History, Controversy, and Ethical Implications in the Field of Near-Death Studies

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A greeting card...

- When a major greeting card company stakes its profit on its customers' recognition of the "bright light" in near-death experiences (NDEs), you know that the phenomenon of NDEs has become integrated into U.S. culture.

Today's presentation...

- History of the field of near-death studies
- Controversy in the field
- Ethical implications arising from the field

History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

- Resuscitation technology
- Raymond Moody, MD, PhD, 1975, *Life after Life*
  - Coined the term "near-death experience"
  - Over 13 million copies sold
  - Translated into 26 languages
  - Increased awareness of and curiosity about NDEs substantially.
History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

However, books making reference to NDEs appeared in writings before 1975. Some of the earliest:
- Schoolcraft, 1825
- Livingstone, 1872
- Cozzins, 1873
- Barrow, 1848
- Clarke, 1878
- Little, 1881
- Munck, 1887
- Winslow, 1868
- Cobbe, 1882

History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

Scholarly journal articles before 1975 included:
- Witte, 1889
- 5 articles by James Hyslop in the early 1900’s
- 4 articles sole- or first-authored by psychiatrist Russell Noyes in the early 1970’s

History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

- 1977: Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena

- 1978: John Audette, Kenneth Ring, PhD; Michael Sabom, MD; and 1; bylaws, articles of incorporation, application for tax exempt status.

- 1981: International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). (Happy 25th anniversary, IANDS!) Among its products:
  - Quarterly newsletter, Vital Signs, and a variety of informational brochures.
  - Since 1989, almost-annual conferences; this year is the 15th.
  - Facilitated implementation and operation of local interest groups; over 55 exist today, most in the U.S., others in Canada, western and eastern Europe, Israel, and South Africa.
  - Website since 1995: www.iands.org; over 400,000 page hits per month.

History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

Other major websites dedicated to NDEs:
- Kevin Williams’ (www.near-death.com)
  - Began in 1996; now gets about 2.5 million page hits per month

- Jeff Long, MD, and Jody Long, JD’s, Near-Death Experience Research Foundation website (www.nderf.org)
  - Began in 1998; now gets about 2.5 million page hits per month

- A recent Googling of the words “near-death experience” yielded results exceeding 76.4 million.

Curiosity about and interest in NDEs clearly continues.
History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

Major books by researchers (a few noteworthy)

- Outside the field of medicine (Ring, 1980, 1984; Ring & Valarino, 1998; Ring & Cooper, 1999; Grey, 1985; Sutherland, 1989)

- By physicians (Sebom, 1982; Morse, 1990; Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995; Rommer, 2000; Parnia, 2006)

History in the Field of Near-Death Studies

Noteworthy edited collections include:

- Greyson & Flynn, 1984


Trends in the Professional Periodical Literature

Made possible by:


- A near-exhaustive list of scholarly publications on NDEs, analyzed by 135 NDE-related topics

- A joint venture between IANDS and the University of North Texas

Findings

One way to categorize NDE research is to differentiate between retrospective and prospective studies.
Retrospective Studies

- Researchers did not have information about the close brush with death before and during the episode; they first learn about it after—often years after—it occurred.
  
  - Involve "convenience samples" of research participants who voluntarily come forward in response to a researcher's call for participants
  
  - Less representative sample but easier and less expensive to conduct

Prospective Studies

- Researchers have information about the NDEs' close brush with death before and during the episode
  
  - Usually conducted in hospitals over a period of a few months
  
  - Tend to be more thorough, difficult, and expensive

The following analysis...

- Is based on the Index mentioned earlier.

- Excludes the numerous individual case studies of NDErs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Number of NDEs</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Mowry</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>King</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>XA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>King et al.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>XA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Tynan et al.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Grieve et al.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Grieve</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Tate</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Thomas et al.</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Riggs</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>McLaughlin et al.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>XA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Mowry et al.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Paull</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Grieve</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Mowry et al.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Ahearn</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Ahearn</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Grieve et al.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Fry et al.</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>XA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Ahearn</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>XA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Bierman et al.</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Ahearn</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Retrospective Studies

- In the past 30 years,
  - U.S. researchers have conducted the largest number of retrospective studies—at least 42,
  - Involving sample sizes ranging from four to over 300 NDERs,
  - For a total of well over 2,000 NDER research participants.

Results: Retrospective Studies

- Outside the U.S.,
  - At least 14 retrospective studies,
  - Most in Western countries of Europe and the country/continent of Australia, with a total sample of over 300 NDERs;
  - Five in non-Western countries of Asia, with a total sample of over 70 NDERs;
  - None so far in South America or Africa.
Prospective Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of NDEs</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Salomon*</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>E/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Greyson</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Schnepf et al.</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Mine</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>&lt;23</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Remia et al.</td>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>van Lommel et al.</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>E/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Schwaniger et al.</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Greyson</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Sartori</td>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>E/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>approx 270</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* mixed prospective and retrospective

Results: Prospective Studies

- So far, prospective researchers have
  - conducted a total of 10 studies
  - in North America and Europe only,
  - involving a total of about 270 NDEs.

