

Paving a New Frontier: Near-Death Experiences and the Unspoken Aspect of What Researchers Have Faced, and Continue to Face

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the growing pains associated with paving a new scientific frontier, and challenges researchers have faced in the past, and continue to face in the field of near-death experiences. Some of the key challenges surround researching a subjective experience in an objective way, disclosure barriers from NDErs, research issues that may arise, in addition to stigmatization that may be associated with being a NDE researcher from mainstream science and educational institutions.

Key Words: near-death experience, paradigm shift, challenges, barriers, stigmatization, disclosure, therapeutic challenges, research challenges

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In the March 2012 issue of *NeuroQuantology*, Sultan Tarlaci wrote a very moving article titled "Ten Years of *NeuroQuantology*: A Long and Narrow Road." This article inspired me for several reasons. For starters, I was intrigued to learn more about how *NeuroQuantology* began, along with the many challenges it has faced, and survived, in coming to fruition to this day, which is still in its early stages of development. As Tarlaci so eloquently wrote, the journal itself is ten years young, much like a ten year old child. Moreover, I am especially honored to be part of this journal as an *Editorial Board Member*, because Tarlaci, the "father" of the journal, has blended together two fields (neuroscience and quantum physics) which had previously not been done before in

hopes that each field could potentially help fill in some blanks where the other field fell short. Truly, we are on the brink of a new frontier that is slowly unfolding before our very eyes.

However, as Tarlaci (2012) stated, paving the way to a new frontier, rather "paradigm shift" as Thomas Kuhn (1962) named it, comes with growing pains. Tarlaci outlined the following three stages that may occur when bringing a new idea to science:

At the first step, the dominating scientific community will claim that the new idea violates the laws of science and that it is impossible. At the second stage, the doubters will admit unwillingly that the idea is possible, but that it is not particularly interesting and that the claim has great weaknesses. At the third stage they accept that the suggestion is correct, and the doubters disappear from the scene. (p. 6)

One area of research that has the potential to radically change science is the occurrence of near-death experiences (NDEs). While scientific research into this phenomenon is still in its infancy, the past 37 years of research has made some amazing progress, and we owe much gratitude to the pioneers who put themselves and their

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professional careers out on the line to pursue this area of research, despite much resistance about the validity about the occurrence of NDEs in the early stages of research from some areas of mainstream science. In fact, there is still much resistance from mainstream science to this day, despite the fact that it has been well established that NDEs are a distinct phenomena with unique characteristics that strongly appear to be different from some type of hallucination, or confabulation of a diseased or dying brain (Atwater, 2007; Greyson, 2010; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, Elfferich, 2001). In this sense, I view much of NDE research as being in stage two, as Tarlaci (2012) highlighted, where the “doubters may unwillingly admit that the idea is possible” but that “the claim has great weaknesses” (p. 6).

As of this date, many theories have been proposed to try to explain, or perhaps better yet, “explain away” NDEs, but each of the theories presented so far have weaknesses that cannot account for all NDE phenomena. For a comprehensive overview of these theories, see Holden, Greyson, and James’ (2009) *Handbook of Near-death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*. While it is not the purpose of this article to overview these theories in depth (since that has already been done repeatedly), I will highlight that the problem with most theories begins with the mainstream scientific notion and *assumption* that consciousness is rooted in the brain, and contingent upon the brain. But what if this assumption is faulty? What if consciousness, in fact, is NOT solely a process of brain function? While many may be quick to say this is impossible, this is exactly the issue that the NDE brings to the forefront. Can consciousness exist independent of a functioning, or non-functioning, brain?

This is not a question that can so easily be dismissed, and at minimum, deserves to be thoroughly considered and investigated before any concrete claims can be made, pro or con about NDEs. And here’s some other food for thought. What are the implications of this if mainstream science was to actually consider the possibility that NDEs are occurring, and that consciousness *can* exist outside of the brain? Well, the implications are huge! And I do not say that lightly. For starters, it would challenge everything we think we know about science and consciousness in general (which is already on shaky grounds since scientists have

yet to pin down *where* consciousness is allegedly located and *how* it functions). A radical reworking and understanding about science in general would possibly need to be undertaken, and many may have to humbly admit that their previous theories were only half correct and need further working. Moreover, educational systems might be greatly impacted, and might perhaps even one day accept the NDE as a legitimate area of research, resulting in more NDE researchers being granted the opportunity to obtain tenure track positions at credentialed mainstream universities nationwide, and internationally (something that is NOT occurring right now--more to come on that topic later in this article). And these implications are just the tip of the iceberg. So what are the challenges that NDE researchers have faced and continue to face?

Conducting Objective Research on a Subjective Phenomenon

From the start, NDE researchers have been faced with the challenge of how to best research a subjective experience in an objective way. Since many of the phenomenon experienced during the NDE cannot be objectively measured or validated, such as “seeing a light,” having a life review, reports of meeting or seeing deceased relatives and/or friends, going through a tunnel, experiencing telepathic communications, and so on; these are areas that remain subjective that are usually reported anecdotally, and are self-reported retrospectively on measures such as Bruce Greyson’s (1983) NDE Scale. A big area of weakness which has received much criticism from skeptics! However, what is cutting edge and is harder to discount--even from the most savvy skeptic who is well versed with NDE research--is the occurrence of two phenomena: out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and electrical sensitivity (popularly referred to as electromagnetic aftereffects in the NDE literature).

