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**THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF NEAR-DEATH
EXPERIENCES IN NORTHLAND MĀORI OF NEW
ZEALAND**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Psychology at Massey University, Palmerston North
Campus, Manawatū, New Zealand.

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2016

Abstract

Near-death experiences (NDEs) can be described as profoundly life-changing, subjective events, that typically manifest in those who have been pronounced clinically dead. Over the past four decades, NDEs have been a field of interest for many researchers. However, the majority of NDE research has been conducted in Western contexts, with fewer than ten studies completed in non-Western regions (Sleutjes, Moreira-Almeida, & Greyson, 2014). The limited non-Western NDE research makes it difficult to determine the role culture may play in the development or interpretation of the NDE.

The focus of the current study is the phenomenology of the NDEs of Māori residing in Northland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Because of the Māori focus, Kaupapa Māori Research was selected as the most appropriate methodological framework for this study. A ‘whānau of supervisors’ consisting of five Kaumātua and Kuia assisted the non-Māori researcher with respect to Kaupapa Māori. Six participants took part in unstructured interviews. Findings revealed the significant role of tikanga Māori within the NDEs of participants’, as well as a high similarity with the features often reported by NDErs of Western culture. Based on these results, it is suggested the two positions previous authors have regarded as conflicting, are not in fact mutually exclusive. The NDE may be cross-cultural in nature and culturally interpreted, but incorporate elements developed in reference to culture.

Acknowledgements

There are a significant number of people, and a number of organisations that deserve to be endlessly thanked for their contribution to this thesis. First, I would like to thank Massey University as an institution for being an impeccably well-oiled machine, having a fantastic body of staff who were always willing to support me in every facet of my student life, and three outstanding campuses'. I would also like to thank the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, for approving my application to conduct this research.

I would really like to thank all those who participated in this research. Your time and energy has been very much appreciated. Each of you being so willing to participate and spend time with me before during and after the interviews has made this research possible. I will never forget you, your families, or the stories you have been kind enough to share with me.

I would like to thank the Ngāti Hine Health Trust (under C.E.O. Maxine Shortland) for their continued support throughout the production of this thesis, for the time their members of staff have spent helping me, and their generous use of space and time for the presentation of the results of this thesis.

I would specifically like to thank Mariameno Kapa-Kingi for her on going support and boundless teaching. Without you my perspective and positioning as a Pākehā would not be worth shaping. Your insight into *te ao Māori* taught me something new every time we spoke.

I would like to thank Paul Matthews for his consistent support, sharing of resources and always making time to answer my questions. Thank you for teaching me what whānau looks like in practice.

I would like to endlessly thank Joe, Hannah and Paul Tipene for their continued support with every aspect of this thesis. Thank you for being pillars in my life that have always had my back from the day I was born. Thank all of you for teaching the world that there is nothing that cannot be managed with kindness, and being exactly the people we need to see more of in the world. I always have and will always appreciate everything you have done for me.

There are not enough thanks in the world for my supervisor Natasha Tassell-Matamua. Thank you for taking the time to explain things to me over and over again. Thank you for always finding the kindest way to say anything. Thank you for always having your door open, and always making time for me. Thank you for putting so much effort and time into believing I could finish. There is no one else in the world who would have been able to guide me through this with such patience.

Thank you to my parents. This apple hasn't fallen far from the tree, and that is the one thing of all things in my life that I will forever be the *most* proud of. This one is for you.

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Personal Rationale

“Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are”

- Benjamin Franklin

One of my clearest memories as a young person is sitting on the playground at primary school with my friends, feeling genuinely envious that I had no Māori lineage. All my friends were Māori. I later came to realise that this genuine envy was a probable consequence of the environment my parents and school developed throughout my formative years. Both adults and young people alike held nothing but unmitigated respect for Māori, culture, and all people of all walks of life. Most of my schooling was completed in Northland environments where those of non-Māori lineage were the minority, and as far as I can recall there was never conflict between ethnic groups, merited by the respect we had for each other. As I grew and attended different institutions for education, where being non-Māori made me one of the vast majority, I realised the bubble of respect I was raised in, unfortunately for society, was anything but an omnipresent convention. I learned very quickly of the ubiquitous judgement of Māori often portrayed as some sort of un-supported ‘truth’ among non-Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. In many social circles operated within everyday by non-Māori, I see this perception of Māori being demarcated as subsidiary, and it appears to be considered acceptable.

I went on to work for the Ngāti Hine Health Trust in Northland, New Zealand. Ngāti Hine Health Trust is a Māori for Māori health organisation, and the largest Māori health provider in the North. I worked in Māori youth suicide, and I witnessed the extreme consequences of the number of injustices that are destroying the lives of people. One of these injustices is the everyday demarcation between Māori and non-Māori. Here I came into contact with a number of people who had near-death experiences or knew of others who had, and wanted to speak about these experiences in relation to the loss of their loved ones, and how they wish to move on with their lives. Most people wished to know if there were others who had experienced anything similar.

My upbringing and work experience has allowed me to spend much time in Māori cultural circles. I have met large numbers of wonderful people doing wonderful things, and my personal growth and personal learning in all things Māori has been something more than significant. I am lucky enough to have many Māori friends in my life who have been willing to support me endlessly in this research. My supervisor, family, family friends, participants, among many

others have stood by my side and explained, taught, and often laughed with me. They have also made sure I was very aware of my place.

This research is my attempt at developing a piece of work that outlines some of the near-death experiences of Māori in Northland, what these look like, and why these are very important. Also, this research is my attempt at showing that with the right attitude, the right positioning, awareness, the willingness to listen and learn, the right intentions, and kindness, we can work together to not only derogate ignorance, but develop benefits for entire groups of people, oppressed or otherwise.

I am lucky enough to be in a position where I have learned from my experience with many brilliant Māori, how to position myself as non-Māori. I have learned how to apologise when I inevitably get things wrong. I have learned how to reflect and become aware of many of my prejudices and assumptions. Most importantly, I have learned how to put another person's culture ahead of my own. I have pushed myself to learn this because this is something theoretically and personally fundamental. It is fundamental because of the sensitivity of the near-death experience. It is fundamental because how a person makes sense of things is often influenced by culture, and it is how someone makes sense of things that I want to understand. But most of all, it is personally fundamental to me to put Māori culture ahead of my own because of the significant number of non-Māori who are putting it second.

Thank you Massey University for making this possible.