

Into the Light:

The Influences and Implications of Near Death Experiences

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Abstract

As defined by Greyson and Stevenson (1980) near death experiences are “refer[ed] to an altered state of consciousness commonly occurring during an episode of unconsciousness, as a result of a life-threatening condition” (Agrillo, 2011). This incredible phenomenon is of interest to many scientists - as a result, it is regarded as an important topic in the area of cognitive neuroscience (Agrillo, 2011). Despite the significance that near death experiences has in the world of science, there has been a minimal amount of scientific investigation undertaken (Agrillo, 2011). Due to this lack of exploration, the origin of near death experiences are predominantly unknown. Even though there is no concrete explanation(s) of this phenomenon, there are multiple biological interpretations or theories that have been suggested. It is important to note that the area of near death experiences not only receive attention from scientists but also scholars of religion. Near death experiences and religiosity are strongly related because this phenomenon has the potential to answer the most well-known philosophical question of whether there is life after death (Agrillo, 2011). Alternately, religion has multiple influences on the perception of near death experiences. In the present paper the biological and religious influences or implications of near death experiences has been considered, along with the biological theories underlying the occurrence of this phenomenon. Additionally, the biological and religious implications and aftereffects of near death experiences have been discussed.

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One of the most recognized philosophical questions of whether there is life after death has yet to be answered with concrete evidence. Varying theories that could potentially answer this question have been suggested over the decades, though these arguments have been presented without scientific evidence. Near death experiences are a phenomenon that has the potential to answer this question with a solid and scientific explanation. For the past 40 years the topic of near death experiences has been receiving significant attention from medical and psychological researchers (Wilde & Murray, 2009). Though to date, research regarding near death experiences has yet to provide information that could determine whether there is life after death. The majority of research conducted about near death experiences has been with regards to the influences and implications of the phenomenon. There are two main influences of near death experiences; the religious influences and the biological influences. Religion and near death experiences are concomitant, these experiences are often described with having religious components and oddly enough, religion is proven to have an impact on near death experiences. The biological influences are better described as hypothesized explanations of the origin of near death experiences. Religion and biology are recurring themes with regards to near death experiences, as the implications of near death experiences are either of a religious or biological nature.

Psychiatrist Dr. Moody, also known as the father of near death experience psychology, coined the term ‘near-death experience’ in 1975 (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). Near death experiences are best defined by Greyson and Stevenson (1980), who describe near death experiences as “an altered state of consciousness commonly occurring during an episode of unconsciousness, as a result of a life-threatening condition” (Agrillo, 2011). These life-

threatening conditions can be encountered under two circumstances; either an individual who almost died or the revival of an individual after pronounced dead (Turner, 2011). All persons who encounter death under these two circumstances are technically having a near death experience. The majority of individuals who encounter death and survive describe their near death experience as blackness and they are unable to recall any aspect of the event (Turner, 2011). Only a small percentage of people who face death and survive describe their near death experience as unique, and they typically composed of varying elements (Turner, 2011). Specifically, 17% of individuals are able to describe their encounter whether that encounter be pleasurable or frightening (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). The majority of near death experiences are enjoyable – often described as peaceful and enlightening (Agrillo, 2011). Relatively few near death experiences are distressing – often described as a nightmare or night terror (Agrillo, 2011).

There are 15 elements of near death experiences that have been recognized by Dr. Moody through his extensive research (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). The element of near death experiences that individuals encounter the most is that of an indescribable feeling or a sense of ineffability, meaning they cannot find the words to describe such experience (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). Other common elements of near death experiences include having a feeling of peace, seeing a dark tunnel, entering a bright light or being of light, experiencing a panoramic life review, and having an out of body experience (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). Other elements of near death experiences that are less common include hearing oneself being pronounced dead, hearing unusual noises, crossing a border or a boundary, your spirit coming back into the body, seeing a vision of a city of lights, and existing in a realm where all knowledge exists (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). More spiritual elements of near death experiences include meeting spiritual beings, existing in a realm of bewildered spirits, and having a supernatural rescue (Khanna &

Greyson, 2014). Individuals who are able to recall their near death experience describe their encounter with one or a combination of these 15 elements (Khanna & Greyson, 2014).

There is a strong association between near death experiences and religion - many of the 15 elements of near death experiences are of a religious nature. Particularly, recurring features of near death experiences involving bright lights and tunnels have been interpreted as evidence of a new life after death – a concept that many different religions believe to be true (Agrillo, 2011).

Most definitions of near death experiences describe the event as a spiritual or mystical nature. Dr. Moody defines near death experiences as “profound spiritual or mystical events that happen uninvited, to some individuals at the point of death” (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). Individuals who live to tell their near death experiences often describe the encounter as having religious features such as a sense of sacredness, divine union, timelessness, and spacelessness (Greyson, 2012).