In a previous article I co-authored with Harris Friedman (Fracasso and Friedman, 2011), we discussed OBEs and electrical sensitivity (referred to as electromagnetic aftereffects in that article), as two potential promising areas of research. See the March 2011 issue of *NeuroQuantology* for an overview of the article titled “Near-Death Experiences and the Possibility of



Disembodied Consciousness: Challenges to Prevailing Neurobiological and Psychosocial Theories.”

As a brief summary, OBEs that have been accurately verified by medical staff and/or family and friends present the greatest challenge for skeptics to debunk. In addition to the hundreds (Holden, 2006; 2009), if not thousands (Atwater, 2007), of cases that have accumulated in the literature as of this date, this phenomenon continues to mystify even those who have an open mind toward NDEs. How can this be? According to mainstream science, this is supposed to be impossible, but why are so many people reporting this as a common occurrence of their NDE? Furthermore, this is not limited to NDErs, as OBEs are also being reported by some during meditation, or even psychedelic experiences.

Anita Moorjani (2012) is a recent example of experiencing a series of in-depth OBEs during her NDE. While she was in a coma resulting from end-stage lymphoma cancer, not only did she spontaneously heal (which is an anomaly in itself), but she accurately reported with great detail extensive conversations and visual perceptions that took place while the team of doctors were trying to save her life. Moorjani also accurately reported conversations that took place between her husband and doctors hundreds of feet away from her hospital room. So this poses a further challenge for researchers who may be tempted to suggest that Moorjani, and other reports similar to hers, were experiencing some sort of “anesthesia awareness.” And this is not the only case of this type in the literature, as this is a very common reporting. Moreover, if this was merely anesthesia awareness, than how is it that NDE experiencers (NDErs) are able to have this incredible sensory perception which is allegedly impossible during normal waking consciousness? The last time I checked, a majority of the normal population is not able to see and hear, with accurate detail, conversations and occurrences that occur hundreds of feet away from one’s physical body (unless we step into the realm of reported paranormal activity, but that’s a whole separate area of research). It is these types of reports that continue to baffle researchers, irrelevant of which side of the fence one is on, pro or con, of the NDE. At this point, science does not have any answers that can satisfy either the skeptics or supporters of

the NDE. In other words, we cannot yet scientifically explain this away, nor can we use science to explain how it may be occurring (although some theories have been proposed, perhaps in quantum physics, but remain just that--as theories that need to be tested).

As for electrical sensitivity, also referred to as electromagnetic aftereffects, this is another anomaly that cannot be so easily discounted because it is a tangible aftereffect that can be visually seen and physically experienced by NDErs, and sometimes others as well when in their presence (Atwater, 2007). I know of a few cases who have personally reported to me that others have witnessed these electromagnetic events (see my recent dissertation, Fracasso, in press). As one example, I had one participant report that she was repeatedly being written up at work due to the cash register consistently failing in her presence, in spite of the fact that she was doing everything proper. Her boss assumed she was merely incompetent, but her co-workers had noticed that the cash register would fail so often in her presence, and then start working again when she stepped a few feet away, that it became somewhat of a joke. Another participant, who is a producer in the music industry, reported to me with great distress that he could barely tolerate entering the recording studio anymore since the recording equipment would consistently fail in his presence, and others had noticed that as soon as he left, everything would start working properly again. This same participant also sent me a video of a street light outside of his apartment that would go out in his presence, and when he stepped about 50 feet back, would turn back on again. I was blown away when I saw this video, because he recorded the street light doing this twice within a 3 minute period.

And this is not new! For several decades, NDErs have consistently reported various technologies failing in their presence, light bulbs or street lights flickering on and off in their presence—and sometimes even exploding (Atwater, 2007; Fracasso, in press; Nouri, 2008; Ring, 1992), the inability to wear watches because they simply stop working, along with a number of other problems with technology and appliances in general. Most compelling is Atwater’s (2007) 25 years of research with over 3,000 adult and child NDErs, who found that 73% reported this



aftereffect. And the implications of this are extensive, since we are now living in an era which is rapidly advancing with wireless technology, and increasing electromagnetic fields that these technologies generate. For a more thorough overview of this anomaly, see the works referenced above, as the literature is much too extensive to review for the purposes of this article.

Challenges in Working with NDErs

Bruce Greyson, an eminent leader and pioneer in this field, has written extensively for the past ten years about several challenges and barriers to working with the NDE population (Greyson, 1996; 1997; 2007). Because many NDErs have not been believed when initially trying to share their experience with family, friends, or practitioners, this has led many to suppress the experience due to fears of being ridiculed, or labeled as “crazy.” In my past 23 years of knowing and working with NDErs, this has been my experience as well, and I cannot express how many times I hear NDErs say to me, “Thank god I can finally share my experience with someone who is not judging me or psychologically analyzing me.”

