

Trends in the Study of Out-of-Body Experiences: An Overview of Developments Since the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract—A review of conceptual and research trends in the literature on out-of-body experiences is presented for the period of mid-nineteenth century to 1987. The discussion emphasizes psychological, psychiatric, and parapsychological publications. The material shows recurrent topics, but there are also some differences, particularly regarding more detailed conceptual discussions and a higher frequency of research projects in recent times. Systematic research and testable theories have been presented mainly in the last two decades. This may be related to the revival of interest in cognitive variables and altered states of consciousness in psychology during the same time period.

Out-of-body experiences (OBEs), defined as “an experience in which a person seems to perceive the world from a location outside his physical body” (Blackmore, 1982a, p. 1), have received considerable attention in recent years. This is evident in a variety of books (e.g., Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; Irwin, 1985), and articles in psychiatry (e.g., Tobacyk & Mitchell, 1987; Twemlow, Gabbard, & Jones, 1982), and parapsychology journals (e.g., Blackmore, 1984a; Stanford, 1987).

Although a number of publications present reviews of OBE research findings and concepts (e.g., Alvarado, 1986b; Blackmore, 1982a; Irwin, 1985), there is a need for a briefer and more systematic discussion of the development of research trends and concepts as opposed to more summaries of research findings. Accordingly, in the present paper I will focus on trends, as opposed to findings, in publications on OBEs published since the middle of the nineteenth century. I hope that this general, and admittedly brief, review will be helpful to convey to the reader a sense of the main ideas and literature of the field. For convenience I have organized the material into four chronological periods: (1) the nineteenth century; (2) 1900–1939; (3) 1940–1969; (4) 1970–1987. These divisions are to some extent arbitrary and should not be taken to represent literal epochs, only general trends.

In this paper I will emphasize some aspects to the exclusion of others. The following material will not be included: (1) the experiences and theoretical

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ideas of persons who have had multiple OBEs or who claim to be able to have them at will (e.g., Muldoon & Carrington, 1929); (2) discussions based on "psychic" sources of information (e.g., Crookall, 1960); (3) discussions of ideas on the existence and nature of subtle bodies unrelated to OBEs (e.g., Poortman, 1954/1978); (4) accounts of attempts to detect subtle bodies when it is not clear if the subject had the *experience* of being out of the body (e.g., Durville, 1909); (5) anthropological discussions of belief in OBEs (e.g., Sheils, 1978); (6) discussions of autoscopy—or seeing an apparition of oneself—with no OBE elements (e.g., Lhermitte, 1951); and (7) studies of de-personalization experiences when it is not clear that OBEs are involved (e.g., Noyes et al., 1977).

Nineteenth Century

Most of the early (pre-1880s) views on OBEs emphasized the idea that something—the spirit or the soul—exteriorized from the body and either stayed close to the physical body or visited distant locations or dimensions.¹ An anonymous (1853, 1854) writer expressed this viewpoint in the *American Phrenological Journal*. In the writer's view the OBE may have indicated "that while the soul is normally connected with the body, and is in a great degree dependent upon it, it still may exist as a *separate entity*, entirely independent of the physical organism" (Anonymous, 1854, p. 81). Similar ideas were presented by Owen (1860), who wrote about the projection of a "spiritual portion" (p. 347) of the body, and by many other writers (e.g., Brittan, 1864; Cahagnet, 1847–1848/1850; Crowe, 1848; Jung-Stilling, 1808/1851).

The concept of the "double" or subtle body was used by many writers to explain spontaneous psychic phenomena during this period. Some of the phenomena accounted by the presumed action of this agent were apparitions of living persons (e.g., Aksakof, 1895; D'Assier, 1887; Kardec, 1861; Stead, 1896). These apparitions sometimes have an OBE component.

In his discussion of theoretical problems to account for apparitions and particularly collectively perceived ones, Frederic W. H. Myers, a classical scholar and psychical researcher, proposed that persons having OBEs may be perceived as apparitions by some sort of nonphysical modification of space. The apparition, according to Myers, appeared to be "diffused from a 'radiant point,' or phantasmogenetic focus, corresponding with that region of space where the distant agent conceives himself to be exercising his supernormal perception" (Myers, 1886, p. 291).

