

Increase in Psychic Phenomena Following Near-Death Experiences

Bruce Greyson

Dr. Greyson is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Chief of the Psychiatric Emergency Service at the University of Michigan. He is also President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies and editor of Anabiosis: The Journal for Near-Death Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Near-death experiences, profound subjective events experienced on the threshold of death, have been extensively studied over the past decade. These near-death experiences (NDEs) often include events with apparently paranormal features. In one study (Greyson & Stevenson, 1980), 75% of subjects reported out-of-body experiences, 49% reported an apparitional experience, 39% reported apparent extrasensory experiences, and 21% reported having been the subject of someone else's psychic experience during the NDE.

Though the paranormal element in NDEs has long been recognized, few near-death studies have focused on this aspect of the experience. Osis and Haraldsson (1977) claimed that their data on deathbed visions supported the hypothesis of an afterlife. Grosso (1981) interpreted deathbed apparitions and veridical out-of-body perceptions during the NDE as evidence of an objective reality to the experience. Ring (1982) described the relatively rare but consistent precognitive visions reported to occur in NDEs, and concluded that their implications justified more extensive investigation. Elsewhere, he has argued (Ring, 1981) that paranormal aspects of the NDE suggest dimensions of human existence inexplicable in terms of current models of psychospiritual functioning. Sabom (1981, 1982) focused on corroboration of perceptions while reportedly out of the body during the NDE as a method for assessing the objective reality of the experience. Stevenson and Greyson (1979) suggested that research into the paranormal component of the NDE might clarify the relevance of these experiences for the question of postmortem survival.

A particularly intriguing question, given the profound personality transformations often reported to follow NDEs (Flynn, 1982), is the effect of a NDE on *subsequent* psychic and psi-related ex-

perience. A standardized questionnaire for assessing such phenomena was developed by Palmer (1979), who conducted a community mail survey to estimate the proportion of the general population that claims to have had various kinds of psychic experiences. He stressed that the survey dealt with experiences that respondents *claimed* to have been psychic, and that no attempts were made to estimate what percentage of these cases actually required paranormal explanations. Despite this caution, his survey has proven to be a valuable sociological tool.

Items in Palmer's survey were classed into the following categories (and others not relevant to the present discussion):

- (1) psychic experiences, i.e., experiences that, if valid, by definition are paranormal, involving extrasensory perception (ESP) or psychokinesis;
- (2) psi-related experiences, i.e., experiences that are not psychic as such, but that might provide a context for ESP or psychokinesis;
- (3) psi-conducive altered states of consciousness, i.e., altered states that are often considered relevant to parapsychology; and
- (4) psi-related activities, i.e., activities related to parapsychology.

Richard Kohr (1980), in addition to reporting percentages of subjects responding positively to each individual item in Palmer's survey, also developed measures of the pervasiveness of paranormal and related effects by summing the *types* of reported experience in each of these four categories.

Recently Kohr (1982) examined the relationship between NDEs and paranormal experiences among 547 self-selected members of the Association for Research and Enlightenment, an organization in-

terested in parapsychology, altered states of consciousness, and related topics. He found that the 84 respondents in this sample who had had NDEs tended to report psychic and psi-related experiences more frequently than did those who had come close to death without NDEs or those who had never come close to death. Kohr's finding of a positive correlation between NDEs and paranormal experiences is subject to three interpretations: (1) that NDEs tend to occur in psychically sensitive individuals; (2) that NDEs tend to focus an individual's attention on psychic and psi-related experiences; or (3) that NDEs actually increase the frequency of such events in an individual's life.

The present study was designed to address these three interpretations by investigating the reported incidence of psychic and psi-related experiences occurring both before and after subjects' NDEs.

METHOD

Subjects were members of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) who had had NDEs and had volunteered for a survey of their paranormal experiences. IANDS is an international organization whose aim is to promote research into near-death phenomena; it specifically disclaims investment in any particular theoretical interpretation of the NDE.

The 80 individuals who volunteered for this study were each mailed a questionnaire containing items from Palmer's survey of psychic experiences (1979); 69 questionnaires were returned in analyzable form (86%). Subjects were instructed to note whether they had or had not ever experienced each of the 19 questionnaire items either before or after their NDEs.