Many other researchers have written about this and have provided some useful tips about how practitioners can initially respond to a patient who may be trying to talk about their experience (i.e., Atwater, 2007; Duffy and Olsen, 2007; James, 2004; Simpson, 2001). The general tips are to listen empathetically and non-judgmentally while NDErs try to put their experience into words, while resisting the temptation to try to explain, or “explain away” the occurrence of their experience as some type of hallucination or reaction to medicinal drugs (Duffy and Olson, 2007; Greyson, 1996; 1997; 2007; James, 2004). Unfortunately though, this is not occurring in a lot of cases, and there are many documented cases in the literature, as well as in my personal observation, where NDErs are suffering undue harm due to many practitioners who are not aware of some of the common aftereffects of NDEs, and therefore initially invalidate the experience. The consequence of this for NDErs is unfortunate, since the suppression of the experience can later turn into depression, anxiety, and lead to all sorts of other post-integration issues due to being invalidated and having no one to talk to about many things they may be experiencing

that they may find confusing at best, and distressing, at worst (Brumm, 2006; Bush, 2007; Wren-Lewis, 2004).

As for therapists who may be interested in working with NDErs, Greyson (1996, 1997, 2007) emphasizes that this is not a relationship that should be entered into lightly. For starters, many practitioners may not believe what the NDEr is sharing, which may very well challenge any previous spiritual or religious beliefs. This is something that therapists should be aware of *before* deciding to enter into a therapeutic relationship with NDErs, along with having a thorough knowledge about some of the common aftereffects. Moreover, practitioners need to be aware that being around NDErs will more than likely challenge one’s own psychospiritual growth. Kenneth Ring (2006), a pioneer, wrote a whole book dedicated to this called *Lessons from the Light*.

Researchers who choose to work with NDErs also face many challenges. The first barrier surrounds disclosure and gaining trust. This is especially challenging in this day and age for several reasons. First, there is pressure on researchers to remain objective and somewhat distant from what is being researched. However, this particular approach may not work with NDErs if researchers truly hope to hear what they have to say and to gain a true grasp of all that they experienced, and continue to experience. Many NDErs may tend to shy away from researchers who come across as distant and cold, so it’s important for researchers to balance the ability to remain objective, but in a way that does not invalidate participants. Also, researchers need to be aware that being around NDErs will eventually have an impact on one’s own psychospiritual growth, similar to therapists who choose to work with this population. Many of the key researchers in this field have been researching this for over 30 years (Bruce Greyson, Janice Holden, Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, and so on), and as previously mentioned, Ring (2006) dedicated a whole book to this, highlighting how being around NDErs has the potential to radically change a person. In fact, I find it disheartening when I hear about skeptics of this research who have never actually met an NDEr, let alone been around them for decades like most of the key researchers have been. And, even if they have met an NDEr, I suspect a skeptic is the last person an NDEr would feel compelled to



disclose their experience to, so it's somewhat of a paradoxical twist.

Stigmatization: Unequal Opportunities at Mainstream Credentialed Universities for Some NDE Researchers

Finally, I think it's worthwhile to mention that many NDE researchers have endured stigmatization from being associated with this research, and in fact, have been denied tenure track positions from some well-known, highly credentialed mainstream universities. I have heard several stories about researchers choosing to leave certain universities, while moving to more open-minded and supportive academic places, but sometimes this still comes with stipulations. In one case of a well-known researcher whose name I will not share, it was stipulated that the NDE research could be carried out, but that by no means could radio or TV interviews be done with popular media circles that in any way advertised or acknowledged any association with that particular university. In fact, I myself have been struggling to gain an academic position at mainstream universities in my local area, and am now wondering if this might be part of the reason.

In addition to the stigmatization that may accompany being a NDE researcher for some, unequal access to grants may be a problem. Because many credentialed mainstream universities have yet to accept the validity and importance of NDE research, and in a lot of cases will not even offer tenure track positions to researchers in this field, it logically follows that obtaining grants may be hindered. I am not saying this is the case for all universities, as many NDE researchers have built lifetime careers with many open-minded universities; however, choices may be limited for some researchers depending on where they live and how open-minded each university is. These challenges are generally unspoken of in the published NDE literature, so I thought it was especially important to bring this topic to light so that any new researchers considering entering into this field walk in fully aware of some of the challenges, and social change that needs to still occur in this field.

In closing, we owe much gratitude to the pioneers in this field who continued marching on with this research, in spite of some of the challenges and road blocks.

Specifically, I'd like to take a moment to honor and thank Raymond Moody, who was the first to publish his groundbreaking research on 150 case studies in 1975 in his book, *Life After Life*. Following this, we own much gratitude to Kenneth Ring, whose 1980 book, *Life at Death*, validated Moody's findings. Pioneers such as John Audette, Michael Sabom, and Bruce Greyson, who have also spent their lives and professional careers researching NDEs deserve more honors than I can express here. Special honors also go out to Sam Parnia, Melvin Morse, PMH Atwater, Pim van Lommel and colleagues, Kimberly Clark-Sharp--and I know I have left many researchers out, so please forgive me, as the list is much too extensive to give proper credit to everyone who is dedicated to moving this field forward.



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