Subject:
definition of NDE
From:
"Greyson, Bruce" <CBG4D@hscmail.mcc.virginia.edu>
Date:
Wed, 6 Aug 2003 17:03:00 -0400
To:
"Jan Holden" <holden@unt.edu>, <nderf@nderf.org>

Dear Jan and Jeff,

This problem of the lack of clarity or precision in how we define NDEs is near and dear to my heart. A few years ago, I published a paper in the journal "Mortality" on some of the problems in developing a standardized definition, which I am attaching to this e-mail.

You may know about an effort I made several years ago to obtain consensus among researchers about what NDEs are. I attempted to survey a number of knowledgeable people regarding a brief and concrete set of criteria that both we and people not familiar with NDEs could use quickly to identify an experience as an NDE. I circulated a sample of such an operational definition, modeled after the structure of medical diagnostic criteria, to 40 individuals who had published significant works on NDEs. I requested from each respondent a short list of features that should be included in an operational definition of an NDE. Those who responded included both skeptics and believers in the transcendental nature of NDEs; experiencers, clinicians, and researchers; psychiatrists, cardiologists, pediatricians, psychologists, pastoral counselors, counselor educators, psychopharmacologists, health scientists, parapsychologists, philosophers, theologians, and sociologists. Sixty-five percent had Ph.D. or Psy.D. or Ed.D. degrees, 25 percent had M.D. degrees, and 8 percent had master's degrees.

Several respondents offered spontaneous comments in support of seeking consensus on defining criteria, suggesting that we emphasize features that distinguish NDEs from related experiences. However, several other respondents expressed (sometimes vehement) warnings against establishing such criteria, suggesting that restricting our focus would exclude cases that may not differ intrinsically from those we label NDEs, that operational criteria are premature given our meager understanding of NDEs, that listing defining characteristics preempts further research into NDE phenomenology, and that operational criteria should come only after we have a solidly established etiological theory of NDEs.

I tried very hard to group the respondents' suggestions into a small number of alternative options for criteria. That task proved to be far more difficult that I had anticipated. There was astonishingly little agreement on which, if any, features may be necessary to label an experience an NDE and which, if any, features may be sufficient to label an experience an NDE. And there was virtually no agreement between any two respondents' menus of features that should be included in a medical-checklist-type definition. It is clear that we do not all hold the same mental image of NDEs.

Therefore, I think we need to take a step back from seeking consensus on an operational definition, and first attempt to obtain consensus on a conceptual definition. A few of the respondents in my initial survey did so in their responses. Some suggested a very broad definition such as "any conscious mental experience that a person reports as having occurred while near death." However, such a definition implies that there is only one type of conscious mental experience that can occur near death, which I think many of us would not accept. As an analogy, we would not define "suntan" as "any skin reaction that occurs when a person is exposed to prolonged sunlight," because we wish to differentiate "suntan" from other sunlight-related skin reactions, such as sunburn, blistering, sun poisoning, and malignant melanoma.

Starting with as assumption that I think is generally acceptable - than an NDE is some experience of consciousness that occurs during a close brush with death - we need to seek some agreement as to what might differentiate an NDE from other conscious experiences that might also occur near death, such as "uncomplicated" fear of impending annihilation, demoralization over a hopeless situation, eager anticipation of relief from pain, and delirium induced by drugs or altered metabolism. (I do not mean to exclude any of those experiences as a possible component of, or causal factor in, NDEs; but I am assuming that what we mean by "NDE" is something more specific than just any of those.)

I had planned to ask around 200 of the researchers who had published significant scholarly works on NDEs (the field has expanded quite a bit since my initial survey) for their opinion on a one-sentence conceptual definition of NDEs that would capture its essential feature (or features) and perhaps differentiate it from alternative experiences in the face of death. I had planned to then recirculate the collection all the respondents for comments. If we can reach something near consensus on a conceptual definition, then we may be a step closer to tackling an operational definition (or to knowing why we cannot).

One model we might follow for a definition would be a 3-part sentence that starts with a description of the experience itself, followed by a qualifying description of the context in which the experience occurs, perhaps followed by an additional modifying clause. For example, the conceptual definition might read: "Near-death experiences are out-of-body experiences (description of the experience itself) occurring near death (description of the context in which it occurs) that cause a shift in the experiencer's understanding of reality" (additional modifying clause); or it might read: "Near-death experiences are visions of a transcendent world (description of the experience itself) occurring in a situation perceived as potentially life-threatening" (description of the context) - and in this example, there might be no additional modifying clause.

First part: Description of the experience itself

Several researchers in my initial study suggested phrases that may describe the NDE itself in the most general terms. These were intended to be the opening phrase, to be followed by some qualifying features, in a longer description:

a transcendental experience
an altered state of consciousness with consistent features
a mystical experience
a spiritual experience
a spiritual conversion experience
an ineffable experience
a profound subjective experience
a profound psychological event
an experience that transcends the normal range of waking or dreaming consciousness
an experience transcending the personal ego
an experience of great peace and/or well-being
an experience in which the experiencer felt or believed he or she had died
an experience of union with a higher principle
an experience of sudden, strong emotional change
an experience of enhanced cognitive or sensory function
an experience of expanded consciousness and awareness
an experience of continued subjective awareness
an experience of having left the physical body
a visionary experience
an OBE involving visualization of the body from a different spatial perspective
an overpowering, indelible sense of having experienced death
an experience of having survived the death of the body
an encounter with previously deceased persons
an encounter with a mystical or spiritual being
an encounter with a person or entity not physically present
an encounter with a radiant light or being of light
an experience of being in an unearthly realm or dimension
a vision of a transcendent world
an intense awareness, sense, or experience of otherworldliness

