

The Life After Death, A Journey Into Shadow Realm

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the phenomenon of life after death through interdisciplinary examination of near-death experiences, consciousness studies, and cross-cultural afterlife beliefs. Near-death experiences represent profound episodes of enhanced consciousness occurring during clinical death, characterized by prototypical features including out-of-body experiences, tunnel phenomena, encounters with deceased entities, and life reviews. The study examined 344 cardiac arrest survivors across ten Dutch hospitals, analyzing prevalence rates, phenomenological characteristics, and associated factors of near-death experiences. Findings reveal that 18% of cardiac arrest survivors report near-death experiences, with 12% describing core experiences. Cross-cultural analysis demonstrates both universal elements and culturally-specific interpretations of afterlife experiences. Results indicate that occurrence of near-death experiences is not associated with duration of cardiac arrest, medication, or physiological factors, challenging conventional materialist explanations. The research contributes to understanding consciousness continuity beyond physical death, with implications for thanatology, neuroscience, psychology, and spiritual studies. This investigation bridges empirical observation with metaphysical inquiry, advancing discourse on human consciousness and existence beyond corporeal limits.

Keywords: *Near-Death Experiences, Consciousness Survival, Afterlife Beliefs, Cardiac Arrest, Shadow Realm.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of life after death has captivated human consciousness throughout recorded history, transcending geographical boundaries, cultural paradigms, and temporal contexts. From ancient civilizations documenting afterlife journeys in sacred texts to contemporary neuroscientific investigations of consciousness during clinical death, humanity persistently seeks understanding of existence beyond physical mortality (Zaleski, 1987). This enduring fascination reflects fundamental questions about consciousness, identity, and the nature of reality itself. Modern research has transformed this metaphysical inquiry into empirical investigation through systematic studies of near-death experiences, representing extraordinary episodes where individuals report vivid conscious experiences during periods of

clinical death or severe physiological crisis (van Lommel et al., 2001). Near-death experiences occur in approximately 5-10% of the general population, with prevalence among cardiac arrest survivors ranging from 10-20% depending on study methodology and clinical circumstances (French, 2005). These experiences exhibit remarkable phenomenological consistency across diverse cultural contexts, featuring prototypical elements including sensations of leaving the physical body, traversing through darkness toward brilliant light, encountering deceased relatives or spiritual entities, experiencing comprehensive life reviews, and receiving messages or decisions regarding return to physical existence (Greyson, 1983). Such experiences profoundly impact individuals' psychological wellbeing, spiritual beliefs, and attitudes toward mortality, frequently resulting in

reduced death anxiety and enhanced life purpose (Khanna & Greyson, 2014).

Contemporary neuroscientific research has documented unexpected challenges to conventional assumptions about consciousness requiring functional neurophysiology. Studies examining cardiac arrest patients have identified that brain electrical activity flatlines within 15 seconds following cardiac arrest and remains flat during resuscitation attempts (Clute & Levy, 1990). These findings generate substantial theoretical implications for understanding how lucid, structured consciousness experiences can occur during periods when brain function has ceased. Cross-cultural investigations reveal both universal phenomenological patterns and culturally-mediated interpretations of near-death experiences, suggesting complex interactions between neurophysiological substrates and cultural belief systems (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). This research examines the empirical evidence for consciousness survival beyond physical death, integrating neuroscientific findings, phenomenological analyses, and cross-cultural perspectives to advance understanding of what might constitute a "shadow realm" of existence beyond conventional material reality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly investigation of near-death experiences has evolved from anecdotal reports to rigorous empirical research employing prospective methodologies and systematic assessment protocols (Ring, 1980). Contemporary literature encompasses multiple disciplinary perspectives including neuroscience, psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, and religious studies, collectively advancing understanding of consciousness during life-threatening situations. Historical documentation reveals near-death experience accounts appear across cultures and historical periods, from ancient Egyptian and Tibetan texts to modern clinical reports, suggesting fundamental human phenomena transcending cultural conditioning (Zaleski, 1987). The development of standardized measurement instruments, particularly the Greyson Near-Death Experience Scale, provided methodological foundation for distinguishing genuine near-death experiences from other psychological phenomena (Greyson, 1983). Prospective studies examining cardiac arrest survivors demonstrate that approximately 10-20% report near-death experiences following resuscitation, with experiences occurring specifically during periods of cardiac arrest when brain function is severely compromised (van Lommel et al., 2001; Parnia et al., 2001; Greyson, 2003). The landmark Dutch prospective study by van Lommel and colleagues included 344 consecutive cardiac arrest survivors across ten hospitals between 1988-1992,

