

*Published in: Journal of Near-Death Studies*      *Vol. 20, 1 (2001), 15-29.*

## **The Different Experience**

# **A Report on a Survey of Near-Death Experiences in Germany**

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**Abstract**

The text provides a short summary of a representative survey on NDE in Germany that has been conducted in 1997-1998 which is the first of this kind in Europe. On the background of previous research on NDE, we are posing several problems which have been central to our investigation. These problems include: the assumption of a unified pattern of experience, of the universality of the pattern, of the necessary link between NDE and clinical death etc. These and other assumptions have been tested in this representative survey which received replies by more than 2.000 persons. As a result we found that some 4 percent of the population reported NDEs. Moreover, the patterns of the NDEs do not seem to correspond to earlier findings: Aside from being much more diverse, they also differ with respect to cultural variables, particularly the difference between religious affiliations and the differences between post-socialist East Germany and West Germany.

## **The Different Experience — a Report on a Survey of Near-Death Experiences in Germany**

### **1. Background**

Reports on near-death experiences have become almost a cultural fashion. Television shows, magazines, newspaper and other media frequently present people who talk about experiences of this kind. Nevertheless, we know little as to how many people did make experiences of this kind, and we do not know the range of experiences involved. The research project at the University of Constance, Germany on ‘structure and distribution of near-death experiences’ tries to address these questions.<sup>1</sup> The project aims at a representative survey on near-death experiences (NDEs) in the Federal Republic of Germany and an analysis of the structure of the corresponding reports on NDEs.

Near-death experiences are reported by people who lived to see a situation in which they felt to be near death, dying or even being dead. Typically these experiences are considered as different to everyday life, and they involve different elements, phases or motifs.

Near-death experiences are sometimes treated as authentic reports of the transcendent reality lying beyond the realms of life; as constructions of consciousness within a body in crises; observers who are more critical of these phenomenon regard them as forms of commemorative stories similar to the genre of urban legends such as the vanished hitchhiker, i.e. as products of imagination.

The phenomenon covered by the notion of NDE are historically frequent. Reports on such experiences are known from pre-Christian history, ranging from Sumerian to classical Greek culture (Moraldi 1987, 20f.). They are also mentioned in the Bible (2

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<sup>1</sup> The research project is supported by the INSTITUT FÜR GRENZGEBIETE DER PSYCHOLOGIE UND PSYCHOHYGIENE (IGPP), Freiburg. It is conducted by Hans-Georg Soeffner, Hubert Knoblauch, Ina Schmied and Bernt Schnettler.

Kor. 12,1-4). As Dinzelbacher (1985) found, reports on NDEs as subjective experiences of death constitute one of the most popular genres in the high middle ages. At this time, the genre tends to become fictionalised in literature, adapting elements from mysticism and Christian iconology (Dinzelbacher 1991). In Protestantism, the beginning 18th century lives to see a mounting number of reports about experiences near death which typically functioned as moral instructions (Clark 1852). In the 19th century, death books played an important role. They contained statements by dying persons and were considered as warrants for the claim that dying not necessarily means the end of existence (Zaleski 1995).

Scientifically orientated investigations started at the end of the 19th century. The first systematic collection of reports on NDE has been provided by the Swiss geologist Albert Heim (1892). He interpreted reports by mountain climbers who survived serious falls. He found these reports to be strongly religious in content and showed that 95 percent of such accident victims experienced being near-death as being exceedingly pleasant. In 1926, the British physicist Sir William Barrett published a study on 'Deathbed Visions' which includes near-death experiences. Yet, although the phenomenon had been discussed before (Scott 1931; Tucker 1943), it was only in more recent time that near-death experiences triggered what may be called a cultural fashion. One major influence on this development have been the popular books of the psychiatrist and physician Raymond Moody (1975). Moody had interviewed 150 people and found recurring elements in their reports which he combined into what he constructed as the ideal case. Typically, this ideal case is described in terms of 15 consecutive elements: such as the notice of one's own death which is followed by a feeling of silence and inner peace, then by sounds. After hearing sounds one enters something which resembles a dark tunnel, then seems to be leaving one's body. Descriptions also include the meeting of others, the perception of light or a creature of light, panorama of one's life, etc.

