

Near-Death Experiences and Claims of Past-Life Memories

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ABSTRACT: Some features of near-death experiences (NDEs) suggest that consciousness may continue to function after death of the body. The life reviews of some NDEs include what seem to be memories of a past lifetime, some of which involve verifiable details, suggesting that the experiencer has lived more than one life and can recall events from successive lives. These apparent past-life memories parallel the claims of young children who remember past lives. Furthermore, some children's past-life memories include scenes from the period between lives that parallel descriptions of the realm in which NDEs occur. Some children's past-life memories include anomalous features that contradict common beliefs about reincarnation. In addition, the idea that humans reincarnate into a new Earthly body seems to contradict the common NDE feature of encountering deceased persons in a non-Earthly realm. However, those apparent contradictions can be resolved by a reconceptualization of prevailing ideas about time and about what aspects of human consciousness may survive bodily death.

KEYWORDS: near-death experiences, life review, past-life memories, reincarnation, survival of death

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are intensely vivid and realistic experiences, often interpreted by the individual as spiritual or mystical, that typically occur under extreme physiological conditions such as trauma, cessation of brain activity, deep general anesthesia, or cardiac arrest, although they may also occur under conditions of psychological proximity to death, as in accidents or illnesses in which people fear they are about to die (Holden et al., 2009). According to prevail-

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ing views in neuroscience, during experiences associated with severe physical trauma, no awareness or sensory experiences of any kind should be possible, yet experiencers report such phenomena. Common features of NDEs include feelings of peace and joy, exceptionally lucid thought processes and perceptions, a sense of one's consciousness being out of the physical body, seeing an unusually brilliant light, encountering other beings and other apparent realms of dimensions of existence, and a sense of unconditional love and wellbeing (Greyson et al., 2009).

In many NDEs, the experiencer's mental functioning and perception seem to be greatly enhanced despite physiological evidence that the brain is severely impaired. Furthermore, some experiencers report accurately seeing events at some distant location from their unconscious body, such as in another room of the hospital; or an experiencer might meet a deceased loved one who then communicates verifiable information that the experiencer could not have known through normal sensory or rational means. Such profound features of NDEs suggest that the consciousness of an individual may function independent of the physical body and that it may continue to function after bodily death.

The Life Review

A prominent feature of many NDEs is the "life review," in which scenes from the experiencer's past come flooding back. Gregg Nome, who was drowning at age 24 when his inner tube capsized after going over rapids, described a typical life review:

I realized that I was a passive observer in the process, and it was as if someone else was running the projector. I was looking at my life objectively for the first time ever. I saw the good as well as the bad.

The images began with living color scenes of my childhood. I was astonished, because I saw myself sitting in a baby's highchair and picking up some food with my hand and throwing it onto the floor. And there was my mom, 25 years younger, telling me that good boys don't throw their food on the floor. Next, I saw myself at a lake on a summer vacation we took when I was about 3 or 4 years old. My older brother and I had to swim with an air bubble on our backs to help us float, because neither of us was able to swim on our own yet. For some reason I was mad at him, and to demonstrate my point, I threw his air bubble into the lake. Mark was very upset and began to cry, and my father walked over and explained to me that it wasn't nice to do what I did, and that he and I would have to row out in the boat to get it, and I would have to apologize. I was amazed at how many scenes I was seeing that had long since been forgotten.

It seemed that all of the scenes had to do with experiences that I had learned from in some way as I matured. I also saw events that were traumatic in various ways. The images continued at high speeds, and I knew that time was about to run out, for the images were getting closer and closer to the present. Then the images ceased. There was only darkness, and a feeling of a short pause, like something was about to happen. (G. Nome, personal communication, March 4, 1986)

This flood of memories in the face of imminent death had been described before the concept of NDEs became well-known (Noyes & Kletti, 1977; Stevenson & Cook, 1995). In fact, descriptions of life reviews go back centuries. In 1791, when British Rear-Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort was only a 17-year-old midshipman, he fell off a boat into Portsmouth Harbor on the southern coast of England (Beaufort, 1858). Unfortunately, he had not yet learned to swim. After exhausting himself struggling to breathe, he lost consciousness and immediately experienced a feeling of calmness and noticed changes in his thinking. He later described it this way:

