

A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings: Scientific Inquiries into the Experiences of Persons Near Physical Death, ed. by Craig R. Lundahl.

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Abstract:

Book reviewed in this article:

A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings: Scientific Inquiries Into the Experiences of Persons Near Physical Death. Craig R. Lundahl (ed.), Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1982. 240 pp.

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Article:

BOOK REVIEW

A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings: Scientific Inquiries Into the Experiences of Persons Near Physical Death. Craig R. Lundahl (ed.), Chicago: Nelson-Hall

Publishers, 1982. 240 pp.

The subject of this edited volume is circumthanatology, scientific inquiry into an aspect of death known as the near-death experience (NDE). There are two types of NDEs, deathbed visions and visions that occur when persons, not necessarily ill, suddenly brush with death. The purposes of this volume are: (1) to disseminate information on near-death research, (2) to encourage further research and teaching in the area of near-death research, and (3) to contribute to a re-evaluation of our society's orientation toward death and dying. The authors are from the fields of medicine, philosophy, psychology, social work, psychiatry, and sociology. The book is mainly written for researchers but might also appeal to others interested in unexplained phenomena.

Near-death is a relatively new topic of scientific inquiry. As Widdison, the only sociologist among the contributors to this collection, observes, NDEs have been viewed as religious and thus inappropriate for scientific research. For this reason, the book itself and the area of inquiry are critiqued separately in this review.

The book provides an excellent introduction to and overview of a field about which this reviewer knew nothing and was skeptical. Chapters range from accounts of anecdotal evidence to reports of the results of surveys and from polemical statements to theoretical discussions. The authors reference and critique one another often which gives one the impression, seemingly accurate, that the volume includes examples of the full range of near-death research.

While inclusiveness is a strength of this volume, it is also its major flaw. Not all of the chapters can really be considered “scientific” in the true sense of the word. For example, a chapter on historical perspectives on near-death episodes and experiences is merely a loosely strung together series of anecdotes about NDEs. The objective of this chapter, which is admittedly achieved, is to demonstrate that NDEs occurred before our era. This chapter, not the only one of its sort, appears early in the book which makes it difficult to take the broader topic seriously. A casual reader might well put the book aside, especially after reading the anecdote about a monk who became a father nine months after having intercourse with the “body” of a young girl who was later resuscitated. Perhaps, after all, a casual reader would be intrigued by this morbid morsel, but any serious scholar would surely be left asking why the story was important to tell.

Putting aside the book would be a mistake for the interested researcher, however, because some of the other chapters represent serious attempts to understand a baffling topic. One particularly interesting chapter, by Grosso, reviews and summarizes the existing theoretical explanations for NDEs. He correctly observes that an adequate theoretical explanation of NDEs, of which there are none, must explain the apparent consistency and universality of NDEs, their para-normal aspects, and their power to modify attitudes and behavior. He proposes a Jungian explanation and, once again correctly, says that adopting it would be premature.

Near-death experiences clearly deserve more attention by serious researchers. Sociologists, in particular, could make important contributions to the area. For example, the study designs, even of the systematic surveys, were inadequate. Many of the researchers relied on referrals from physicians, on volunteers responding to media coverage, or even on secondhand reports.

There are three substantive areas of inquiry which may be of interest to some sociological researchers. First, there is still work to be done in the conceptualization and measurement of NDEs. The research reported in this volume adequately documents some of the elements of an NDE, for example, feelings of peace, body separation, entering the darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light. It is not clear, however, whether these elements represent stages of the NDE, as Ring suggests, or whether they represent different types of NDEs. The one formal

measure used in this collection of chapters, the Weighted Core Experience Index, measures the depth of a “classic” NDE merely by assigning equal weight to the occurrence of each element.

Second, though all of the evidence presented in this volume suggests that demographic, cultural, and social factors have little or no effect on the Occurrence and nature of NDEs, this topic should be investigated further. One cannot help but think that better study designs, better measures, and more sophisticated statistical techniques might uncover patterns that have not yet surfaced.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, sociologists could inquire into the consequences of NDEs. Authors in this volume suggest that persons who have had NDEs are less likely to fear death, are better able to cope with terminal illness, are more likely to value life, and feel more purposive than those who nearly die but have no NDE. One is reminded of W. I. Thomas’ statement, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

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