

## BOOK REVIEWS

HOLDEN, JANET MINER, GREYSON, BRUCE and JAMES, DEBBIE (Eds.). (2009). *The handbook of near-death experiences: Thirty years of investigation*. Forward by Kenneth Ring. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger. xv + 302 pp. ISBN 9780313358647. Hard copy, \$49.95. *Reviewed by Ryan Rominger.*

Holden, Greyson, and James (2009) provide, as editors, a synoptic view into a unique transpersonal experience had by millions of individuals around the globe, that of the near-death experience (NDE). For those new to the phenomenon, the Western pleasant NDE has typically been identified as a constellation of experiences in which an individual is either physically close to death or perceives him or herself as close to death. Experiences include hearing oneself pronounced dead, veridical perception of one's own body, a sense of floating or moving down a tunnel toward a light, time and spatial distortions, profound feelings of love, experiencing deceased relatives, religious figures, and/or a being of light, encountering a border, a return to the body, and a transformation of the self after the experience, often called "aftereffects." These and other related features have been reported cross-culturally by adults, teens, and children, leading to controversial discussions in medicine, psychiatry, and psychology of the reality and nature of these events. *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* (hereafter *The Handbook*) provides an extensive review of both the NDE research that has been conducted over that last three decades as well as many of the pertinent theoretical discussions within the field of NDE research. Edited by Holden, Greyson, and James, the book has eleven chapters by knowledgeable researchers in the field of NDE studies and is a valuable resource for transpersonal psychologists. While focusing on basic research, many of the findings are informative for therapeutic and counseling work with those who have had near-death experiences.

Within the first chapter "The Field of Near-Death Studies: Past, Present, and Future," Holden, Greyson, and James set the cornerstone of *The Handbook* by highlighting the general arch of research conducted from the early 1970s onward. After acknowledging 150 years of early reports from explorers, medical personnel, and psychical researchers, the authors resurrect the narrative of a young medical student, Raymond Moody, who began the current academic focus in 1975, coining the term "near-death experience" in his book *Life After Life*. Venturing forth, Holden, Greyson, and James also describe the rise of NDE-related organizations such as the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), the types of publications that have emerged, and the general patterns found within NDE research.

Within subsequent chapters, authors describe concomitants of the NDE itself and NDE research. Nancy Zingrone and Carlos Alvarado, in "Pleasurable Western Adult Near-Death Experiences: Features, Circumstances, and Incidence," provide an in-depth review of Western research on the NDE, its aftereffects, and related demographic variables. Zingrone and Alvarado

additionally provide a discussion of incidence and prevalence, settling on what they call a “reliable incidence” (p. 33) of the NDE within sample populations ranging from suicide attempts to cardiac arrest patients. In Chapter 3, “Aftereffects of Pleasurable Western Adult Near-Death Experiences,” Russell Noyes, Jr, Peter Fenwick, Janice Holden, and Sandra Rozan Christian illuminate the changes that individuals may encounter after an NDE. Research on the aftereffects, as in other chapters, is described both textually and visually through easy-to-read tables, and the discussion naturally flows into factors that influence aftereffects, the meaning of aftereffects for the individual, and how early personal reactions and social responses to the NDE experiencer affect the development or progression of aftereffects. In “Distressing Western Near-Death Experiences: Finding a Way Through the Abyss” Nancy Evans Bush descends into the often avoided topic of distressing NDEs (dNDEs). Bush describes the types of distressing experiences, the research that has focused on the dNDE, and the various approaches used, even within the field of NDE research, to explain (or explain away) this phenomenon.

Chapter 5 heralds Cherie Sutherland’s “‘Trailing Clouds of Glory’: The Near-Death Experience of Western Children and Teens.” Starting with Melvin Morse’s description of a resuscitated 7-year-old’s NDE, this chapter compares the Western adult NDE with Western childhood and adolescent NDEs, describing similarities and differences in content and aftereffects. Sutherland poignantly raises a fundamental issue during this chapter, that of the reliability of retrospective accounts especially if the experience occurred during childhood. I found the discussion illuminating not only for NDEs but for *all types of exceptional human experiences* studied within the field of transpersonal psychology. Similar to other exceptional human experiences, a researcher might question why some have the experience while others do not, or why some do not report the experience. In “Characteristics of Western Near-Death Experiencers” Janice Holden, Jeffrey Long, and B. Jason MacLurg explore the variety of characteristics studied by NDE researchers, either directly or indirectly, and how these traits, attitudes, and beliefs might contribute to having or reporting an NDE. As a researcher in the field, I found this chapter particularly interesting considering the authors specifically target major demographic variables including sex, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, sexual orientation, physical ability, and religious affiliation, among others.