## **2. Assumptions on NDE**

Following Moody, a host of researchers studied this phenomenon, such as Ring, Grosso, Grof and Halifax, Russell and Kletti, to mention but a few. In much of this research, a

number of assumption became accepted which we subject to further scrutiny. These assumption include:

(1) NDEs are *linked to the biological death*. This assumption holds that the experiences can be made only by subjects who have been medically in the most dangerous conditions, such as clinical death. This assumption led several investigations to concentrate solely on people who have been near-death. Thus Schoonmaker (1979) restricted his studies to survivors of medically life-threatening situations as did Osis and Haraldsson (1977) and Sabom (1982).

(2) Many researchers assume that NDEs exhibit a *common structure* and manifest a *unified, common schema* (Zaleski 1995). Despite the communality of this assumption, investigators often disagree as to what elements form part of the basic structures. Whereas Moody mentioned 15 elements, Schröter-Kunhardt (1993) finds eleven, Sabom (1982) identifies ten elements as do Gallup and Procter (1982), and Ring (1980) finds NDEs to be constituted by five phases. In general, one can identify two tendencies.

(a) In the tradition of Moody, a host of prominent researchers maintain that the structure of *NDEs is constituted predominantly by certain substantial elements*. By substantial elements we refer to the content of what is being experienced, or, in phenomenological terms, the ‘noema’ of these experiences (Since the content of these experienced are only accessible by language, we would rather prefer to call them motives.) These include experiences described as tunnel, light, out-of-body etc.

Similarly to Moody it is also assumed that these motives occur one after another, i.e. that the NDE exhibits a certain *sequenciality* — which is often considered to be very clear-cut. Thus Ring (1984) identifies five different ‘phases’ (feeling of inner peace, out-of-body experience, entering darkness, perception of light, entering light) which are assumed to succeed one another. (In talking about elements or motives, one should also mention that some of them have also been studied in isolation, such as out-of-body experiences, tunnel and panoramic experiences (cf. Blackmore 1982; Drab 1981; Noyes and Kletti 1977)).

(b) The other strand of research assumes that *NDEs are rather to be described in terms of forms of experiences*. By forms of experience we refer to the ways how the experiences are made or, to put it phenomenologically, their ‘noetic’ quality. In this vein, Sabom (1982) (who has conducted interviews with large numbers of persons near to physical death) tends to use more abstract categories which are related to the study of religious experience. To him, NDEs are characterised by ineffability, timelessness, sense of reality, feeling of being dead, acoustical perceptions, body separation, mental journey and return. Greyson and Stevenson (1980) characterise NDEs by four core dimensions (cognitive, affective, paranormal and transcendent) which we have included in our questionnaire.

(c) Aside from the typical motives of NDEs, there are some additional elements which are often taken for granted as being part of a common structure of NDEs. These include the assumption that:

- *NDEs lead to fundamental changes in life*. On the one hand they may just affect the subject’s image of and attitude to death; on the other hand they may lead to serious changes and ‘after effects’ on the subject’s life style, ranging from different social behaviour to increased religiousness. According to Atwater (1988), Flynn (1986), Ring (1992), Sutherland (1990, 1992) etc., NDE-experiencers tend towards post-materialist values; some believe that they have been chosen for some unique but still unknown mission, a conviction that it was God or some other supernatural force that was responsible for their new sense of destiny, and a new or intensified belief in some form of life after death; there is also an increasing belief in reincarnation (Wells 1993).
- NDEs are subject to *ineffability*, i.e. they are said to be expressed in language and communication only with great difficulty and loss of content.
- NDEs are a *taboo* issue in most communicative contexts. Therefore subjects typically hide their experiences and communicate them only under special circumstances.
- Although there are a few evidences for some NDEs being evaluated as unpleasant, bad or ‘hellish’ experiences, one common assumption is still that *NDEs are of a distinctly positive nature*.

