

Census of Non-Western NDEs to 2005

Observations & Critical Reflections

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

- **Most NDE studies draw from similar cultures**
- **Highly consistent clinical presentations**
- **These suggest universal features**
- **These, in turn, have lead to universal claims**
- **Universal religious or biological generalisations**

CURRENT REVIEW

Based on earlier surveys

A. Kellehear (1993)
Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease

A. Kellehear (1996)
Experiences Near Death: Beyond medicine & religion.
New York, Oxford University Press

NDEs in the West

- **Physical crisis – accident, illness, misadventure**
- **Sensations of peace**
- **OBEs**
- **Tunnel sensation**
- **Encounters with supernatural beings**
- **Life review**
- **Deceased relatives/friends**
- **Encounters with ‘another’ world**

Some historical observations

- **Similar to ‘otherworld journeys’ in Medieval times (Zaleski 1987)**
- **Similar to ‘otherworld journeys’ in Greco-Roman times (Walker & Serdahely 1990)**
- **Stone Age suggestions in cave paintings, grave goods, body positioning (Kellehear 2007) from 10k to 170k ago**

Similarities & Differences

- **More than simply ‘journeys’ – OBEs, tunnels, life reviews**
- **Less than these ‘journeys’ – lacking in detail, tests, trials or judgements**

Important Qualifier

- **A single psychological response (eg anxiety or life review) can be evoked by different social circumstances**

- [afternoon tea with others can cause anxiety] OR [life rev from death threat or reminiscence]

- **That psychological response (eg anxiety or life review) may have different underlying physiology**

- [overdose of caffeine, or adrenaline from blackmailing company] OR [unconsciousness or conscious reminiscence]

ASIAN NDEs

Total sample = 200 - 300

- | | |
|------------|-----------------|
| • CHINA | • 100-180 cases |
| • INDIA | • 109 cases |
| • THAILAND | • 10 cases |
| • TIBET | • 16 cases |

PACIFIC NDEs

Total sample = 9

- **Western New Britain** • **3 cases**
- **Hawaii** • **1 case**
- **Guam** • **4 cases**
- **New Zealand** • **1 case**

HUNTER-GATHERER NDEs

Total sample = 30

- **Native America (North and South)** • **14 cases**
- **Africa (Indigenous)** • **15 cases**
- **Australia (Aborigine)** • **1 case**

Summary of Non-Western NDE Features

CULTURE	TUNNEL	OBE	LIFE REV	BEINGS	WORLDS
China	maybe	yes	yes	yes	yes
India	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
Thailand	maybe	yes	yes	yes	yes
Tibet	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
W.N. Brit	maybe	maybe	maybe	yes	yes
Hawaii	maybe	yes	no	yes	yes
Guam	no	yes	no	yes	yes
NZ	maybe	yes	no	yes	yes
Americas	no	yes	no	yes	yes
Australia	no	no	no	yes	yes
Africa	maybe	no	no	yes	yes

MAJOR OBSERVATIONS

**Main cross-cultural feature
Encountering other beings and realms**

**Main culture-specific features
Life review and tunnel experiences**

**Equivocal feature
OBES**

CULTURE-SPECIFIC OBSERVATION

**Tunnel experiences and life review
is not reported, or rarely suggested,
in NDE accounts from hunter-gatherer,
cultivator or herdsman societies**

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Universal features of seeing beings and otherworlds

- 1. There are supernatural beings and otherworlds**
- 2. Reflections of a common brain structure**
- 3. Defence mechanism to deny threat of death**

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Culture-specific features of tunnel and life review

- 1. Description of experiences cannot be separated from the language employed to describe them**
- 2. Life review is a cultural function of individuality (interior self) and linear concepts of time**

SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL COMMENT

- Historical religions create an interior self that locates the moral and social responsibility for actions in that self**
- Religious storylines 'create' linear time**
- Primitive religions spread the 'self' across totemic relations and tribal identity**
- Religious storylines 'create' recurrent time**

LIMITATIONS

- **Cases collected by different researches/purposes**
- **Cases originally collected using different methods**
- **The problem of language translation**
- **The problem of 'ineffability'**
- **Lack of widely agreed definition of NDE**
- **Current criteria drawn from descriptive conventions of psychology and medicine**

NEVERTHELESS !

- **Does suggest strong links between culture and psychology**
- **Does suggest a need to check cultural data before dreaming up biological theories esp since both tunnel and life review have major medical theories linking these to anoxia and temporal lobe disturbances**

BROADER CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Major diversity of NDE features**
- **So-called NDE features are everywhere**
- **Medicalization of NDEs**
- **Nominalism vs mysticism**
- **The 'social' and the 'physical' - inseparable**

The Enchantment of Everyday Life