



LETTER TO THE
EDITOR

Commentary on Near Death Experiences: Greyson (2023)

Etzel Cardeña
Thorsen Professor of Psychology,
Department of Psychology,
Lund University
etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se

<https://doi.org/10.31275/20243347>

PLATINUM OPEN ACCESS



Creative Commons License 4.0.
CC-BY-NC. Attribution required.
No commercial use.

In his recent paper on negative or distressing Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), Greyson (2023) argued that the fear of losing or dissolving one's ego (p. 692) relates to having "inverted" (or distressing) NDEs but also mentions that going through that distress may result in the more typical pleasant NDE type, consistent with the notion of "hybrid" positive and negative NDEs (Melloul Ait et al., in press).

While reading his paper, I was reminded of a puzzling pattern in a study of hypnotic virtuosos (Cardeña, 1988). My sample of selected (for high hypnotizability) participants reported some unsuggested, spontaneous phenomena were similar to those reported in NDEs (Cardeña, 2005) both in content (e.g., bright lights, tunnels) and positive emotionality (e.g., bliss). Of the 12 people in the sample, however, two had, at times, very distressing experiences (for instance, one reported being lowered in a coffin, the other having a dream of a man with a knife chasing her), although those showing profiles of likely pathology had been screened out from the experiment. One difference between them and the rest of the sample was that they had the lowest scores in the Barron's Ego Strength Scale (ES; Barron, 1953) of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI; Hathaway & McKinley, 1949), which measures resourcefulness and the capacity to adapt (scores of 31 and 41 in comparison with $M = 49.1$, $SD = 2.60$ for the rest of the participants).

In a study with a general sample, those scoring low in the ES were more inhibited (and dependent) than those scoring higher (Harmon, 1980). With respect to alterations related to psychedelics, Aday et al. (2021) found that those low in openness to experience and with preoccupied, apprehensive, or confused states of mind were more likely to have adverse reactions. Thus, across different contexts (NDE, hypnosis, and psychedelics), those with more rigid, apprehensive, inhibited, and/or confused tendencies tend to experience potentially positive experiences as distressing.

This apparent pattern requires a thorough investigation into varying types of alterations of consciousness as it might help us understand different types of reactions. Furthermore, testing whether these observations relate to the unresolved state of mind in attachment-related trauma (e.g., Gander et al., 2020) might expand these considerations into developmental psychology.

REFERENCES

- Aday, J. S., Davis, A. K., Mitzkovitz, C. M., Bloesch, E. K., & Davoli, C. C. (2021). Predicting reactions to psychedelic drugs: A systematic review of states and traits related to acute drug effects. *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science*, 4(2), 424–435. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acspsci.1c00014>
- Barron, F. (1953). An ego-strength scale which predicts response to psychotherapy. *Jour-*



- nal of Consulting Psychology*, 17(5), 327–333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0061962>
- Cardeña, E. (1988). *The phenomenology of quiescent and physically active deep hypnosis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of California, Davis.
- Cardeña, E. (2005). The phenomenology of deep hypnosis: Quiescent and physically active. *International Journal of Clinical & Experimental Hypnosis*, 53(1), 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207140490914234>
- Gander, M., Buchheim, A., Bock, A., Steppan, M., Sevecke, K., & Goth, K. (2020). Unresolved attachment mediates the relationship between childhood trauma and impaired personality functioning in adolescence. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 34(Supplement B), 84–103. https://doi.org/10.1521/pedi_2020_34_468
- Greyson, B. (2023). The darker side of near-death experiences. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 37(4), 683–698. <https://doi.org/10.31275/20232843>
- Harmon, M. H. (1980). The Barron Ego Strength Scale: A study of personality correlates among normal. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 36(2), 433–436.
- Hathaway, S. R., & McKinley, J. C. (1940). A multiphasic personality schedule(Minnesota): I. Construction of the schedule. *Journal of Psychology*, 10, 249–254.
- Melloul Ait, A., Kinnunen, K., & Cardeña, E. (in press). The phenomenology of distressing near-death experiences and their aftereffects. *Journal of Anomalous Experience and Cognition*.