From the moment that all exertion ceased—which I imagine was the immediate consequence of complete suffocation—... thought rose above thought with a rapidity of succession that is not only indescribable, but probably inconceivable by anyone who has not himself been in a similar situation. The course of those thoughts I can even now in great measure retrace—the event which had just taken place—the awkwardness that had produced it—were the first series of reflections that occurred. They took then a wider range—our last cruise—a former voyage, and shipwreck—my school—the progress I had made there, and the time I had mis-spent—and even all my boyish pursuits and adventures. Thus traveling backwards, every past incident of my life seemed to glance across my recollection in retrograde succession; not, however, in mere outline, as here stated, but the picture filled up with every minute and collateral feature. In short, the whole period of my existence seemed to be placed before me in a kind of panoramic review, and each act of it seemed to be accompanied by a consciousness of right or wrong, or by some reflection on its cause or its consequences; indeed, many trifling events which had been long forgotten then crowded into my imagination, and with the character of recent familiarity. (Beaufort, 1858, pp. 77–78)

Among 698 near-death experiencers who participated in my research, 175 (25%) reported a life review. Of those, 37% reported that *their entire lives* flashed before their eyes, from birth to the present (30%), in reverse order (17%), in apparently random order (26%), or all at once (28%). Eighty-one percent said that they had no control of

the life review. The vast majority (84%) described their life review as more vivid than ordinary memories. Some experiencers told me that they were shown images from their past, as on a movie screen or on pages in a book, but 47% reported that they re-experienced these past events as if they were still happening, with all the original sensations and feelings.

Of those who reported a life review, 72% said that it changed their ideas of what things are important in life, and 86% reported making significant life changes as a result of their life reviews. Fifty-one percent of those who had a life review experienced a sense of judgment, most often judging themselves, about the rightness or wrongness of their actions.

Many near-death experiencers reported that their life review not only helped them cope with losses, guilt, and conflict and find meaning in their lives, but also helped them make changes in their behavior based on what they had learned. And 76% of those who reported re-experiencing their life events said that they did so not only through their own eyes *but also from the perspective of others*, feeling those other people's emotions as well as their own. They reported that this kind of "empathic life review" helped them understand the pain they may have caused others and the reasons for the pain they may have suffered at the hands of others.

Apparent Past-Life Memories Occurring Within the Life Review

Some life reviews additionally include mental impressions or images that did not seem to relate to the experiencer's current lifetime. In these cases, experiencers reported apparent memories that they believed related to a previous Earthly lifetime.

After struggling with lymphoma for four years, Anita Moorjani fell into a coma. Her husband rushed her to the hospital, where her oncologist ordered a full-body scan. They found lemon-sized tumors throughout her body, and her vital organs seemed to have shut down. Her brain and lungs were filled with fluid, and liquid oozed from lesions on her skin. The doctors told her husband she would not make it through the night. But although she had no use of her physical senses, Anita was more acutely aware of all that was going on around her than she had ever been in her normal physical state:

I was drifting in and out of consciousness during this time and could feel my spirit actually leaving my body. I saw and heard conversations between my husband and the doctors taking place outside my room, about 40 feet away down a hallway. I was later able to verify this conversation to my shocked husband. Then I actually “crossed over” to another dimension, where I was engulfed in a total feeling of love. I also experienced extreme clarity of why I had the cancer, why I had come into this life in the first place, what role everyone in my family played in my life in the grand scheme of things, and generally how life works. . . .

I know I was drifting in and out between the two worlds, but every time I drifted into the “other side,” I was shown more and more scenes. There was one which showed how my life had touched all the people in it; it was sort of like a tapestry and showed how I affected everyone’s lives around me. There was another which showed my brother on a plane, having heard the news I was dying, coming to see me. This was verified to me as, when I started to come round, my brother was there, having just got off a plane. I then saw a glimpse of my brother and me and somehow seemed to understand it was a previous life, where I was much older than he and was like a mother to him. In this life, he is older than I. I saw in that life I was very protective towards him. This life I was now perceiving with my brother seemed to take place in an underdeveloped rural setting, in a time and location I couldn’t identify. We were living in a sparsely furnished mud hut, and I looked after him while our parents went out to work in the fields. I suddenly became aware he was on the plane to come and see me, and felt, “I can’t do this to him, can’t let him come and see me dead.” Then I also saw how my husband’s purpose was linked to mine, and how we decided to come and experience this life together. . . . (A. Moorjani, personal communication, November 25, 2008)

For Moorjani, the life review in her NDE was not limited to this lifetime but, rather, included images and insights that appeared to be from a past life. This raises the question of whether “past life” memories are anything more than fantasy.