(3) It is maintained the assumption that NDEs follow ‘universal laws of symbolic experience’ (McClenon 1994, 172) which remain constant across cultural as well as social differences. Thus Roberts and Owens (1988, 611) claim: „The central features of the NDE have been recorded throughout history and across numerous cultures and religious groups“. And Schröter-Kunhardt concludes that NDEs exhibit outstanding cross-cultural similarities of form, despite considerable diversity of imagery and content, i.e. recurrent motifs, composite imagery and a series of sequential events (Schröter-Kunhardt 1990). We shall refer to this assumption as the *universality assumption*. In a more sophisticated version the assumption concedes that there are differences in the structure of experience; yet, these differences are said to be accounted for by different degrees of elaboration and depth of investigation of other accidental circumstances.

(4) NDEs are often said to be linked to *religious interpretations* in two different ways. On the one hand, the assumption of a universal structure of the NDE led some investigators to speculate about a religious explanation for these experiences by postulating either the existence of the reality experienced (Kübler-Ross 1969) or the existence of a religious faculty of human experience which supposedly forms the basis of the universal structure (Roberts and Owen 1988).

Secondly and on a more empirical basis, some investigators found that these experiences are regarded as religious by the subjects. Thus Ring states: „A specifically religious interpretation is given to it by many, though not all, of the core experiencers“ (1982, 138). The same is observed by McClenon in his interviews of American and Japanese students (McClenon 1993). Moreover the NDE is said to increase individual religiosity (Schröter-Kunhardt 1990, 1017).

### **3. Methods**

In general, we start from the assumption that one has to distinguish between *experiences* of near death and *reports* on NDEs. As scientific observers, we only have access to the reports on NDEs. This also holds for those studies which claim to investigate experiences. Actually, reports on NDEs are, in general (and leaving aside genre issues) *communicatively constituted accounts of what is claimed to have been experienced*

*subjectively*. (There is an interesting issue on the relation between experience, communication and culture involved here which, however, cannot be pursued at this point. Suffice it to say that our sociological interests are strongly related to this issue.) On the grounds of this assumption we infer that there must be social and cultural influences on NDE reports since the communication of experiences is a social activity per se. Our main thesis, therefore, is that (1) the structure of (reports on) these experiences varies, and (2) that it is subject to cultural and social factors.

The overall goal of the research project was to pursue two questions: (1) how many people have made these experiences, and (2) what are the structures of these experiences. Both questions will be analysed with respect to their relation to social and cultural variables. Of particular interest seemed to us the possibility to compare East German data with data from West Germany since both societies differ with respect to some crucial cultural features. (The survey was preceded by a series of 18 qualitative interviews conducted by Hubert Knoblauch. In addition to available investigations of similar kinds, we drew on the results of these interviews in the development of the questionnaire.)

Since the distribution of NDEs constituted one of our two main goals, we had to address a sample representing the whole society. In order to achieve this goal, we collaborated with a well recognised institute specialised in surveys, ZUMA at Mannheim, which conducted the survey. Taking account of the ensuing restrictions and particularly in order to address our second goal, the structure of NDE, we decided to split the questionnaire. That is that the whole sample of the survey had been asked if they did have an NDE or similar experience. Following this filtering question the second part of the interview had been addressed only to those who gave positive answers (or 'I am not sure') to this question. They were asked to fill out the questionnaire by themselves. In addition to these data, we also have access to the socio-demographic data of our sample and of the general survey.