Myers' ideas, to which he returned later (Myers, 1903), were a reaction to Edmund Gurney's concepts of apparitions. Gurney regarded the OBE as an hallucination of the pathological type and proposed and developed the concept of telepathically induced hallucinations to explain diverse types of spontaneous ESP experiences, particularly apparitions of the living and

reciprocal apparitions² (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). Others, such as Podmore (1894) and Mrs. Sidgwick (1891) also supported telepathic hallucinatory explanations.³

This period presented little systematic research. Exceptions are Gurney's case collection of reciprocal apparition cases and attempts at presenting an analysis of case characteristics (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886), and the induction under hypnosis of so-called "travelling clairvoyance" by others. The latter were cases in which hypnotized subjects were instructed to visit a distant location and report events occurring there, or describe the location itself. This type of "experiment" may be considered as early attempts to test for ESP during OBEs (e.g., Backman, 1891; Barth, 1849; Elliotson, 1845; Haddock, 1851).

While some, like Cahagnet (1847–1848/1850), believed that the exteriorization of some aspect of the subjects explained travelling clairvoyance, others proposed different explanations. Richet (1887) held the opinion that the experience was created by the subject's memory and imagination processes. Podmore (1894) felt that instructions given to the subjects shaped the report into "travelling" imagery.

Overview

The nineteenth century writings on OBEs were characterized by theoretical concepts, particularly those postulating the exteriorization of some aspect of the person having the experience (the spirit, double, or subtle body). However, alternate explanations postulating the concept of telepathic hallucinations were also defended. Gurney's case collection and the attempts of others to induce travelling clairvoyance by hypnosis present the first efforts towards research on OBEs.

1900–1939

While numerous case reports (e.g., Anonymous, 1929; Häning, 1932), case collections, and discussions of specific groups of cases were published during this period (e.g., Bozzano, 1934/1937; Leaning, 1928; Mattisien, 1931; Muldoon, 1936), there was practically no empirical research on the phenomena. Possible exceptions are Cornillier's (1921) travelling clairvoyance studies, and Wallace's (1925) report of attempts to move objects during OBEs.

Also interesting was a paper by Hart and Hart (1933) presenting previously published cases of OBE apparitions and comparing them to cases of apparitions of deceased persons. They wrote, "some apparitions of living persons seem to have been self-conscious personalities, while others seem to have retained only vague memories, or no memories whatever, of their having appeared" (p. 247).

As will be seen in the following discussion this period is an extension and development of previous theoretical concepts proposed as explanations of OBEs.

The concept of projection of a subtle body received considerable attention. This interest was kindled by, among other factors, the attempts at the physical detection of subtle bodies (e.g., Durville, 1909; deRochas, 1908; see also Alvarado, 1980), and by numerous publications of autobiographical accounts of persons who claimed the ability to induce the experience. These writings emphasized phenomenological aspects of the experience such as travels to distant places and "dimensions" (e.g., Fox, 1939; Lancelin, n.d.; Muldoon & Carrington, 1929; Turvey, 1911).

Funk (1907) wrote that OBE apparitions indicated the "power of the human ego to manifest itself objectively at a distance" (p. 179). Hans Driesch (1932/1933) seemed to be open to the concept in one of his books. Other authors such as Bret (1939), Mattisien (1931), and Muldoon (1936) embraced the concept of the double to explain OBEs as well as other psychic phenomena.

The work of Italian psychical researcher Ernesto Bozzano is of particular interest in this regard. In a series of publications Bozzano (1911, 1934/1937, 1938) presented a classification of aspects of the phenomena of "bilocation," by which he meant a variety of manifestations for which the concept of an externalization of or action by a subtle body was offered as an explanation. The classification included OBEs, the phantom limb sensation of amputees, autoscopy, observations of OBE apparitions, and observations of other apparitions of the living, and apparitions and luminous phenomena observed at deathbeds. As Bozzano (1938) wrote:

The phenomena of bilocation demonstrate that within the "somatic body" there exists an indwelling "etheric body," which in rare circumstances is able to release itself temporarily from the "somatic body". The inevitable inference follows that if the etheric body is able to separate temporarily preserving its consciousness intact, we must end by recognizing that when it separates definitively at the crisis of death, the individual spirit will continue to exist. (p. 101)⁴

Bozzano's concern with the implications of the OBE to the subject of survival of bodily death⁵ can be found in many other publications in the psychical research literature (e.g., Hill, 1918; Mattisien, 1931; Myers, 1903).