The flashes of past lives in Moorjani’s life review, though quite compelling to her, included no specific details that could be corroborated by independent investigators and, therefore, considered evidential. That was not the case, however, with David Moquin’s NDE, when he was hospitalized with double pneumonia at age 48. He described visions of past lives during his NDE as he was in and out of coma for several days:

During that time, I experienced at least two events that felt like past lifetimes. The one that has haunted me for the past 24 years

was that of burning to death in an airplane crash. I kept seeing myself on fire and trying to reach a field just past a line of trees and a barbed-wire-type fence. I crashed, hit my head, and tried to crawl out as I was engulfed in fire and couldn't breathe.

Many years later a psychic told me that in my last lifetime I died landing a fighter plane on an odd single digit day in November 1944. I was born December 21, 1944. My daughter, hearing the recording of the reading, googled and found that Captain Fryer was the only pilot that died on an odd single digit day that November, and that he died trying to land his burning P-51 Mustang. My favorite plane has always been the P-51. The model sits on my desk. My daughter asked me questions and I seemed to know the names of my wing commander, squadron commander, mother, and father. (D. Moquin, personal communication, October 29, 2018)

Unlike Moorjani's apparent memories of a past life, Moquin's included verifiable details that were subsequently corroborated as true for a particular person who died a month before Moquin was born. A tantalizing possibility is that Moquin's memories from his NDE—and those of young children who seem to recall accurate accounts of the life of someone from the past—may provide compelling evidence that people live more than once.

Research Into Claims of Past-Life Memories

Reincarnation is a central idea in many Asian religions, and a national survey by the Pew Research Center found that one-third of all Americans—even a third of Mainline Protestants and a third of Roman Catholics whose contemporary religious orthodoxy excludes belief in reincarnation—believe that humans may at some point after death return to live another life here on Earth (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/). Beyond reincarnation or rebirth into another lifetime being just a religious or spiritual belief, there may be objective evidence that people can live more than one life.

Researchers at the University of Virginia and at other universities around the globe have studied more than 2,000 cases of very young children—before they were of school age—who claimed to recall details of a past life (Stevenson, 2001; Tucker, 2012). In about two-thirds of those cases, they have been able to identify the person the child claimed to have been in that past life, based on the child's memories matching specific details of the claimed past life.

Ian Stevenson, the psychiatrist who pioneered this research start-

ing in the 1960s, generally limited his investigation to very young children, generally between the ages of 2 and 5, before they had learned to read, in order to avoid claimed past-life memories that were likely to be contaminated by things the child may have read or seen. He also limited his studies to memories that came to the children spontaneously. He particularly avoided memories recovered in hypnotic past-life regression, because of the increased suggestibility of people when there are hypnotized. The purported past lives recalled under hypnosis may be extremely plausible and convincing to the person having the experience, but experiments have shown how easily suggestions given by a hypnotist can influence the features of the purported past life to conform to these suggestions (Baker, 1982; Kampman & Hirvenoja, 1978; Spanos et al., 1991; Zolik, 1962). The issue is not that information acquired under hypnosis is never accurate, but, rather, that it is not reliable enough to be trusted as scientific evidence without additional verification.

The young children that Stevenson and other researchers have investigated not only have memories of past lives but also often show behaviors, such as phobias or preferences, that are unusual within the context of their own families and are not explained by any current life events. However, these unexplained behaviors are usually consistent with the child's statements about a previous life. For example, a young child who remembers a life that ended in drowning may show an unnatural fear of water, or a young child in a Hindu family who remembers a life as a devout Muslim may refuse to eat food not prepared according to Islamic law. Some of these children have birthmarks and birth defects that correspond to wounds or other marks on the deceased person whose life the child claims to remember (Stevenson, 1997). In many cases of this type, autopsy reports of the deceased people have confirmed these correspondences.