The questionnaire consisted of a series of questions including multiple choice, scales as well as open questions which had been tested in advance. In order to access the structure of experience, we formulated a multiple choice question including a host of different items, motives and features mentioned by earlier researchers. In addition, we asked to

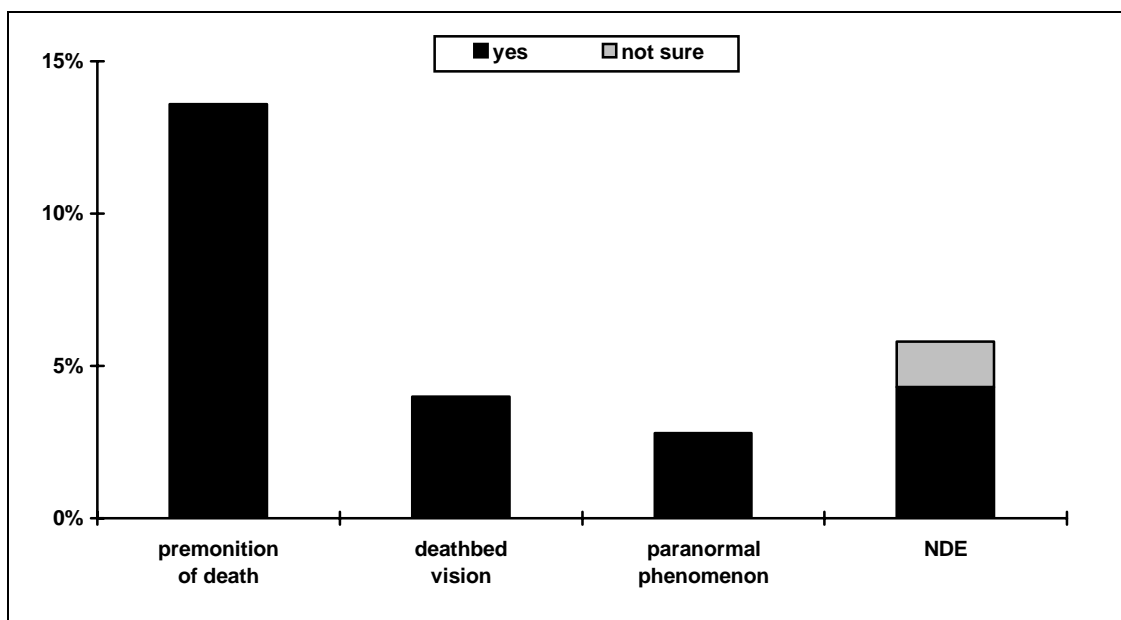


formulate the content of experience in an open question. The questionnaire of course included questions on the circumstances of the experience, the interpretation, the religious meaning etc. The structured questions have been subject to statistical analysis, using loglinear models to explain the influences on NDE. We also applied cluster analysis for the classification of particular experiences. Open questions, on the other hand, have been interpreted by qualitative methods which considered (a) the form of recounting (narrative structure) and (b) topical contents (motifs).

#### 4. Results

Of the exactly 2044 persons interviewed, 356 answered positively to have had experiences with death of at least one of the following kinds (multiple responses): 258 (13.6 percent) did have a premonition of someone else's death (which, in their view, later proved true), 79 (4.0 percent) did witness death-bed visions, and 55 (2.8 percent) lived to see paranormal phenomena while being together with dying persons (i.e. a cup breaks at the moment of death). With respect to the NDE, 118 persons filled out the split questionnaire, which amounts to 5.8 percent of the sample.

**Figure 1: Frequencies of extraordinary experiences related to death**



N= 2044

However, it would be exaggerated to conclude that the number of NDEs in the sample, and therefore in the population amounts to the same number of 5.8 percent since we did include also those who stated that they were not sure. On the basis of the multiple choice and open questioned, we have been eliminating those questionnaires which were not directly related to NDE, such as death shocks, death presentiments, NDE reports of second persons etc.

As a result, we found that about 4 percent (n=82) of the sample did report an NDE. It should be stressed that this can be considered the first representative survey on the distribution of NDEs in Germany. The results on the distribution of NDEs can be considered as representative in a statistical sense. Thence, with respect to the total population of Germany (81.8 Million in 1995) the results lead to assume that about 3.3 million Germans have lived to see such an experience. The sample exhibited a very symmetrical distribution between East (40) and West (42), men (41) and women (41), again with a symmetric distribution in East (20 each) and West (21 each). The average age of the persons was 35.6 years. NDEs dated back from 1 to 65 years, the average being 13 years. The percentage of NDE with respect to the sex of the sample was slightly higher for men (4.3 percent) than for women (3.8 percent). Whereas the results on the distribution of the NDE can be taken as representative, the details with respect to other variables can be taken to indicate only tendencies. Nevertheless, some of these tendencies do allow to address the assumptions mentioned above quite clearly.