Aside from examining the actual influences that religion has on near death experiences, it is apparent that religiosity and near death experiences are correlated.

Whether or not near death experiences are more prominent with individuals who are religious in comparison to individuals who do not practice religion is a question that researchers have sought to answer. According to the current research near death experiences are not in fact encountered more frequently by religious people in comparison to non-religious people, as hypothesized by both scholars of religion and scientists (Agrillo, 2011). Near death experiences occur relatively equally to people with different religious beliefs and religious affiliations, ranging from one extreme to the next (i.e: Christianity, Hinduism, to Agnosticism and Atheism) (Agrillo, 2011). Though, it is important to note that religious people tend to have more intense and vivid near death experiences in comparison to non-religious people (Wilde & Murray, 2009). This is thought to be a result of the concept that near death experiences are shaped by what a

person expects their experience of death will be like (Wilde & Murray, 2009). For example, if a person expects that they will go to heaven when they die, then they may see a bright light during their near death experience rather than a panoramic life review. This concept demonstrates that the more integrated an individual is with their religion, the more intense their near death experience will be. Individuals of all religions have a firm belief as to what will happen to them after death, in turn shaping their near death experience. Near death experiences are also influenced by the type of religion that an individual practices (Agrillo, 2011). For example, Christians are more likely to see Jesus, angels or other religious figures of Christianity during their near death experience, whereas Hindus are more inclined to see messengers of Yamraj or other religious gods that exist within Hinduism (Agrillo, 2011). This distinction between individuals that practice separate religions further strengthens the parallelism between religiosity and near death experiences.

Despite the increasing amount of research that has been completed with intentions of determining the origin of near death experiences, there is no clear understanding of the biological processes that underlie near death experiences. However, multiple explanations that are backed up by scientific evidence have been suggested by medical researchers. It is believed that near death experiences are the illustration or manifestation of normal brain functions that have gone awry (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). It is suggested that the typical brain functions go off course because the body is unable to adapt to the traumatic event it is experiencing (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). This implies that the process of death lacks moments of peacefulness which is suggested by multiple medical personnel and researchers (Mobbs & Watts, 2011). Rather, it is a process experienced as a distressing event, so much so that the brain cannot tolerate the encounter which results in improper functioning of the brain (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). The astray functioning of the

brain is suggested to result in the induction of an experience that can be described using the 15 elements of near death experiences (Mobbs & Watt, 2011).

A vast number of individuals who have a brush with death happen to be people with life threatening diseases (Agrillo, 2011). This is an important concept, as the majority of these sickly individuals are under the influence of psychotropic drugs or anesthetics – substances that have the ability to influence an individual's perception (Agrillo, 2011). An individual's altered perception can be easily recognized when the individual is conscious, though it is unknown as to whether these substances alter an individual's perception unconsciously (Agrillo, 2011). Thus, it is suggested that these people who are under the influence of such substances can attribute their near death experiences to said alteration of their perception (Agrillo, 2011).

It has been suggested that near death experiences may be the result of the neurotransmitter systems that are employed by the body during times of stress such as death (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). More specifically, noradrenaline systems may directly or indirectly evoke positive emotions, hallucinations, and other features prevalent in near death experiences (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). The basic set of neurotransmitter systems are often activated within the body when stress levels need to be kept to a minimum – this is achieved through the release of chemicals that promote feelings of pleasure within the body (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). When an individual has a close encounter with death, these neurotransmitter systems make the experience as pleasurable as possible, almost creating a sense of peacefulness for the individual. This concept can definitely explain as to why near death experiences occur. Though, this theory is only applicable to pleasurable near death experiences, not distressing near death experiences.

The ability to precisely determine the border between biological life and death is a very difficult task (Sleutjes et al., 2014). For instance, an individual's heart can stop beating and they

can stop breathing, though there is still some brain activity, which suggests life. The early stages of death consist of components that make it complicated to determine biological death, leading researchers to argue that near death experiences occur to people that are in a moribund state (Sleutjes et al., 2014). It is argued that the origin of near death experiences is clear functioning of the consciousness during a period of apparent coma (Sleutjes et al., 2014). This hypothesis complies perfectly with Greysen and Stevenson's (1980) definition of a near death experiences, described as "an altered state of consciousness commonly occurring during an episode of unconsciousness, as a result of a life-threatening condition" (Agrillo, 2011).