Since multiple simultaneous statistical tests were performed, the Bonferroni procedure was used to correct error risk (Grove & Andreasen, 1982). This technique permits the assignment of levels of significance for tests of multiple hypotheses such that the probability of *at least* one hypothesis being accepted, when in fact the null hypothesis is true for all cases, can be set at an acceptable level.

For each of the 19 items in the survey, a 2 x 2 contingency table was constructed comparing percent of respondents reporting that item before the NDE with percent reporting that item after the NDE, and a binomial test of symmetry of the off-diagonal elements was performed. Using the Bonferroni inequality to set an overall error rate of $p = .05$ for the family of 19 survey items, the significance level for each individual binomial test was set at $p = .0026$.

Survey items were also grouped into categories of (1) psychic experiences, (2) psi-related experiences, (3) psi-conducive altered states of consciousness, and (4) psi-related activities. Single

scores were calculated for each of these four groups by summing, for each subject, the number of items positively responded to from that group, as K ohr (1980) had done. Scores for these four types of experience before the NDE and after the NDE were then compared by *t* tests. Again using the Bonferroni inequality to set an overall error rate of $p = .05$ for the family of four types of experience, the significance level for each individual *t* test was set at $p = .0125$.

RESULTS

The 69 subjects included 40 women and 29 men, with a mean age of 50.3 years (S.D. = 14.8) and an age range of 24-91 years. The subjects' mean age at the time of the NDE was 32.2 years; hence, the elapsed time between the NDE and the present study was 18.1 years (range = 9 months to 72 years).

Percentages of subjects responding to each survey item positively, regarding an experience prior to the NDE and regarding experiences subsequent to the NDE, are presented in Table 1.

Psychic Experiences

ESP experiences while awake were reported to have occurred significantly more frequently after the NDE than before the NDE. For the remaining types of psychic experience—ESP "agency," ESP dreams, and psychokinesis—the reported increase in frequency after the NDE was not statistically significant. The mean number of types of psychic experiences (i.e., from 0 to 4 of waking ESP, ESP "agency," ESP dreams, and psychokinesis) reported to have occurred after the NDE (1.36) was significantly greater than the number of types of psychic experience reported to have occurred prior to the NDE (0.65) ($t = 4.36$, $p < .0001$).

Psi-Related Experiences

Out-of-body experiences, encounters with apparitions, and perceptions of an aura about someone else were each reported to have occurred significantly more frequently after the NDE than before the NDE. For three other psi-related experiences—apparent communication with the dead, apparent memories of previous lives, and *d ej a vu*—the reported increase in frequency after the NDE was not statistically significant, while the remaining item in this category—residence in a haunted house—was reported with equal frequency before and after the NDE. The mean number of types of psi-related experience (i.e., from 0 to 7 of out-of-body experiences, encounters with apparitions, perception of auras, communication with the dead, past life memories, *d ej a vu*, and residence in a haunted house) reported to have occurred after

the NDE (2.49) was significantly greater than the number of types of psi-related experience reported to have occurred prior to the NDE (1.21) ($t=4.86$, $p<.0001$).

Psi-Conductive Altered States of Consciousness

Profound spiritual, mystical, or transcendental experiences, lucid dreams, and recall of dreams at least once a week were each reported to have occurred significantly more often after the NDE than before the NDE. For the remaining psi-conductive altered state—unusually vivid dreams at least once a week—the reported increase in frequency after the NDE was not statistically significant. The mean number of types of psi-conductive altered states (i.e., from 0 to 4 of mystical experiences, lucid dreams, weekly dream recall, and weekly vivid dreams) reported to have occurred after the NDE (2.28) was significantly greater than the number of types of psi-conductive altered states reported to have occurred before the NDE (1.12) ($t=5.37$, $p<.0001$).

Psi-Related Activities

Attempts to analyze dreams for insight or guidance and routine practice of meditation, yoga, or self-hypnosis were both reported to have occurred significantly more frequently after the NDE than before the NDE. For the other psi-related activities—visits to psychics or mediums and psychedelic drug use—the reported increase in frequency after the NDE was not statistically significant. The mean number of types of psi-related activities (i.e., from 0 to 4 of dream analysis, meditation, visits to psychics, and psychedelic drug use) reported to have occurred after the NDE (1.68) was significantly greater than the number of types of psi-related activities reported to have occurred before the NDE (0.81) ($t=4.30$, $p=.0001$).