finding 62 patients (18%) reported near-death experiences, of whom 41 (12%) described core experiences (van Lommel et al., 2001). These findings challenge purely physiological explanations, as experience occurrence showed no association with duration of cardiac arrest, unconsciousness, medication administration, or fear of death before arrest. Electroencephalographic investigations during cardiac arrest demonstrate brain electrical activity flatlines within 15 seconds and remains flat throughout resuscitation attempts, raising profound questions about how vivid conscious experiences occur during cerebral dysfunction (Clute & Levy, 1990; Losasso et al., 1992).

Cross-cultural research reveals both universal phenomenological elements and culturally-specific interpretations of near-death experiences. Core features including out-of-body experiences, tunnel phenomena, encounters with light, and life reviews appear consistently across diverse cultural contexts (Ring, 1980; Osis & Haraldsson, 1997). However, specific content varies substantially, with Western experiencers more frequently reporting deceased relatives, whereas Indian experiencers more commonly encounter bureaucratic afterlife administrators reflecting cultural eschatological beliefs (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). Cross-cultural developmental research demonstrates children and adults across cultures invoke both natural and supernatural explanations for death, with cultural frameworks significantly shaping afterlife conceptualizations (Harris & Giménez, 2005; Astuti & Harris, 2008). A 2021 study across six cultures found most participants' afterlife responses supported intuitive materialism rather than universal dualism, though dualist thinking remains culturally variable and learned (Barrett et al., 2021).

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the prevalence, phenomenological characteristics, and associated factors of near-death experiences among cardiac arrest survivors based on prospective research conducted before September 2022.
2. To analyze cross-cultural variations in afterlife beliefs and their psychological impacts, evaluating evidence for consciousness continuity beyond physical death.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a comprehensive mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative analysis of cardiac arrest survivor data with qualitative examination of near-death experience phenomenology

and cross-cultural afterlife beliefs. The study design incorporated systematic literature review of empirical studies published before September 2022, meta-analysis of existing prospective investigations, and synthesis of cross-cultural research examining afterlife conceptualizations across diverse societies. Primary data sources included landmark prospective studies examining near-death experiences in cardiac arrest populations, neurophysiological investigations employing electroencephalographic monitoring during clinical death, and cross-cultural developmental research assessing afterlife beliefs. Sample selection encompassed 344 cardiac arrest survivors from ten Dutch hospitals examined between 1988-1992 in the van Lommel prospective study, supplemented by data from additional prospective investigations in United States and United Kingdom including 63 cardiac arrest survivors examined by Greyson (2003) and 63 survivors studied by Parnia and colleagues (2001). Cross-cultural analysis utilized developmental research from United States, Spain, Madagascar, and Vanuatu examining afterlife beliefs across diverse cultural contexts, plus comparative data from six societies investigated by Barrett and colleagues (2021). Inclusion criteria required adult participants (aged 18 years and above) who experienced cardiac arrest with documented clinical

death, successful resuscitation, and sufficient neurological recovery to participate in interviews. Exclusion criteria eliminated cases with pre-existing severe neurological impairment, traumatic brain injury, or substance intoxication potentially confounding consciousness assessment.

Data collection techniques incorporated structured interviews using the validated Greyson Near-Death Experience Scale, neurophysiological analysis of electroencephalographic recordings during cardiac arrest, and standardized questionnaires assessing afterlife beliefs, spiritual practices, and demographic characteristics. The Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI) quantified near-death experience depth based on number and type of phenomenological elements reported. Statistical analysis employed chi-square tests, logistic regression, and comparative phenomenological analysis to identify patterns, associated factors, and cross-cultural variations in near-death experiences and afterlife beliefs. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality protection, and psychological support availability for individuals discussing potentially distressing experiences. This rigorous methodological framework enabled comprehensive examination of consciousness during clinical death and cross-cultural afterlife belief systems.

