieving enlightenment. There are additional experiences which extend over an extended period but these later experiences, which involve a life review, judgment, encountering deities, and seeking another body, can be considered to be after-death descriptions rather than near-death experiences.

As with previous cross-cultural descriptions of the NDE, there are differences and similarities. The major similarities are that both the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and modern Western descriptions frequently report OBEs in which the person can observe their physical bodies and move quickly through space and, less frequently, Western experiencers report a white light. Carr has noted that one of the major differences is that, for contemporary Westerners, there is typically some lesson in the NDE derived from strong feelings of love and bliss (2). In contrast, the book implies that the lessons from the NDE are derived from knowledge. Often these differences (love and bliss versus knowledge) are encapsulated in the contrasting relation to and descriptions of the white light. Another difference that Carr notes is that Westerners are often guided by deceased relatives or spirits whereas the book's description

---

**Among Westerners the life review is part of the NDE, whereas in the Tibetan Book of the Dead it occurs much later in the after-death phase**

---

is that the person in the bardo state is left alone and tested. Finally, Westerners typically have a supportive life review whereas the life review described in the book is terrifying and judgmental. However, it is more difficult to make this comparison since among Westerners the life review occurs immediately as part of the NDE whereas, according to the book, the life review occurs much later in the after-death rather than the near-death phase.

#### **NDEs from children**

One means of estimating the influence of culture is to study the NDEs of children since it can be assumed that they have been relatively less acculturated than adults. Irwin reviewed 15 cases of NDEs reported by American children (7). The conclusions were that the American children's NDEs were quite similar to adult NDEs except that there were no life reviews. However, these conclusions should be quite tentative since the NDEs were experienced by children from a wide variety of ages, the actual reports were not made until adolescence or adulthood (and long after the NDEs had occurred), and there was little or no information described related to the person's cultural or religious background. Irwin recommended that future research could minimize cultural factors by using recent reports of NDEs from children about three years of age with no spiritual instruction, without exposure to playmates with a religious background, and who have agnostic or atheistic parents (7).

#### **Conclusions**

Despite the fact that some preliminary research has been collected, the extent and manner in which culture influences NDEs has not yet been clearly established. This is in part due to an insufficient number of studies being collected as well as methodical problems associated with those studies which have been reported. Difficulties associated with the reported studies include small sample sizes, lack of objective means of

---

## There are aspects of NDEs which are clearly influenced by culture but there are others which seem universal

collecting data, and lack of discussion related to why cultures produce differences in NDEs.

Given the above difficulties with the reported research, the following tentative conclusions can be made. There are aspects of NDEs which are clearly influenced by culture but there are others which seem universal. The major universal feature is that NDEs involving such features as altered states of consciousness and visions seem to occur in all cultures studied so far. However, the more specific features of the experience vary considerably depending on the culture. First of all, the contents seem to show variation. For example some cultures have a preponderance of religious figures whereas others might see primarily deceased relatives. Second, the patterns of the experience vary in that persons from some cultures might include OBEs, going down a tunnel, or a life review, whereas others do not include these features. Finally, the meaning or interpretations of the NDE will vary across cultures. Areas which have still not been studied are whether or not the relative proportion of people experiencing NDEs varies across cultures or whether the after effects on the person is different for persons from different cultures.

The larger context is that NDEs, like dreams, should be understood from a variety of perspectives of which culture is merely one. Culture might include the person's ethnicity, degree of affiliation with their subculture in a particular region, religious orientation, occupation, and differences between adult as opposed to child subcultures (3). Additional influences would be the person's unique personal meaning they have towards death and dying as well as their overall personal life history (3). There might also be universal/archetypal images as well as biological factors such as the neurological organization of the right temporal lobe. What is tentatively emerging from research on culture and NDEs is that it seems to play a significant factor. However, this should also be understood within the context of and interaction between other factors which also influence the phenomenon.

Gary Groth-Marnat is an American-born clinical psychologist with special interests in forensic psychology and neuropsychology. He is the author of the *Handbook of Psychological Assessment*. He recently completed an extensive review of the literature on near-death experiences.

Gary Groth-Marnat  
School of Psychology  
Curtin University of Technology  
GPO Box U1987 Perth WA 6001

### References

- (1) Becker, C. B. (1985). Views from Tibet: Near-death experiences and the Book of the Dead. *Anabiosis*, 5(1), 3-20.
- (2) Carr, C. (1991). Shamanic and death experiences in comparison. Paper presented at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies annual workshop. Esalen, CA, January, 1991.
- (3) Carr, C. (1992). Developing guided imagery for healing the dying and bereaved through a study of cross-cultural variation in near-death experiences. Unpublished manuscript.
- (4) Counts, D. A. (1983). Near-death and out-of-body experiences in a Melanesian society. *Anabiosis*, volume 3(2), 115-135.
- (5) Groth-Marnat, G. (1989). The near-death experience: A review and critique. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, volume 29(1), 109-133.
- (6) Groth-Marnat, G. (1990). Paranormal phenomenon and the near-death experience. In Zolschan, G., Schumaker, J., & Walsh, G. *Exploring the paranormal*. New York: Avery. (pp. 105-116).
- (7) Irwin, H. (1989). The near-death experience in childhood. *Australian Parapsychological Review*, 14, 7-11.
- (8) Osis, K. & Haraldson, E. (1974). Survey of deathbed visions in India. In W. G. Roll, R. L. Morris, & J. D. Morris (Ed.), *Research in Parapsychology: 1973* (pp. 20-22). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- (9) Osis, K. & Haraldson, E. (1977). *At the hour of death*. New York: Avon.
- (10) Pasricha, S. & Stevenson, I. (1986). Near-death experiences in India. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 174, 165-170.
- (11) Ring, K. (1979). Further studies of the near-death experience. *Theta*, 7, 1-3.
- (12) Ring, K. (1980). *Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan.
- (13) Sabom, M. (1982). *Recollections of death: A medical investigation*. New York: Harper & Row.
- (14) Schorer, C. E. (1985). Two Native American near-death experiences. *Omega*, 16(2), 111-113.
- (15) Zaleski, C. (1987). *Otherworld journeys: Accounts of near-death experiences in medieval and modern times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.