Moving away from Western NDEs, Allan Kellehear provides a comprehensive review of cross-cultural NDEs and NDE research in “Census of Non-Western Near-Death Experiences to 2005: Observations and Critical Reflections” (Chapter 7). Kellehear describes the NDE as reported in a variety of cultures, and provides a review of the two Western elements rarely found within Non-Western NDEs: the tunnel and the life review. In Chapter 8, “World Religions and Near-Death Experiences,” Farnaz Masumian offers readers a whirlwind tour of world religions’ connections with the NDE. From Hinduism’s *Rig-Veda* to Islam’s *Qur’an*, Masumian provides textual and ontological references to NDE elements and aftereffects. Holden, in Chapter 9 “Veridical Perception in Near-Death Experience,” explores a topic that transcends the field of NDE

research, that of the survival theory. Within NDE research, the presence of verifiable veridical perception, a visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or olfactory experience later corroborated by witnesses, introduces the possibility that some aspect of the self may survive physical death. Holden's chapter provides an excellent introduction to both the NDE research on the veridical perception phenomenon as well as a discussion of the meaning hidden within these perceptions. Progressing along the theoretical track, Bruce Greyson, E. W. Kelly, and E. F. Kelly present "Explanatory Models for Near-Death Experiences" in Chapter 10. The authors duly note that many NDEs are reported during episodes where individuals are not near death. However, most explanatory models focus on episodes where one is near death. Greyson, Kelly, and Kelly accurately and elegantly describe the conventional psychological and physiological theories of the cause of the NDE, as well as arguments against those same theories, and which point to evidence that supports the reality of the experience. Finally, in the concluding chapter of *The Handbook*, Ryan D. Foster, Debbie James, and Janice Holden impart "Practical Applications of Research on Near-Death Experiences." This chapter covers a wide range of potential uses of research to date, including training of medical, psychological, educational, and spiritual guidance professionals.

After reviewing *The Handbook*, and having studied NDEs for the past 10 years, I believe there are few areas that *The Handbook* did not cover. That said, each chapter could easily be expanded, existing as books in and of themselves. Additionally, some areas were mentioned but not fully expounded upon. For example, there is a large body of literature amassing on survival theory and the belief that science is moving away from materialism. Authors are also increasingly writing of the distressing NDE (touched upon in Chapter 4), the cultural aspects of the NDE (touched upon in Chapters 7 and 8), and how the NDE affects non-experiencers. The field continues to grow as researchers and practitioners make connections between their field of study and the experiences described by the NDEr.

Overall, *The Handbook* is an excellent resource for established professionals who need a general reference text or for the novice NDE researcher who needs an overview of the field to date. Nurses, doctors, therapists, spiritual directors, and transpersonal psychologists would all benefit from absorbing the breadth and depth of information provided within this text.

## Reference

MOODY, R. (1975). *Life after life*. Atlanta, GA: Mockingbird Books.

## The Editors

The editors of *The Handbook* have all participated on the Board of the International Association of Near-Death Studies (IANDS). *Janice Miner Holden*, Ed.D., is past president of IANDS, professor of counseling and Chair

of the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at the University of North Texas. *Bruce Greyson*, M.D., is founder and research director of IANDS, served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, and is a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. *Debbie James*, R.N./M.S.N, is senior instructor in the Nursing Education Department at the Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and is Founder of the San Antonio chapter of IANDS.

#### The Reviewer

*Ryan Rominger*, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor and Associate Dissertation Director at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Ryan has studied NDEs since 2000, contributed articles to the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and *Art Therapy* focusing on NDEs, and is currently engaged in multiple studies involving individuals who have been affected by an NDE. Additional interests include the integration of exceptional human experiences, use of art-based research methods, and use of technology in online education.