Psychological explanations of OBEs were proposed by other researchers. Hyslop (1912) accepted the ESP component of the experience but attributed the OB sensation to the tendency of the subconscious mind to dramatize images of locality that give the impression that the subject was in a different physical location. Others considered the OBE a mere dream (Richet, 1922), and a hallucination or the product of the imagination (Osty, 1930).⁶

Bret (1939) accepted the idea of a subtle body to explain some OBEs, but conceded that some specific cases were dreams or fantasies. Watters (1935)

also accepted the projection of a subtle body (or, as he called it, the "intra-atomic quantity"), but argued that this could only occur at death. In his opinion accounts of OBEs were to be explained as imagination and hallucinations.

Psychophysiological explanations were proposed by a few writers. Schmëing (1938) explained flying dreams by external physical stimuli perceived during sleep by withdrawal of blood from the brain that lowered the body's pressure and produced a sensation of lightness. He believed that similar factors of a greater magnitude could induce an OBE. Also, psychological aspects such as the realization that the body was no longer functional helped to induce the experience.

In trying to make sense of an OBE he experienced, Charles Quartier (in Osty, 1930) speculated on the importance of internal bodily sensations when he wrote that the OBE was "the dramatization, in visual form, of cenesthetic sensations" (p. 191, my translation). Mairie (1933) agreed with this hypothesis.

Overview

As in the previous years, there was little by way of research, and conceptual discussions predominated. In depth discussions of specific cases, or groups of cases, was also an important development. Although concepts discussed in this period were similar to those of the nineteenth century, they were somewhat more detailed in their propositions, particularly regarding supposed psychological aspects of the phenomena. Another important development was the introduction of psychophysiological theorizing.

1940-1969

In these years the trend towards more systematic study increased. Case collections of OBEs and surveys of published cases were used to study phenomenological aspects of the OBE and to argue for the objective nature of the experience (e.g., Battersby, 1942; Crookall, 1961; Hart, 1954; Muldon & Carrington, 1951).

Particularly important and influential were the publications of American sociologist Hornell Hart and English geologist Robert Crookall. Hart focused on OBE cases with ostensibly veridical or ESP elements published mainly in the psychical research literature (Hart, 1954).⁷ An important methodological development was the use of a scale to measure the level of evidentiality of the reports. In Hart's words: "The scale developed rules out at the start all cases which do not present evidence that the individual who had the psychic experience reported its details before receiving evidence of their veridicality" (p. 125). The cases were classified under the following categories: (1) cases induced by hypnosis; (2) willful projection by concen-

tration; (3) projection by methods more complex than concentration; (4) spontaneous apparitions of the living corresponding to OB sensations or visions of the experiencer; (5) other cases. Hart listed eight characteristics of OBEs in his collection, and suggested that hypnosis should be seriously considered as a means to induce OBEs,⁸ since it seemed to be "the method most likely to produce full and verifiable" (p. 144) experiences. In later publications Hart (1957; Hart & Collaborators, 1956) returned to similar topics and compared the phenomenology of OB apparitions (conscious apparitions of the living) with apparitions of deceased persons. In one of these papers he published the first systematic percentage breakdown of OBE case characteristics (Hart & Collaborators, 1956).

Crookall's work, published in a series of papers (e.g., 1963, 1966, 1967a), and books (e.g., 1961, 1964, 1965) was an attempt to support subtle body concepts of OBEs by analyzing phenomenological aspects of OBE reports obtained mainly from the spiritualist, psychical research, and occult literatures.⁹ Crookall alleged that he had found specific OBE characteristics that differentiated the experience from hallucinations, dreams, and other subjective phenomena.

The first survey on OBE incidence was conducted by Hart (1954) with a college student sample. His study was followed by surveys done by Banks (1962), and Green (1960, 1966, 1967, 1968). Green's work is particularly important because she tried to see if there was any relationship between OBEs, sex, and academic background (1966, 1967). She also studied OBE phenomenology with new cases, as opposed to reanalysing previously published ones (1968).