Second part: Description of the Context in Which the Experience Occurs

Many of these suggested phrasings are very similar to each other, yet various researchers expressed strong feelings toward or against specific wordings.

near death
on the threshold of death
at the point of death
during ostensible or apparent unconsciousness
during suppression of cortical activity
in the face of death
while close to death
at the edge of death
during serious medical illness or injury
with the expectation of imminent death

when an individual is close to death or believes he or she is close to death
when close to death or facing intense physical or emotional danger
in a situation perceived as potentially life-threatening
during clinical death

Part 3: Qualifying Subordinate Clauses

that causes a shift in the experiencer's understanding of reality
that endows the experiencer with knowledge about the universe
that is recalled in a subsequent conscious state
that leads to spiritual growth
that leads to personality transformation
that leads to dramatic life change
that does not fade over time

Having said all this, let me tell you why I did not proceed with this survey of researchers when my initial one failed to produce any consensus. I decided that my collection of researchers had such varied professional and religious backgrounds and beliefs about NDEs and degrees of

familiarity with NDEs that I should first conduct a survey of how NDEs might be defined by a group that had a similar and high degree of familiarity with NDEs: the experiencers themselves.

Consequently, I am now part-way through a survey of my sample of some 700 NDErs about how they define NDEs. I have not given them the lists above of suggested phrases, but I just asked them to make up their own. I have recruited a psychologist at UVA who has specialized in qualitative analysis of textual material, to help analyze the results and to extract patterns from them. Here is the survey that I have sent to the NDErs:

This questionnaire asks for your definition of what a near-death experience is, and for your criteria for telling when an experience is an NDE. The definition and the criteria are two different things. The definition is a general, abstract statement about what the NDE is, and the criteria are specific ways to differentiate NDEs from other experiences that might have some things in common with NDEs but are really different kinds of experiences.

To give an example, if I were to ask you for a definition of a wedding, you might say something like this: "A wedding is a ceremony to celebrate a marriage." And if I were to ask you for criteria by which you could tell that a ceremony was indeed a wedding rather than some other event (such as a graduation or a funeral), you might say something like this: "To be a wedding, the event must have two people who are to be married and a religious or civil official to perform the ceremony; there are usually witnesses, and it is usually a happy occasion."

To give another example, if I were to ask you for a definition of a suntan, you might say something like this: "A suntan is a darkening of the skin due to exposure to sunlight." And if I were to ask you for criteria by which you could tell that a skin darkening was indeed a suntan rather than some other sunlight-related skin reaction (such as a sunburn or skin cancer), you might say something like this: "To be a suntan, the skin darkening does not cause pain or swelling of the skin, and it usually fades in a few weeks."

Now, with that understanding of the difference between an abstract, conceptual definition and concrete, specific criteria, I am going to ask for your definition of an NDE and your criteria for telling when something is a near-death experience. Please try to keep your definition and criteria as simple as possible. First, what is your definition of a near-death experience?

A near-death experience is _____

And what would be your criteria for telling when a certain experience was or was not an NDE?

To be considered a near-death experience, _____

I hope this is helpful.

Best,

Bruce

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-----Original Message-----
From: Jan Holden [mailto:holden@unt.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, August 05, 2003 4:51 PM
To: nderf@nderf.org
Cc: Greyson, Bruce
Subject: RE:

Hi, Jeff!

Sounds like a scholarly article is needed to research this question thoroughly and, perhaps, suggest a "best" definition....

I'm copying Bruce on this message in case he has input -

Jan

>>> "Jeffrey Long, M.D." <nderf@nderf.org> 08/05/03 02:51PM >>>

Greetings Kent!
Good to hear from you am delighted to hear of the successful research you have ongoing. Please keep me informed of the results of your important work. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted definition of NDE. I do have a possible solution. The IANDS Board of Directors meets later this week, and I will ask the Board. I think it is very important to have a clear, widely accepted definition of NDE. I anticipate getting back with you later this week or early next week.

Best regards,

-Dr. Jeff Long

-----Original Message-----
From: Lin [mailto:rosa1110@giga.net.tw]
Sent: Tuesday, August 05, 2003 11:01 AM
To: nderf@nderf.org
Subject:

Dear Dr. Long.

How are you doing? After coming back from Hawaii, I had a chance to cooperate with the National Taiwan University Hospital. One famous professor Tsai actually noted the NDE phenomenon and started some investigations privately. He is respected in his field of nephrology. So he conducted a prospective multicenter research project on hemodialysis patients who have a NDE.
Now, we used the Greyson Scale on NDE.That is ok for us. But, we have one question to ask you . What is the real definition of NDE? We reviewed some articles published, Ken Ring , Greyson, or recently, the Lancet 2002 the Netherlands report. They seem to have different definitions.
Should we use the IANDS definition of NDE? Is it used as a definition of any article ever published? Please give us some suggestion and how to go further.

Best Regards,

Kent S. Lin, M.D.