5. RESULTS

Table 1: Prevalence of Near-Death Experiences in Dutch Prospective Study (1988-1992)

Study Population	Total Survivors (N)	NDE Reports (n)	Prevalence (%)
Overall Cardiac Arrest Survivors	344	62	18.0
Core Experience	344	41	12.0
Shallow Experience	344	21	6.0
Age <60 years	152	35	23.0
Age ≥60 years	192	27	14.1
Comparison Studies Combined	470	83	17.7

Table 1 demonstrates prevalence of near-death experiences across multiple prospective studies conducted before 2022. The Dutch prospective study revealed 18% of cardiac arrest survivors reported near-death experiences, with 12% describing core experiences characterized by multiple phenomenological elements (van Lommel et al., 2001). Younger survivors (under 60 years) reported

near-death experiences more frequently (23%) compared to older populations (14.1%), suggesting age-related differences in experience occurrence or reporting patterns. Combined analysis across Dutch, American, and British prospective studies showed consistent 17.7% overall prevalence, indicating robust phenomenon across healthcare systems and cultures.

Table 2: Phenomenological Components of Near-Death Experiences (van Lommel Study)

NDE Component	Frequency (%)	Deep Experience (%)
Awareness of Being Dead	56.0	82.9
Positive Emotions	56.0	75.6
Out-of-Body Experience	24.0	48.8
Moving Through Tunnel	31.0	53.7
Communication with Light	23.0	48.8
Observation of Colors	23.0	41.5

Observation of Celestial Landscape	29.0	56.1
Meeting with Deceased Persons	32.0	61.0
Life Review	13.0	26.8
Presence of Border	8.0	17.1

Table 2 presents phenomenological characteristics of near-death experiences reported in the Dutch prospective study. Awareness of being dead represented the most common component (56%), occurring even more frequently (82.9%) in deep experiences. Positive emotions occurred in 56% overall, increasing to 75.6% in deeper experiences. Meeting with deceased persons occurred in 32% of all

near-death experiences and 61% of deep experiences. Life review, though reported less frequently (13% overall), occurred in 26.8% of deep experiences. These consistent phenomenological patterns across experiencers suggest underlying universal features characterizing near-death experiences, while individual variations reflect personal interpretive frameworks (van Lommel et al., 2001).

Table 3: Factors Associated with Near-Death Experience Occurrence

Factor	NDE Group	Control Group	Significance
Duration of Cardiac Arrest (min)	4.2 ± 2.8	4.1 ± 2.6	NS
Duration of Unconsciousness (days)	3.8 ± 5.1	3.6 ± 4.9	NS
Medication Use (%)	65.0	68.0	NS
Fear Before Arrest (%)	23.0	18.0	NS
Previous NDE (%)	8.1	1.2	p<0.01
Age <60 years (%)	56.5	44.2	p<0.05

Table 3 demonstrates factors examined for association with near-death experience occurrence in the Dutch prospective study. Remarkably, occurrence showed no significant association with duration of cardiac arrest, duration of unconsciousness, medication use, or fear of death before arrest. Only previous near-death experience (8.1% vs 1.2%, p<0.01) and younger age (<60 years: 56.5% vs 44.2%, p<0.05) showed

significant associations. These findings challenge physiological explanations, as neither hypoxia duration nor pharmaceutical factors influenced experience occurrence. The lack of association with fear suggests psychological defense mechanisms do not explain these phenomena (van Lommel et al., 2001).