As to the question if NDEs are typically *linked to biological death*, our data gave a very clear indication. (In the questionnaire, this question was asked twice with respect to the subjective evidence and inter-subjective evidences.) In fact, less than 50 percent of the respondents asserted to have been in a life-threatening situation when experiencing NDE, and only 6 percent claimed to have been clinically dead.

The fact that the questionnaire allowed for open questions yielded particularly interesting results with respect to the *structure of the NDE*. By analysing the descriptions of NDEs in close detail, we found some recurrent patterns which, however, had to be divided into different *types of NDE*. Surprisingly, the most detailed and explicit description of NDE did not correspond to what had been found by Moody, Ring and others. Instead of

consisting of a sequence of different events which may be characterised by some abstract motives, they consisted of singular scenes the content of which varies immensely. (Since the element of NDE are always parts of reports, we are referring to them as motives.) To give just a few examples: One person near death lives to see a scene in which scytheman tries to grasp her hand; in another scene he accompanies the person to the door - and is pushed out the door. Some of these scenes are experienced in some detail, yet they hardly exhibit any sequence of events or motives.

The less elaborated descriptions have been devoted to singular kinds of motives. However, even in these cases we have never found a single case which corresponds e.g. to Ring's phases. One may contend that the focus on single motives would be overcome if one would conduct in-depth interviews. Yet, as mentioned, we have conducted a series of in-depth interviews, and their results tend to support the findings in our survey. It may be most adequate to delineate the structure of experience according to different types. Although it must be admitted that a number of cases lay between the types, the majority of the written accounts falls into one of the following categories.

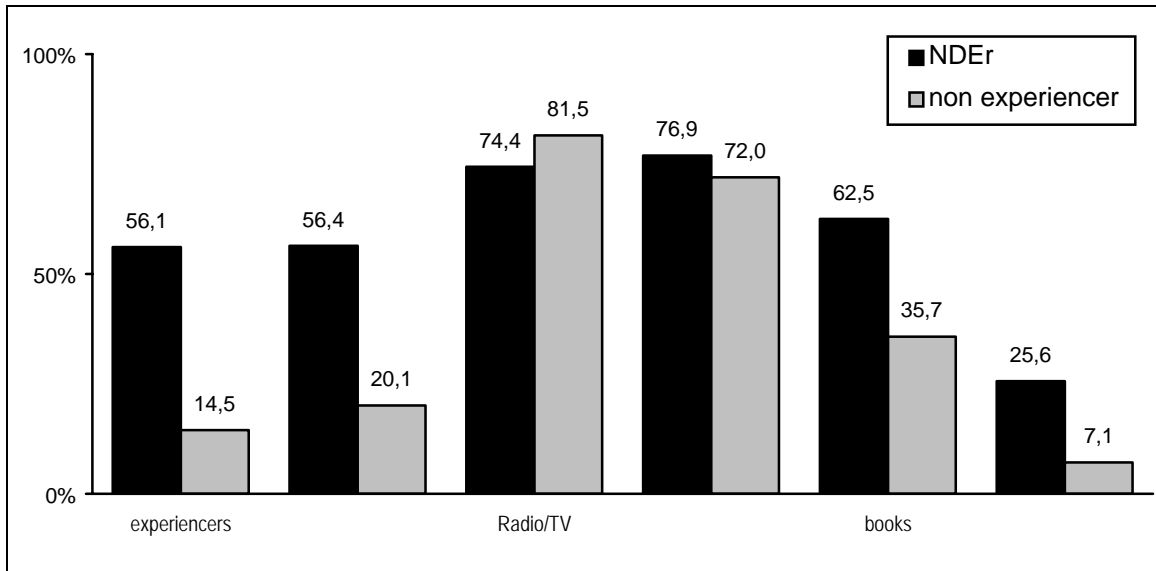
One type may be labelled '*being in transcendence*'. Reports of this kind are characterised by claims that experiences have been made in a transcendent reality which differs from their everyday life-world. Although this reality is compared to heaven or paradise, other persons are mentioned rarely, and the descriptions surprisingly lack references to god or similar god-like entities. Another type of reports focuses on the *emotional* quality of the experience („indifference“, „great feeling“). Other persons or activities are hardly mentioned. A range of reports highlight the *contrast of light and dark* which is understood in visual terms. They lack emotional features and take an almost distanced observational stance. Only in a few cases this type overlaps with reports on experiences which may be labelled as *out-of-body experiences*. And wherever we found descriptions of *panorama*-experiences, they had not been linked to any other feature. One of the most frequent types could be called '*scenic experience*'. They consist in often elaborate and detailed descriptions of single scenes, actions or events which either appear surreal, involve an encounter with other beings or consist in descriptions of landscapes reminding of the medieval topos of the '*locus amoenus*'.