In 1942 Collins commented that the study of OBEs was "a field for experimental research, which so far has been strangely neglected" (Collins, 1942, p. 74). However, soon after some studies were reported, among them the observations of "bilocation" phenomena with Italian subject Pasqualina Pezzola (Cassoli, 1954), and attempts to study ESP during hypnotically induced OBEs (e.g., Bulford, n.d.; Roll, 1975). Charles T. Tart (1967, 1968, 1969b) conducted the most important and influential studies of the period. Subjects who claimed to have frequent spontaneous OBEs or to be able to induce the experience at will were tested for ESP and monitored on psychophysiological variables such as EEG, EKG, and REM. These studies represented a transition from older and simpler to newer and more sophisticated approaches. As Irwin (1985) stated, Tart's studies "often are regarded as seminal in restoring modern parapsychologists' attention to the phenomenon of the OBE" (p. 66).¹⁰

Conceptually, many writers speculated on OBEs implications for survival research. While Hart (1967) and Whiteman (1965) argued for the OBE's importance as an indication of survival, others like Ducasse (1961) and J. B. Rhine (1960) argued that the experience was inconclusive evidence of survival due to the fact that reports came from living persons underscoring the

idea that the phenomenon was dependent on the physical body for its manifestation.

Other conceptual issues included discussions of the projection of subtle bodies and purely psychological explanations. Crookall (1967b), Hart (1967), and other writers (e.g., De Boni, 1960; Dumas, 1947) speculated on the existence of a subtle body (see also Whiteman's [1967] concepts of non-physical dimensions). But others, like Louisa E. Rhine (1958) were not convinced. Rhine reacted to Hart's ideas by maintaining that the explanation of OBEs was "still in question and certainly open to more than one interpretation" (p. 65). Both Broad (1959) and Eastman (1962) showed skepticism to subtle body ideas. In Gardner Murphy's opinion OBEs were "not very far from the known terrain of general psychology, which we are beginning to understand more and more without recourse to the paranormal" (Murphy with Dale, 1961, p. 287).

Among specific psychological concepts offered by other writers, Tyrrell (1942/1953) interpreted OBEs as hallucinatory constructs of the subconscious levels of personality of two or more persons working together, at a distance, through ESP means. (Tyrrell's ideas were an extension and further elaboration of the old telepathic concepts to explain reciprocal apparitions.)

Aspects such as body image (Hebb, 1960), vividness of visual imagery (Burt, 1968), and psychodynamic workings such as dramatization of the fear of death and reenactment of birth fantasies (Fodor, 1959), were also discussed. (See also the publications of Jaffé [1963], Menninger-Lerchenthal [1954], and Rawcliffe [1952]).

Equally interesting was the treatment of physiological variables by Burt (1968), Jung (Jung & Pauli, 1955), and Lippman (1953).

Overview

Attempts to conduct systematic research were more frequent in these years than in previous ones, as can be seen by the appearance of the first surveys, systematic case collections analyses, and psychophysiological experiments. Conceptual issues continued relatively unchanged, although there was a slight increase of psychological speculations.

1970-1987

The level of activity in these years was unprecedented. Obvious evidence are two symposia on the topic in parapsychology conventions (Morris et al., 1978; Palmer, et al., 1974), and the publication of the first specialized scientifically oriented monographs on the topic (Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; Irwin, 1985).

The psychological approach has predominated but not to the complete exclusion of other ideas. Some writers have continued to present ideas based

on supposed projection of subtle bodies or on other aspects of personality (e.g., Becker, 1983; Giovetti, 1983; Tart, 1979; Vieira, 1986). This type of theorizing, however, is in minority in academic circles (for criticisms see Blackmore, 1982a; Irwin, 1985; and J. B. Rhine, 1974).¹¹ Some variations of these concepts have included ideas of a nonphysical or "higher space" dimension, as seen in the papers published by Greene (1983), Poynton (1975), and Whiteman (1975).

A great number of authors have offered psychological concepts to explain OBEs. Some proposed that the OBE is a defense mechanism designed to deal with the threat of death (Ehrenwald, 1974), or the loss of love (Reed, 1974). Others discussed the phenomenon in terms of archetypal images (Fisher, 1975), distortion of the body image (Horowitz, 1970), depersonalization (Whitlock, 1978), lucid dreams (LaBerge, 1985), or a variety of concepts basically postulating that the OBE is a hallucinatory creation arising under different psychological factors (e.g., Brent, 1979; Capel, 1978; Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; Zusne & Jones, 1982).