Problematic Features of Past-Life Memories

These cases of young children are too consistently verified by independent means to be written off as fantasy and wish fulfillment and may be regarded as evidence *supporting* a belief in reincarnation. There are, however, some cases in the University of Virginia collection that suggest that their interpretation is not as straightforward as our common conceptions of reincarnation would suggest. For example, in some cases, researchers have investigated *two or more children* who recall the same past life (Keil, 2010).

Anthropologist Antonia Mills (1988) described several cases of apparent multiple simultaneous reincarnations among the Gitksan tribe in British Columbia, noting that the Gitksan value being reborn simultaneous in several people as an indication of being a "good" person (p. 34). As with other First Nations tribes from that region, the Gitksan consider "dreams, visits from the disembodied or ghostly previous personality, birthmarks, and/or memory or behaviour appropriate to the previous personality as the means of knowing who has been reincarnated as whom" (p. 34).

In one illustrative Gitksan case, Susan Albert died of a stroke in her late 70s, but before she died, she said she wanted to come back as her granddaughter's child. Within three months, that granddaughter gave birth to a baby girl, Rhonda Mead. The baby was physically and behaviorally precocious, and when she was 15 months old, she was taken to visit relatives in a town 750 miles away. When she saw her uncle sitting in her great-grandmother's favorite easy chair, she tried to push him out of it, yelling, "That's my chair!" and according to her mother, "She just screamed bloody murder if anybody sat in her chair." She also insisted on sitting in one particular chair at the dinner table, claiming it was hers, although she was so small she could barely see over the edge of the table while sitting on it. She also identified pieces of jewelry and other objects of Susan Albert's as hers, and mentioned by name her great-grandmother's dog, who had died before she was born. Furthermore, she had an oddly shaped scar on her right arm that resembled a tattoo her great-grandmother had on that arm, and expressed likes and dislikes that were the same as Susan Albert's.

However, around the same time as Rhonda's birth, two other baby girls, Sheila and Susan Richards, were born to the extended family, both of whom were identified by Susan Albert's family as having been Susan Albert in their past life, based largely on dreams. Mills was not able to interview either of these other children to ascertain whether they had verifiable memories of their great-grandmother's life.

Mills (1988) has investigated other cases of multiple children in several of the Pacific Northwest tribes who were believed to be reincarnations of the same deceased person, and Stevenson (1969, 1985, 1986) noted such cases among the Inuit in Alaska and among the Igbo in Nigeria.

In other problematic cases, a child may appear remember the past lives of *two different people who lived at the same time*. We have a small number of such purported cases from the files at the University of Virginia, but have not published them because the identification

of the deceased person alleged to have reincarnated is not well established. And in some cases, the person whose life the child remembers died *after the child was born*. The University of Virginia files include thirty-seven such cases, which raise questions about how to interpret the children's knowledge of someone else's life. One alternative explanation of these "anomalous dates" cases are not examples of reincarnation but rather of possession of a child after birth (Matlock & Mishlove, 2019). The typical claims of children who recall past lives are challenging enough to the current understanding of the relationship between mind and brain, but these problematic cases introduce additional complications in their interpretation. Because of these inconsistencies, Stevenson (1966, 2003), who initiated this line of research, never claimed that these cases were *proof* of reincarnation. Instead, he referred to them as "cases *suggestive* of reincarnation" and "cases *of the reincarnation type*."

Parallels in Near-Death Experiences and Claimed Past-Life Memories

Both claimed memories of past lives and NDEs have been controversial topics in academia, because they challenge contemporary models of the mind-brain relationship and may be open to multiple interpretations. I know some scholars who have been willing to accept one of these challenging phenomena but not the other. Given, however, that both NDEs and claimed memories of past lives bear on the mind-brain relationship and on whether the mind can continue to function after death of the brain, data from the two phenomena might actually complement each other and form a bridge to a new understanding of mind and brain and of the survival question, and perhaps shed light on each other.