Despite the different types of experiences, most of the reports stress they felt very conscious while experiencing the NDE (63 percent). Although the interviewees supported the ineffability hypothesis, i.e. the view that NDEs can hardly be expressed in words (80 percent), the assumption that NDEs are anathema in modern society does not hold at all. In fact, 73 percent declare that they meet on interested listeners when telling the story, 73 percent expect a strong interest in the topic by others and almost 60 percent believe that their stories are trusted.

Concerning the *after-effects* of the NDE the results of our sample contrast to previous findings: Although general statements without real behavioural consequences are supported (feeling to live more consciously increased for 69,5 percent of the interviewed, 63,4 percent show more interest in the meaning of life), religious belief and belief in god increased only for 28 percent (stable for 67,1 percent). Surprisingly, fear of death decreased only for 40 percent, remained stable for 40 percent and even increased for 20 percent!

The assumption of a common scheme of experiences which holds across cultures is difficult to test. Nevertheless, some variables in our data relate to this hypothesis. On the one hand, there seems to be a certain relation between experiencing the NDE and the knowledge about NDE: Whereas 52.4 percent of the NDEr knew of the phenomenon, only 34.4 percent of the non-experiencers had ever heard before about NDE. There are even more significant results if we compare the sources of their knowledge about NDEs.

**FIGURE 2 Sources of knowledge about NDE**




It is quite obvious that people know quite a lot about NDEs, a knowledge which is partly derived from mass media, independently of whether they have made such an experience or not. The knowledge relates either to the word 'NDE' or to the definition of its content. We should like to refer to the knowledge on NDE as an 'ethncategory'. On this background it is also interesting that experiencers have more specialised knowledge, e.g. drawing on books or going to special events. The most striking indication in this figure, however, is the importance of personal contacts. It seems as the chance of experiencing a NDE is related to the knowledge of someone else who knows about it or, even better, has experienced it himself.

Whereas this showed the influence of others on experiencing NDEs, there are indications for cultural differences. One of this indicators is directly related to the site of our survey. It is the fact that the survey has been conducted in Germany, a society which until recently had been divided between two different ideological systems. It is quite sound to assume that, before the 1990s, East Germans had very few information and cultural communication on NDE. On this background, it might be interesting to compare the results between East and West. First, one might be surprised to learn that NDEs seem to have been experienced in the East as much as in the West. Ideological differences do not seem to affect the occurrence of NDEs. If one however looks at the contents of NDEs, the differences become much more obvious.