Results: Retrospective & Prospective Combined

- In the past three decades, by even the most conservative estimate,
  - over 65 research studies,
  - involving over 2,500 NDEs.

Scholarly Articles Addressing NDEs by Publication Dates: 1889-2005

Five-year Increments
### Top Scholarly Publication

**Venues Ranked by Number of Articles Addressing NDEs through 2005**

- The clear leader: *Anabiosis Journal of Near-Death Studies* with nearly 15 times the number of articles than the next highest periodical.
- Of the non-NDES journals:
  - 7 in medicine
  - 6 in parapsychology
  - 5 in psychology
  - 4 in theology
  - 3 in religion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Number of Articles</th>
<th>Journal/Frequency of Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Anabiosis Journal of Near-Death Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Journals of Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Journals of Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Journals of Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Journals of Interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Scholarly Publications by Sole or First Author

- Because sheer number and recency of a scholar's publications do not assess quality or impact on the field, they are only a crude indicator of who are the leading past and present figures in the field of near-death studies.

1. *Creswell, J.* 2003 1
2. *Friedman, J.* 1997 11
3. *Hicks, D.* 2001 7
4. *Hicks, D.* 1997 10
5. *Hicks, D.* 1994 16
6. *Hicks, D.* 1993 3
7. *Hicks, D.* 1991 11
8. *Hicks, D.* 1986 17
9. *Hicks, D.* 1976 16
10. *Hicks, D.* 1976 4
11. *Hicks, D.* 1976 17
12. *Hicks, D.* 1975 17
13. *Hicks, D.* 1973 17
14. *Hicks, D.* 1972 17
15. *Hicks, D.* 1971 17
16. *Hicks, D.* 1970 17
17. *Hicks, D.* 1969 17
18. *Hicks, D.* 1968 17
19. *Hicks, D.* 1967 17
20. *Hicks, D.* 1966 17

### Other Interesting Observations from the Index...

- Number of articles addressing each of the 135 NDE-related topics used in the content analysis
  - Most frequently addressed topics:
    - *Methodology in NDE research.*
    - *Characteristics of NDEs—emotions—pleasurable.*
    - *Characteristics of NDEs—autocopy, out-of-body.*
    - *Characteristics of NDEs—light, mystical,* and
    - *Altered states and NDEs.*
  - The actual amount of research published so far has barely scratched the surface of what, hopefully someday, will be a much more comprehensive picture of the NDE.

### Other Interesting Observation from the Index...

- Least frequently addressed topic—with only one citation listed—is "humor and NDEs."
  - At least several of the least addressed topics indicate areas sorely in need of further research:
    - "Religion and NDEs—Indigenous cultures* and *-Judaism with six citations each.
    - *Characteristics of NDEs—psychic abilities* with four.
    - *Circumstances of NDEs—combat related* with four, and
    - "Religion and NDEs—Islam* with only two.
Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies

Adapted from Ken Wilber's (2000), Integral "theory of everything"

- Interplay between two fundamental dichotomies:
  - the individual and the collective
  - the subjective/interior and the objective/exterior

Individual
Subjective: Experienced inside an individual.
- Individual report of one's NDE

Objective: Observed from outside of an individual.
- Physiological monitoring during NDE
- Questionnaires, etc.

Collective

Individual
Subjective: Experienced inside an individual.

Objective: Observed from outside an individual.

- Physiological monitoring during NDE
- Questionnaires, etc.

- Societal/systemic context:
  - Social, technological, etc. systems
  - Resuscitation & other medical technologies
  - Political system
  - Academic/scholarly system (research funding)
  - Religious system
Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies

**Individual**
- Subjective: Experienced inside an individual.
- Objective: Observed from outside an individual.
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**Collective**
- Subjective: The cultural context; the shared worldview/meanings of a group of people.
  - The American public's predominant belief in the afterlife.
  - The Western scientific worldview of empirical investigation.

**Collective**
- Objective:
  - The societal/systemic context: social, technological, etc. systems.
  - Reincarnation & other medical technologies.
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**Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies**

Controversy in the field of near-death studies can be understood as occurring both within and between these quadrants, particularly when one aspect claims dominance over, or total exclusion of, another.

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  - Political system.
  - Academic/scholarly system (research funding).
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Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies

Controversy in the field of near-death studies can be understood as occurring both within and between these quadrants, particularly when one expects claims to distance one, or total exclusion of, another.

Individual
- Subjective: 
  - Experienced (outside) an individual.
  - Individual report of one’s NDE.
- Objective: 
  - Psychological monitoring during NDE.
  - Questionnaires, etc.

