Five Minutes After Death:  
A Study of Beliefs and Expectations

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the beliefs and expectations that a sample of 508 people hold about the first five minutes after death. A substantial minority believed that they will experience the main elements of the near-death experience (NDE). In general these elements were cited more frequently than were Biblical images. Six percent of the sample said that postmortem survival for them will be a negative and disturbing experience. We discuss these results in terms of their methodological implications for other survey work and their theoretical contribution toward our understanding of negative NDEs.

What, if anything, do people believe about experiences associated with the first five minutes after their own death? This paper examines the nature of popular beliefs and expectations about the initial moments of postmortem existence. Studying beliefs about personal survival of death is relevant to near-death research for two reasons.

First, these beliefs may reflect aspects of socialization and social conditioning, which in turn may influence to some extent the content and nature of the near-death experience (NDE). For example, Calvin Schorer (1985–86) noted of native American NDE accounts that the panoramic life review is absent but traditional images such as the
flathead snake, the "war eagle," deer, moose, and bows and arrows are encountered. Dorothy Counts (1983) described an event within a Melanesian NDE in which a deceased acquaintance cut the leg of the NDEr and spat ginger on it. Counts noted that "spitting ginger on a wound is a traditional healing practice... thought to have great healing power" (1983, p. 119). Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986) noted several culture-specific features of their Indian accounts, including being "sent back" because of mistaken identity and the reading of the record of a person's life. However, they cautioned against the reductionist implication that these variations are purely a function of prior beliefs and socialization.

We should remember, however, that if we survive death and live in an afterlife realm, we should expect to find variations in that world, just as we find them in the different parts of the familiar world of the living. A traveller to Delhi encounters dark skinned immigration officials, who in many respects behave differently from the lighter skinned immigration officials another traveller may meet when arriving in London or New York. Yet we do not say that the descriptions of the first traveller are "real" and those of the second "unreal." (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986, p. 169)

This caution notwithstanding, the observed cross-cultural variations in NDE content do prompt further empirical scrutiny of the possibility that the phenomenology of the experience is inspired to some degree by processes of social conditioning.

Another reason for exploring beliefs with respect to the NDE is that even if the relationship between social beliefs and the content of an NDE is causally ambiguous, social beliefs will nonetheless be important to the interpretation of the NDE by NDErs and their social network. For example, NDErs frequently depict elements of their NDE in terms of some aspect of their religious belief. Kenneth Ring (1980) reported cases where "the light" was described as a "vision of Jesus." Of course, it is not necessarily the characteristics of the phenomenon that are important for this identification but rather the NDErs' interpretation of what they believe they experience. Furthermore, not all NDErs will necessarily interpret their experience as a brief glimpse of the afterlife. The English philosopher Sir A.J. Ayers, in his much publicized account (1988) of his own NDE was happy to view that experience as a side effect of brain activity secondary to his cardiac arrest. Although in his view survival is a philosophic question worth entertaining, Ayers wrote that persistence of brain activity is by far the "most probable explanation." This is a similar interpretation to that