

Application of Qualitative Thematic Analysis to Near-Death Experiences

Pétre B.^{1*}, Cassol H.^{2*}, Degrange S.¹, Martial C.², Charland-Verville V.², Guillaume G.¹, Laureys S.²

*jointly co-authors

¹Departement of Public Health, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium

²Coma Science Group, GIGA Research Center and Neurology Department, University and University Hospital of Liège, Liège, Belgium

Objectives

This study aims to contribute to the characterization of near-death experiences (NDEs) by highlighting the main themes discussed by near-death experiencers (NDErs) as well as the vocabulary they use when portraying their experience. Two experts in qualitative thematic analysis, novices in the field of NDEs, processed the retrospective self-reported NDE narratives of cardiac arrest survivors.

Methods

A thematic analysis was carried out using Nvivo software (version 9.2 for Windows) on 34 narratives (written in French). This analysis enables to identify and report patterns within data¹ and is commonly used in qualitative research to classify data into thematic categories². All study participants met the inclusion criteria (i.e., Greyson NDE scale's total score $\geq 7^3$) to be qualified as NDErs.

Results

The analysis enabled to identify 10 time-bounded themes which refer to isolated events within narratives, and 1 transversal theme (i.e., altered time perception) which characterizes the structure of the whole narrative and is not described as an isolated event. Frequency of the extracted themes and illustrative verbatim are given in Fig. 1 and Table 1, respectively.

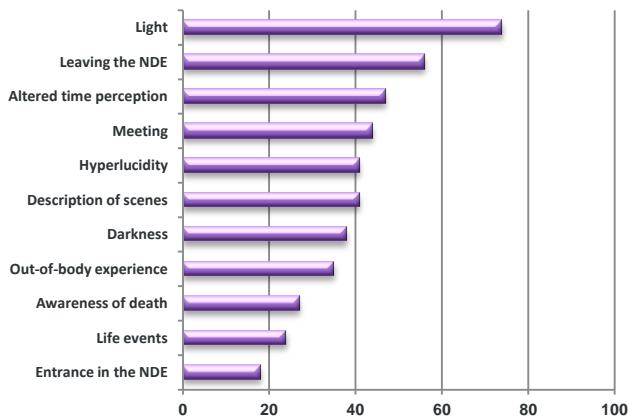


Fig. 1. Frequency (%) of the identified NDE themes according to the qualitative thematic analysis –by decreasing order.

NDE themes	Examples of verbatim (gender; age; time since NDE in years)
<i>Light</i>	"I moved forward. I was not walking. I felt attracted by the light and only my will was making me move forward." (Male; 53; 15)
<i>Leaving the NDE</i>	"Everything disappeared all at once and I once again saw the doctors and the firemen taking care of me. The paramedic told me that I just had a cardiac arrest of 30 seconds. 30 seconds only, even though I have the impression that a very long time went by!" (Male; 53; 4)
<i>Altered time perception</i>	"I am unable to tell how much time it lasted." (Male; 66; 6)

Table 1. Examples of verbatim associated with NDEs most reported themes.

Conclusion

Our results highlight the structure of NDE narratives and give a fuller overview of the vocabulary used by NDErs to describe such ineffable experiences. Despite some differences in the extracted themes, our data corroborate the content of existing tools such as the Greyson NDE-scale³ and are concomitant with studies supporting the universality of this phenomenon⁴.

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