Several researchers have reported anecdotally that near-death experiencers became more open to the idea of reincarnation after their NDEs (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; Ring, 1980; Sutherland, 1992). Amber Wells, an undergraduate student of psychologist and near-death researcher Kenneth Ring, carried out a survey comparing near-death experiencers and non-experiencers who were interested in NDEs. She found that belief in reincarnation was equally strong in the experiencers and in the comparison group of non-experiencers (Wells, 1993).

Among more than 200 near-death experiencers who have participated in my research, one-third said they believed that after death

they will be “recycled” and reincarnated or reborn in the physical world—and another third reportedly believed that reincarnation is “possible.” Those are the same percentages of belief in reincarnation that the Pew Research Center found among the American population as a whole. However, some near-death experiencers related their belief in reincarnation to specific events in their NDEs (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; Ring, 1980; Sutherland, 1992; Wells, 1993).

Some young children’s descriptions of past-life memories correspond to descriptions of NDEs. Medical student Poonam Sharma and child psychiatrist Jim Tucker examined cases of Burmese children who claimed to remember not only a past life, but also *the period between the past life and this one*. Purported memories of the intermission period between lives show cultural differences between Asian and Western children (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016). Sharma and Tucker found striking similarities between what Burmese children said about the environment between lives and what Burmese near-death experiencers said about the world of the NDE (Sharma & Tucker, 2004). That similarity would seem to support the belief that these past-life memories may be real memories of another incarnation.

Contribution of NDEs to an Understanding of Apparent Past-Life Memories

Apparent memories of a past life that occur during the life review of an NDE would seem to support a belief in reincarnation, and to strengthen confidence in the claims of young children to recall past lives. However, some findings from near-death research suggest that an understanding of claimed past-life memories is not straightforward.

In an apparent contradiction to the idea of reincarnation, many near-death experiencers report having met deceased loved ones in some seemingly otherworldly environment in their NDEs. The question arises how it might be possible for deceased people to continue existing in some otherworldly realm after death if they have been reborn into a new Earthly life. The simplest resolution to this apparent contradiction might be that deceased individuals might reside in some afterlife environment while awaiting reincarnation on Earth (Matlock & Mishlove, 2019). Alternatively, one might speculate that different people may have different afterlife scenarios, some being reborn and others remaining in some otherworldly realm; or that one person might have several different afterlife scenarios, including both rebirth

and continued existence in an otherworldly realm. This latter possibility is compatible with reported cases of mediumistic communications allegedly from deceased individuals who claim to have already reincarnated but are able to leave their new bodies and present to the medium as discarnate spirits, and cases of apparitions of deceased individuals that appear after they have been reborn (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016, pp. 250–251). Furthermore, given the claim of many near-death experiencers that the familiar concept of time as a linear progression doesn't apply in the afterlife (Greyson, 2021, pp. 32–34), it might be possible both to continue to exist in some otherworldly realm and also “simultaneously” to be reborn on Earth.

Altered Concept of Time in NDEs

Many experiencers report that in their NDEs they had not only an altered sense of time but also a sense of complete timelessness. Joe Geraci, a 36-year-old policeman who almost bled to death after surgery, described this sense in his NDE:

I knew what it was like to experience eternity, where there was no time. It's the hardest thing to try and describe to someone. How do you describe a state of timelessness, where there's nothing progressing from one point to another, where it's all there, and you're totally immersed in it? (J. Geraci, personal communication, December 15, 1981)

Among 698 people who shared their NDEs with me, 415 (59%) said that they had a sense of timelessness in their NDEs. Some of these experiencers said that time may still have existed on Earth but that the realm of the NDE seemed to be outside of the flow of time. Everything in their NDE seemed to be happening at once, or they seemed to move forward and backward in time. Others said that they realized in the NDE that time as humans know it was only ever an artificial construct of the brain and never really existed, that is, that the very concept of time had no independent reality. These may be alternate ways of trying to describe a perception that is ultimately ineffable.

Once again, given the claim of many near-death experiencers that time as humans typically know it doesn't exist in the otherworldly realm, then it might be possible both to be reincarnated into another body on Earth and also to persist simultaneously in a non-Earthly realm or dimension.