DISCUSSION

Kohr (1982) found psychic and psi-related phenomena to be more common among near-death experiencers than among a control population, but left unanswered the question as to whether the

Table 1

Percent of subjects responding to survey items positively regarding experiences occurring before and after an NDE (N = 69)

Type of Experience:	% reporting item before NDE	% reporting item after NDE	<i>p</i> *
<i>Psychic Experiences:</i>			
Waking ESP experiences	24.6	55.1	<.0001
ESP "agency"	10.1	29.0	NS**
ESP dreams	18.8	33.3	NS
Psychokinesis	11.6	18.8	NS
<i>Psi-Related Experiences:</i>			
Out-of-body experiences	11.6	43.5	.0001
Encounters with apparitions	13.0	44.9	.0001
Perception of auras	11.6	33.3	.0015
Communication with the dead	11.6	27.5	NS
"Memories of previous lives"	14.5	29.0	NS
Déjà vu	48.5	60.3	NS
Residence in a haunted house	8.7	7.2	NS
<i>Psi-Conductive Altered States of Consciousness:</i>			
Mystical experiences	23.2	59.4	<.0001
Lucid dreams	25.0	55.9	.0003
Weekly dream recall	36.8	63.2	.0021
Weekly vivid dreams	26.5	48.5	NS
<i>Psi-Related Activities:</i>			
Dream analysis	33.8	72.1	<.0001
Meditation	21.7	50.0	.0026
Visits to psychics	7.2	25.0	NS
Psychedelic drug use	17.6	20.9	NS

*based on binomial test of symmetry of 2 x 2 contingency table

**not significant at $p<.0026$, which, using Bonferroni procedure, yields overall critical value of $p<.05$ for all 19 binomial tests

NDE group might have been more psychically sensitive before the NDE, or whether the NDE induced a greater vulnerability to, or awareness of, paranormal events. The present data support the latter hypothesis: among near-death experiencers, psychic and psi-related experiences were reported more frequently to have occurred after the NDE than before the NDE. This effect was highly significant for grouped psychic experiences, for grouped psi-related experiences, for grouped psi-conductive altered states of consciousness, and for grouped psi-related activities. Using stringent criteria, this increase in frequency following a NDE was found to be significant for 9 of the individual 19 questionnaire items.

The increased incidence of paranormal events following NDEs cannot be attributed to a greater elapsed span of time following NDEs, since the mean number of years per subject following the NDE was 18.1, contrasted to 32.2 years prior to the NDE. Neither can the higher post-NDE rate of psychic phenomena be attributed to age, as Palmer's original study with the present survey instrument (1979) showed younger people to report more paranormal experiences than did older subjects.

These data may be interpreted as evidence that NDEs somehow produce an increase in psychic experiences, presumably by facilitating communication with an individual's latent sensitivities or with some alternative reality. Another interpretation compatible with these data is that the NDE may merely increase an individual's awareness of, or ability to recognize, those paranormal abilities he or she always had.

Since these data are only correlational, we cannot necessarily infer a causative role for the NDE; it may be that some third factor acted to elicit both the NDE in the near-death state and the increase in psychic experiences subsequently. Further, since these data were collected post hoc, it is possible that the effect of the NDE is not to increase paranormal experiences but to introduce a bias into the recall of psychic events: individuals who perceive their NDEs as turning points in their lives may retrospectively attribute to that event exaggerated changes in personality variables, including paranormal abilities. This last hypothesis could be tested only by surveying individuals prior to a NDE and again subsequent to one—a logistically difficult task. Finally, since no effort was made to verify reports of psychic phenomena, these data are consistent with the hypothesis that the NDE may induce a subsequent delusional belief in one's psychic abilities. This last possibility is contradicted, however, by the documentation of intact reality testing among near-death experiencers (Greyson, 1982; Osiris & Haraldsson, 1977).

The NDE appears to be not only psi-conductive for the duration of the experience, but psi-

enhancing for the individual's subsequent life. Further study of what particular aspects of the NDE exert this effect may yield insights into both the enhancement of paranormal abilities and the nature of the reality experienced in the near-death state.

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Box 54
University of Michigan Hospital
1405 E. Ann St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109