Biological death is often determined by physicians when an electroencephalogram (EEG) reading is flat, signifying no brain activity or life (Agrillo, 2011). It is said that a flat EEG reading is proof of total brain inactivity though that is not the case (Agrillo, 2011). EEG readings only measure surface cortical activity - if this region of the brain contains no activity, then it would look to the physicians that the individual is dead (Agrillo, 2011). This is not the case, as there are still areas of the brain that contain activity, even though the EEG is unable to measure this electrical activity (Agrillo, 2011). The brain activity that is undetectable by the EEG is suggested to give explanation to why near death experiences occur (Agrillo, 2011). This hypothesis is highly debated between medical professionals and researchers, as some individuals claim that the brain activity undetected is so minimal that it cannot cause individuals to experience the elements of near death experiences (Agrillo, 2011).

As the biological death of an individual is difficult to determine, near death experiences are said to occur during a physiological and psychological state that is related to a sleep-like state (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). These people that have a brush or close call with death are in an apparent coma-like state in which they experience rapid eye-movement (REM) (Mobbs & Watt, 2011).

REM is phenomenon that typically occurs during deep sleep and is an indicator of dreaming and the merging of memories (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). As these individuals are experiencing REM, it is possible that the unique experience they encounter is in actual fact a very intense dream (Mobbs & Watts, 2011). These vivid dreams that happen to consist of the 15 elements of near death experiences, which could potentially explain the origin of near death experiences (Mobbs & Watts, 2011).

It is apparent that the origin of near death experiences is inconclusive, even though the implications of near death experiences are indisputable. It is ironic that religious practices have influences on near death experiences, as the majority of implications of near death experiences are of a religious nature. For instance, individuals who experience near death experiences report that their sense of spirituality is heightened, leading to increased compassion, altruism and a sense of purpose in life (Greyson, 2012). Near death experiences also cause individuals to have a decreased fear of death, competitiveness and materialistic interests (Greyson, 2012). These individuals often develop new life values and give meaning to all events that occur in their life, increasing a connection with one's inner self and the world around them (Greyson & Khanna, 2014). Near death experiences also cause individuals to adopt or foster an internal sense of connection to the divine and to something greater than the self (Greyson, 2012). Interestingly, people who experience a near death experience report more daily spiritual experiences than those who do not (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). The frequency of daily spiritual experiences was positively correlated with the depth of near death experiences (Khanna & Greyson, 2014). Not only does religion influence the perception of near death experiences – the phenomenon also has implications on one's spirituality.

The biological implications of near death experiences are few though significant. It has been reported that the realization of having a near death experience leaves the affected individuals with the fear of impaired mental health (Wilde & Murray, 2009). These individuals feel as though they are mentally unstable because of their vivid and realistic encounter and the explanation as to why these events occur cannot be delivered, causing distress. Distressing near death experiences often result in negative intense effects such as a strong fearfulness of death (Agrillo, 2011). In extreme cases, distressing near death experiences can cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or symptoms akin to PTSD (Wilde & Murray, 2009). Depending on the intensity of a near death experience, subsequent desire for alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sugar and meat can be altered (Turner, 2011). The more intense the near death experience, the less desirable these substances are to the individual (Turner, 2011). The biological implications of near death experiences are mainly negative, though minimizing the desire for harmful substances such as drugs, alcohol and tobacco are ideal.

Near death experiences is an area that has only been researched recently, therefore there is much more information yet to discovered about the topic. Further research would be ideal in order to understand the processes underlying the end of life or early death stages, which may enhance our knowledge of the consciousness and unconsciousness with regards to brain functions and operations (Agrillo, 2011). The experience of dying is a topic in which little knowledge is known, thus research is necessary in order to give us a clearer insight or understanding of the first stages of the dying brain (Agrillo, 2011). Determining the origin of near death experiences would be incredibly beneficial to all individuals who have a near death experiences. Though, knowing the origin of this phenomenon would be particularly important with regards to individuals who experience distressing near death experiences. As previously

mentioned, distressing near death experiences often cause individuals to experience horrible symptoms. Though, if a physician had an explanation that they could use to demonstrate to the individual explaining why they experienced what they did, this could alleviate some of the detrimental symptoms. The benefits of pursuing further research of this topic would be ideal for a number of reasons, but mainly to further understand the biology of the brain and to be able to avail those who experience near death experiences with answers.

Near death experiences continues to gain further attention from religious scholars as it could potentially answer the question to whether there is life after death, a question that initiates debate amongst all individuals. The correlation that near death experiences and religion share is substantial, as near death experiences are influenced by religion and the implications of near death experiences are of a religious nature. Neurological researchers also take an interest of near death experiences, as it is an upcoming topic and the phenomenon can give rise to the processes involved in the early stages of dying and brain function. The biological influences of near death experiences are yet to offer a solid explanation as to why this phenomenon occurs, whereas the biological implications of near death experiences are readily known. Near death experiences is a topic that will only continue to gain the recognition of the academic world, as it is one of the few topics that has the interest of both theorists and scientists.

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