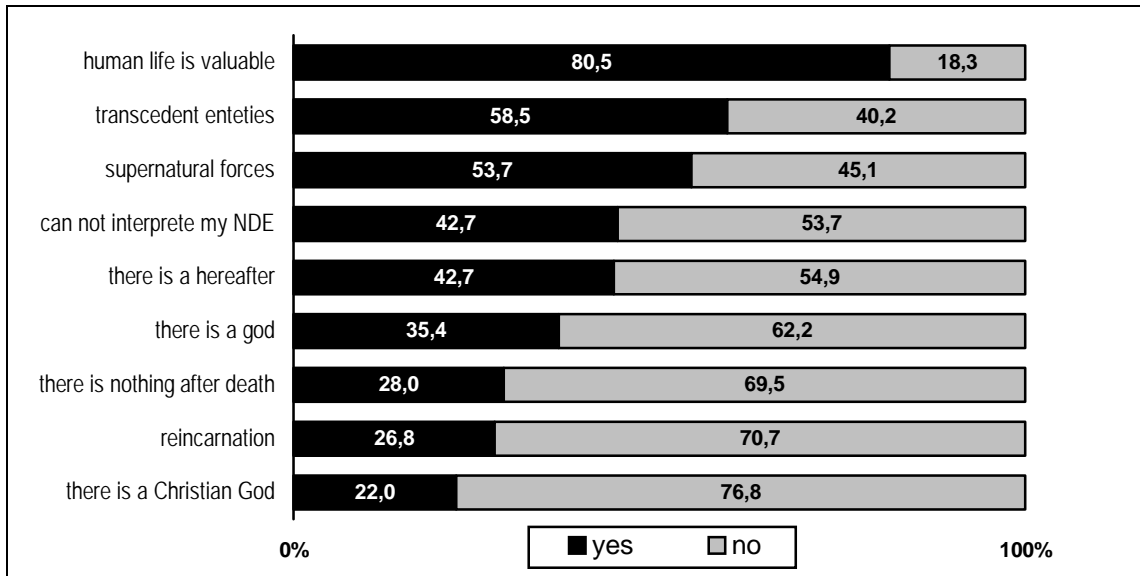
**Table 1: Contents of NDEs (percentages)**

motifs	Region		Sex		Religion		total
	West	East	male	female	un-churched	church-members	
wonderful feelings	<b>59.5</b>	40.0	43.9	<b>56.1</b>	<b>56.7</b>	46.2	50.0
life review	42.9	45.0	<b>48.8</b>	39.0	43.3	44.2	43.9
horrible world	<b>16.7</b>	10.0	<b>17.1</b>	9.8	16.7	11.5	13.4
tunnel	31.0	<b>45.0</b>	39.0	36.6	<b>53.3</b>	28.8	37.8
full mental awareness	66.7	62.5	61.0	68.3	63.3	65.4	64.6
OBE	38.1	22.5	<b>34.1</b>	26.8	23.3	<b>34.6</b>	30.5
light	<b>50.0</b>	30.0	31.7	<b>48.8</b>	40.0	40.4	40.2
heavenly world	<b>45.2</b>	30.0	29.3	<b>46.3</b>	40.0	36.5	37.8
horrible feelings	28.6	<b>60.0</b>	<b>48.8</b>	39.0	<b>50.0</b>	40.4	43.9
feeling of being dead	28.6	22.5	19.5	<b>31.7</b>	26.7	25.0	25.6
enter other world	<b>54.8</b>	40.0	43.9	<b>51.2</b>	46.7	48.1	47.6
contact with dead	11.9	<b>20.0</b>	17.1	14.6	<b>20.0</b>	13.5	15.9
met living persons	31.0	32.5	31.7	31.7	33.3	30.8	31.7
met non-human beings	11.9	10.0	9.8	12.2	10.0	11.5	11.0
<b>Total N</b>	42	40	41	41	30	52	82

In general, NDEs are experienced much more positively in the West (59,5 percent of the experiencers) than in the East (40 percent). Also certain motives (such as tunnel in the East, light in the West) are unequally distributed in statistically significant way.

The influence of cultural factors is supported by the variable of religiosity. On the one hand, members of the two big churches (roman-catholic and protestant) as well as non-members of religious organisations do not exhibit striking differences. The only exceptions are members of Christian religious sects which have slightly more NDEs than all others. Even if this result could hint at the influence of religious beliefs and socialisation, it has to be treated with caution, since the absolute numbers in this group are very low. Religious belief, on the other hand, show also some more solid picture if we look at the interpretations of NDEs. 