A hint of this kind of ambiguity is apparent in Moorjani's account of her NDE. She reported that her experience gave her a more nu-

anced understanding of reincarnation than her traditional Hindu background suggested:

Time felt different in that realm, too, and I felt all moments at once. I was aware of everything that pertained to me—past, present, and future—simultaneously. I became conscious of what seemed to be simultaneous lives playing out. As I was experiencing the sensations associated with being a protective older sister, ensuring that there was enough for us to eat and we were safe from any undesirable external elements, it didn't feel like a past life. Even though the scene appeared historical, in that realm, it still felt as though it were happening here and now.

Before my NDE, probably because of my culture, I used to think that the purpose of life was . . . to evolve beyond the reincarnation cycle of birth and death. . . . But after my NDE, I feel differently. This is primarily because the concept of reincarnation in its conventional form of a progression of lifetimes, running sequentially one after the other, wasn't supported by my NDE. I realized that time doesn't move in a linear fashion unless we're using the filter of our bodies and minds. Once we're no longer limited by our earthly senses, every moment exists simultaneously. I've come to think that the concept of reincarnation is really just an interpretation, a way for our intellect to make sense of all existence happening at once. . . .

In the NDE state, I was aware of my brother on a plane coming to see me and of conversations the doctors were having outside my room and down the hall. I understood many aspects of my future life, as they would be panning out. This showed me that time, space, and solid matter don't always exist as we normally think of them. During my NDE, I felt that I could focus on any point in time that I needed to access. . . .

It's as though our earthly minds convert what happens around us into a sequence, but, in actuality, when we're not expressing through our bodies, everything occurs simultaneously, whether past, present, or future.

Although being able to perceive all points of time simultaneously lent to the atmosphere a clarity in that realm, recalling it and writing about it creates confusion. The sequence isn't obvious when there's no linear time, making the retelling sound clumsy.

It seems as though our five senses limit us to focus on one point in time at any given moment, and we string these together to create an illusion of linear reality. . . . Because of this, I believe that when someone has a glimpse of what have previously been interpreted as "past lives," they're actually accessing parallel or simultaneous existences, because all time exists at once. (A. Moorjani, personal communication, November 25, 2008)

In this narrative, Moorjani claimed to have perceived features of her NDE with crystal clarity, yet found it difficult to describe them adequately with words. This paradox, common to many NDE narratives, makes it difficult to find agreement among experiencers as to how they describe an after-death state.

Conclusion

NDEs that include apparent past-life memories in the life review suggest that humans can live on this Earthly plane more than once, and memories of past lives that include descriptions of the period between lives support the validity of NDEs. But little of that cross-validation between NDEs and apparent memories of past lives can be considered scientific evidence. At this point it appears that the question of reincarnation is a matter for which NDEs provide tantalizing directions for further research rather than definitive answers.

Cases indicating simultaneous physical existences along with the experience of timelessness that so many near-death experiencers have described suggests that an alternate view of the nature of reincarnation may be necessary. Rather than conceptualizing it as a series of incarnations over linear time—the normal perception of time in Earthly life—it may involve incarnations that occur simultaneously in a state of timelessness in which everything is happening all at once—the perception of time that experiencers report during their NDEs. Especially for the majority of people who have not experienced the timelessness of an NDE this paradigmatic shift in thinking about the nature of time can be challenging.

In particular, the temporal inconsistencies between encounters with deceased persons in NDEs and rebirth into subsequent Earthly lives, like so many ineffable features of NDEs, are challenging for scientists. These apparent contradictions and ineffability call for the identification of different methodologies or different means of expression to investigate them. But science is not a static discipline; it is constantly updating its technologies and conceptual models. In order to understand in what way human consciousness may survive bodily death, researchers need to be flexible in the conceptual models both of time and its apparent passage and of what it means to survive. Only by remaining flexible in conceptualizing and integrating evidence from NDEs, from apparent memories of past lives, and from other evidence suggestive of survival such as mediumship, spontaneous visions of the

deceased, and instrumental transcommunication, can humanity hope to reach a better understanding of postmortem survival.

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