Collective
- Subjective: 
  - The cultural context: the shared worldview/meanings of a group of people.
  - The American public’s pre-decessant belief in the afterlife.
  - The Western scientific worldview of empirical investigation.
- Objective: 
  - The societal/systemic context: social, technological, etc. systems.
  - Narratives/other medical technologies.
  - Political system.
  - Academic/scientific system (research funding).
  - Religious system.

Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies

- Wilber has further contended that anyone can have at least a transitory experience of any state of consciousness...
- For example, theoretically, anyone is capable of having the transpersonal experience—transcending the usual personal limitations of space and/or time—of an NDE.

But how the NDE will be interpreted—by both the experiencer and others who hear about it—depends mightily on the developmental level at which the interpreter is primarily operating.
- One person might interpret it as an indication of being singled out by a blessing or punishing God;
- Another as a fascinating glimpse affording a broader understanding of the nature of human consciousness, if not cosmic Mind.

The potential for controversy is hopefully clear.

Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies

- The potential for controversy around NDEs is further heightened when Wilber’s developmental perspective is taken into account.
- He has compiled a dizzying array of information—
  - ancient and modern,
  - Eastern and Western,
  - secular and spiritual—
to support his contention that every individual, society, and culture potentially moves through a developmental sequence that he has broadly categorized as
  - prepersonal,
  - personal,
  - transpersonal.
Controversy in the Field of Near-Death Studies

The history of the field of near-death studies might be conceptualized as an attempt to resolve the various controversies that the experience has so richly spawned.

From an Integral perspective, however, the goal of inquiry and discourse is not necessarily always to find one hypothesis or perspective right and another wrong but, rather, to discover how each of the four quadrants helps to inform a better understanding of NDEs— as Wilber has said,

To hold NDEs in an all-quadrant, all-level, Integral embrace.

Ethical Implications of the Field of Near-Death Studies for Healthcare Providers

- Whatever the ultimate outcome regarding these various controversies, some aspects of the NDE have achieved the status of fact
  - that people have these experiences
  - that many such people find the experience itself, as well as its aftermath, to be profound
  - that this profoundness makes many NDEs psychologically, socially, spiritually, and/or physically vulnerable.

- This vulnerability points to ethical imperatives on the part of NDEs' healthcare providers.

Ethical Implications of the Field of Near-Death Studies for Healthcare Providers

- In search of ethical principles common to the various medical, mental, and spiritual healthcare providers, we reviewed the ethical codes of:
  - American Medical Association
  - American Nurses Association
  - International Council of Nurses
  - American Psychiatric Association
  - American Psychological Association
  - American Counseling Association
  - National Board for Certified Counselors
  - National Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors
  - American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists
  - National Association of Social Workers
  - American Association of Pastoral Counselors
  - The Common Code of Ethics for Chaplains, Pastoral Counselors, Pastoral Educators and Students

We found explicit or implicit reference to several principles...
Ethical Implications of the Field of Near-Death Studies for Healthcare Providers

Important ethical principles:

- nonmalfeasance—to practice in a way that does no harm;
- beneficence—to practice in a way that does good, that contributes to the well-being of the patient or client;
- autonomy—to practice in a way that enables clients or patients to make informed, voluntary decisions whenever possible;
- respect for individuality and diversity—to practice in a way that honors the uniqueness of each individual and their social/cultural context;
- competence—to practice in a way that reflects the current knowledge base about medical, mental, and/or spiritual well-being.

These principles apply to the way healthcare professionals respond to NDEs.

Indeed, NDEs collectively might be considered a diverse population, and at least some NDEs have been physically, psychologically, socially, and/or spiritually at-risk.

We know of cases involving unethical or ethically questionable action on the part of their healthcare providers:

- A patient/client being diagnosed with a mental disorder on the basis of her NDE alone
- A patient being medicated with a tranquilizer in response to his post-surgery report of an NDE
- A parishioner discounted or ostracized as a result of his subjective report of an NDE

We also know of cases involving ethical action:

- A counselor without expertise in NDEs who, presented with a client in whose history an NDE had played an important role, consulted with a counselor who did have such expertise.
- A nurse who invites patients both before and after surgery to discuss with her any experience surrounding their surgery that they wished to—no matter how unusual the experience.
- A rabbi who listened with interest and empathy to a member of his synagogue as that member described an NDE, who inquired into the meaning of the experience for the NDE, and who affirmed the subjective reality of—and inherent mystery in—the experience.
Conclusion

In the next four days, conference presenters will, collectively, summarize the current knowledge base regarding NDEs.

- Discuss the ethical implications arising from that knowledge.
- The practical applications of that knowledge, and
- Future research directions to enhance that knowledge.

We believe that this conference will, itself, constitute a historic event in the field of near-death studies.

References

Along the way, we expect that you won't be bored...

...and we certainly hope that you won't be bored to near-death...

"I was floating in a tunnel toward a very bright light and then a voice told me I had to go back and finish listening to the presentation."