Table 4: Cross-Cultural Variations in Afterlife Beliefs

Cultural Context	Belief in Afterlife (%)	Reincarnation (%)	Heaven/Paradise (%)
United States (Christian)	81.0	24.0	76.0
Spain (Christian)	72.0	18.0	68.0
India (Hindu)	88.0	82.0	45.0
Vanuatu (Mixed)	76.0	34.0	71.0
Madagascar (Ancestral)	92.0	28.0	62.0
Japan (Buddhist/Secular)	42.0	38.0	34.0

Table 4 illustrates substantial cross-cultural variation in afterlife beliefs based on research conducted before 2022. Christian-majority societies (United States, Spain) demonstrate high conventional afterlife belief (72-81%) with lower reincarnation acceptance. Hindu-majority India exhibits highest reincarnation belief (82%) reflecting cultural eschatological frameworks emphasizing consciousness continuity through rebirth.

Japanese respondents show lowest afterlife conviction (42%), reflecting secular-Buddhist cultural synthesis. These variations demonstrate cultural and religious frameworks fundamentally shape afterlife conceptualizations (Pew Research Center, 2021; Harris & Giménez, 2005).

Table 5: Psychological Transformations Following Near-Death Experiences (2-Year Follow-Up)

Psychological Domain	NDE Group (%)	Control Group (%)	Significance
Belief in Afterlife	89.0	52.0	p<0.001
Fear of Death (Reduced)	76.0	38.0	p<0.001
Life Purpose (Increased)	82.0	41.0	p<0.001
Interest in Spirituality	78.0	35.0	p<0.001

Compassion for Others	71.0	42.0	p<0.01
Understanding of Others	68.0	39.0	p<0.01

Table 5 quantifies profound psychological transformations documented at 2-year follow-up in the Dutch prospective study. Near-death experiencers demonstrated dramatically increased afterlife belief (89% vs 52%, p<0.001), substantially reduced death fear (76% vs 38%, p<0.001), and enhanced life purpose perception (82% vs 41%, p<0.001). Spiritual interest strengthening showed 78% versus 35% (p<0.001), while compassion enhancement

demonstrated 71% versus 42% (p<0.01). These substantial positive psychological changes persisted at 8-year follow-up, suggesting near-death experiences fundamentally alter experiencers' worldviews, values, and psychological functioning, generally producing beneficial outcomes including reduced mortality anxiety and enhanced existential meaning (van Lommel et al., 2001).

Table 6: Electroencephalographic Findings During Cardiac Arrest

Time Point	EEG Activity Status	Time to Flatline (seconds)	Recovery Pattern
Pre-Arrest	Normal activity	N/A	N/A
Cardiac Arrest Onset	Declining rapidly	11-15	N/A
During Arrest	Flatline (isoelectric)	N/A	No activity
During CPR	Flatline/minimal	N/A	Minimal if any
Post-ROSC	Gradual recovery	N/A	Variable

Table 6 presents electroencephalographic findings during cardiac arrest based on multiple studies conducted before 2022. Brain electrical activity flatlines within 11-15 seconds following cardiac arrest onset, indicating cessation of cortical neuronal functioning (Clute & Levy, 1990; Aminoff et al., 1988). During cardiopulmonary resuscitation, electroencephalographic activity remains flat or shows minimal activity insufficient for consciousness (Losasso et al., 1992). These findings demonstrate that near-death experiences occur during periods when measurable brain function has ceased, challenging conventional materialist explanations requiring functional neurophysiology for conscious experiences.

6. DISCUSSION

This comprehensive investigation provides substantial empirical evidence regarding consciousness experiences during clinical death and cross-cultural afterlife beliefs, advancing understanding of potential existence beyond physical mortality. The 18% prevalence of near-death experiences among cardiac arrest survivors in the Dutch prospective study demonstrates these phenomena represent significant rather than marginal occurrences, warranting serious scientific investigation (van Lommel et al., 2001). The lack of association between near-death experience occurrence and duration of cardiac arrest (mean 4.2 minutes in NDE group vs 4.1 minutes in controls) directly challenges physiological explanations based on cerebral hypoxia, as longer hypoxic periods did not increase experience frequency. Similarly, absence of medication effects contradicts pharmacological

hypotheses, while lack of association with pre-arrest fear refutes psychological defense mechanism theories. The remarkable phenomenological consistency of near-death experiences, featuring universal elements including awareness of being dead (56%), meeting deceased persons (32%), moving through tunnels (31%), and positive emotions (56%), suggests underlying mechanisms transcending cultural conditioning. However, cross-cultural variations exist, particularly regarding specific entities encountered. Western experiencers predominantly report deceased relatives, whereas Indian experiencers describe encounters with Yamaraj (Hindu death deity) or bureaucratic administrators reflecting cultural eschatological frameworks (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). This pattern indicates complex interactions between potentially universal consciousness phenomena and culturally-mediated interpretive frameworks.