**Figure 3: Interpretations of NDEs**



(N=82, multiple responses)

Despite the fact that there are clear differences in religious affiliations between East (where about 25 percent of the population is member in churches and atheism is predominant) and the West (where the majority of the population is still member of the two churches), Christian interpretations of the NDE are of little importance. Only 22 percent held a stronger believe in the Christian God, in life after death, whereas 28 percent expect nothing to come after death. The most positive reactions are to humanistic or diffuse transcendent beliefs (higher, supernatural powers). These results suggest some very basic difference to the results of American surveys. Whereas in America NDEs seem to support religious belief, in Germany they rather undermine it.

## 5. Discussion

The results of the survey allow some quite clear answers to the problems posed. First, NDE seem to be a widespread phenomenon in contemporary societies, i.e. in Germany. This finding involves that a large part of the population knows the category of NDE. Despite the common knowledge of this category, the experiences people reported differed quite substantially. One may, of course, argue that this finding depends on the subjective definition of NDE. Yet, on the other hand, all notions of near-death experience depend on subjective evidences, so that one could argue that every reasonable definition of NDE must be based on a subjective definition.

In fact, the results indicate that a series of commonly held assumptions should be reconsidered. These include the assumption that NDE is linked to biological death (and the knowledge of being declared dead), the ineffability of the experience, the consequentiality of the experience or its religious meaning. More critically, the results suggest that NDEs do not exhibit a common structure. Although following certain patterns, these patterns can hardly be subsumed under one structure. For this reason, also the assumption that NDEs are a universal phenomenon seems to be at stake.

As the data indicate, NDEs do not only differ significantly between different experiencers according to several types; there are strong indications for cultural influences on NDEs. In this respect, the difference between East-German and West-German subjects would allow for the hypothesis that socio-cultural background not only affects the interpretation of NDEs but also the very content of what is being experienced. To say it in other words: *the content of NDE is culturally constructed*. There are further evidences for this assumption. If we scrutinise the reports on Indian (Salteaux) NDEs we find obvious differences in motives, i.e. tipi (HALLOWELL 1940); also the interpretations differ clearly, as. e.g. a comparison between American and (Marxist) Chinese NDEs shows (KELLEHEAR 1996). In addition, it has been shown that also Mormon NDEs differ in substantial ways from those described by Moody, Ring et. al. (LUNDAHL 1981-82).

This hypothesis seems also to hold with respect to religious affiliation. However, the most obvious cultural influence becomes salient if one compares the German data *in toto* with previously published studies, particularly on data from the U.S. (on which most of our literature review drew). Compared to *American* NDEs, the NDEs we found in Germany are significantly different. This difference in experience refers to:

(1) the *content* in terms of motives, sequences and emotional quality. Whereas American NDEs include a certain number of elements which seem to follow one another and are typically experienced as emotionally positive, the majority of German NDEs consists of one element or scene without any sequences. 50 % of all NDEers reported positive emotions, 43% negative emotions. Nevertheless there were salient differences between the population of the former two German states: in West Germany NDEs were



predominantly positive (59,5 % positive vs. 28.6% negative) whereas negative NDEs prevailed in East Germany (60% negative vs.40% positive).

(2) the *consequences*, in terms of effects for later life. American NDEs obviously affect experiencers' morality and lead to more or less serious changes in life. German NDE, on the other hand, only affect something like the general outlook on life without having moral consequences.

(3) their *interpretation with respect to world view*. Whereas American NDEs seem to strengthen religiosity and support existing religious beliefs, German NDEs are hardly considered religious at all.

Although these results indicate the importance of cultural influences, further research must try to investigate these factors in more detail. Yet, despite the importance of cultural influences, we shall not argue that NDEs are but cultural constructions. To the very contrary, it seemed rather surprising to find a large number of these experiences in a society where people had few access to knowledge about these experiences — such as the former German Democratic Republic. One could, therefore, conclude that it is not the occurrence of the NDE which is influenced by culture, but its content and its interpretation.

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