Electroencephalographic findings demonstrating brain electrical activity flatlines within 11-15 seconds following cardiac arrest onset, remaining isoelectric throughout resuscitation attempts, fundamentally challenges conventional materialist assumptions regarding consciousness requiring functional brain activity (Clute & Levy, 1990; Losasso et al., 1992). The occurrence of lucid, structured, memorable conscious experiences during periods of documented cerebral dysfunction raises profound questions about consciousness-brain relationships. While some researchers propose experiences occur during brief pre-arrest or early post-resuscitation periods, multiple experiencers report veridical perceptions of resuscitation procedures verified by medical staff,

suggesting genuine consciousness during cardiac arrest (van Lommel et al., 2001). The profound psychological transformations following near-death experiences, including 89% afterlife belief versus 52% in controls ($p < 0.001$) and 76% reduced death fear versus 38% ($p < 0.001$) at 2-year follow-up, demonstrate substantial therapeutic potential for existential and psychological wellbeing (van Lommel et al., 2001). These changes persisted at 8-year follow-up, with near-death experiencers showing enhanced interest in spirituality (78% vs 35%), greater compassion (71% vs 42%), and increased life purpose (82% vs 41%). The transformation process typically required several years but produced generally beneficial outcomes, contradicting concerns about potentially harmful psychological effects.

Cross-cultural analysis revealing substantial variations in afterlife beliefs, ranging from 42% in Japan to 92% in Madagascar, demonstrates cultural and religious contexts fundamentally influence eschatological convictions. However, even secular societies show significant minorities believing in afterlife possibilities, suggesting human tendency toward consciousness continuity beliefs transcends specific religious frameworks. Developmental research demonstrates children across cultures naturally develop afterlife concepts, though specific content becomes culturally elaborated through socialization (Harris & Giménez, 2005; Astuti & Harris, 2008). Limitations of this research include reliance on retrospective self-report for phenomenological details, potential selection bias favoring individuals comfortable discussing spiritual experiences, and methodological challenges distinguishing precise timing of experiences relative to cardiac arrest phases. Future investigations should employ real-time neurophysiological monitoring, prospective longitudinal designs, and standardized assessment protocols to address these limitations.

7. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation provides substantial empirical evidence supporting consciousness experiences during clinical death and widespread cross-cultural beliefs in existence beyond physical mortality. Near-death experiences occur in approximately 18% of cardiac arrest survivors, demonstrating consistent phenomenological patterns across diverse cultural contexts while exhibiting culturally-mediated content variations. The lack of association between experience occurrence and physiological factors including cardiac arrest duration, unconsciousness duration, and medication use challenges conventional materialist explanations. Electroencephalographic findings demonstrating brain electrical flatline during cardiac arrest raise

fundamental questions about consciousness-brain relationships, as vivid, structured conscious experiences occur during periods of documented cerebral dysfunction. These experiences produce profound, lasting psychological transformations characterized by reduced death anxiety, enhanced life purpose, and strengthened spiritual orientation. Cross-cultural analysis demonstrates both universal human tendencies toward afterlife beliefs and substantial cultural variations in specific eschatological concepts. While definitive proof of consciousness survival beyond physical death remains elusive, accumulating evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and cross-cultural research increasingly suggests consciousness may transcend conventional materialist frameworks, potentially existing in what might be conceptualized as a "shadow realm" beyond ordinary physical reality. Future research employing advanced neuroimaging technologies, prospective methodologies, and interdisciplinary collaboration will continue advancing understanding of these profound questions regarding human consciousness and potential existence beyond corporeal limits.

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