Three writers have proposed the most important psychological ideas of the period. John Palmer (1978) conceptualized the OBE basically as a response to a body image change causing a threat to individual identity. Susan J. Blackmore (1984b) proposed that OBEs were a model of reality created by the organism using internal cognitive resources when the models dependent on sensory input were disrupted. Finally, Harvey J. Irwin (1985) emphasized attentional cognitive processes and attenuation of somatic sensory input, as well as a hypothetical synesthetic process accounting for a transformation of one sensory mode experience for another. These ideas were more detailed than the rest of the above mentioned speculations and presented testable predictions.

During these years there was also an unprecedented level of research following some of the above mentioned psychological concepts. In several surveys researchers explored possible relationships of OBEs to imagery and attentional capacities (e.g., Blackmore, 1982c, 1987; Irwin, 1980; Myers et al., 1983), to altered states of consciousness and related practices and experiences (e.g., Blackmore, 1982b; Kohr, 1980; Palmer, 1979), and to personality variables (e.g., Irwin, 1981; Jones, Gabbard, & Twemlow, 1984; Myers et al., 1983; Tobacyk & Mitchell, 1987). In other studies attempts were made to obtain increasingly detailed information on OBE phenomenological characteristics (e.g., Alvarado, 1984; Blackmore, 1984a; Giovetti, 1983; Poynton, 1975), including ESP claims (e.g., Alvarado, 1986a).

Information on demographic aspects (e.g., Kohr, 1980; Palmer, 1979), and physiological variables such as form of birth (Blackmore, 1983b), and proneness to migraine (Irwin, 1983), was also collected.¹²

Interest in experimentation also followed the predominantly psychological approach. Researchers explored ESP scores during claimed laboratory OBEs (e.g., Harary & Solvvin, 1977; Palmer & Vassar, 1974), as well as different psychological variables such as expectation, the effect of induction

procedures (e.g., Palmer & Lieberman, 1975; Palmer & Vassar, 1974), and other factors (e.g., Smith & Irwin, 1981; Nash, Lynn, & Stanley, 1984).

Experimental attempts to measure psychophysiological correlates of the experience (e.g., Morris et al., 1978; Osis & Mitchell, 1977), and to test in a physical way (e.g., by vibrations or the detection of electromagnetic activity) projection models of OBEs have also been published (Morris et al., 1978; Osis & McCormick, 1980).

Overview

While most of the elements found in previous years were present in the last period, the amount of serious and organized research and theory building was unprecedented. The psychological approach predominated in both conceptual and research developments. Additionally, the first psychological OBE theories with clearly testable predictions were presented.

Discussion

In this paper I have outlined briefly the trends of over a century of OBE research and theorization. Although several features have recurred throughout the periods discussed (such as the use of subtle bodies and psychological constructs as explanatory concepts), there have been differences in the frequency of systematic and empirical studies in different time periods. Particularly noticeable are the differences between the more recent years and previous ones. The modern period has a higher frequency of psychological concepts and empirical research, and consequently, has seen an increase in publications on OBEs in parapsychology and in the journals of other disciplines (e.g., Nash, Lynn, & Stanley, 1984; Twemlow, Gabbard, & Jones, 1982). This last development suggests that the OBE is no longer of interest only to parapsychologists but, as other human experiences and altered states of consciousness, it is beginning to pique the interest of a variety of disciplines that deal with anomalous psychological behaviors and reported experiences.

To some extent interest in OBEs in recent years may be seen as the consequence of conceptual changes during the 1960s and the 1970s in psychology (e.g., Holt, 1964; Tart, 1969a), and parapsychology (e.g., George & Krippner, 1984; Honorton, 1977) that brought increased attention and research on cognitive processes and altered states of consciousness. OBEs constituted a logical and appropriate subset of the general problem area of imagery and altered states of consciousness such as dreams, meditation, and drug-induced states.

Regardless of the reasons for the current shift of interests (and we could certainly speculate on the increasing influence of occultism in general, as well as on the impact of oriental philosophy) there may be benefits for modern researchers in realizing that OBE studies have a long and varied

history. A good grounding in this literature may be useful to the pragmatic goals of future researchers.

Endnotes

¹ These views are intimately related to ancient concepts of subtle bodies in religious and occult literatures (e.g., Mead, 1919; Poortman, 1954/1978) and to speculations on the "seat of the soul" (e.g., Bruyn, 1982).

² These are cases "in which a person who is undergoing an OBE, and finds himself at or 'projects' himself to a particular spot distant from his physical body, has been seen at that very spot by some person present there" (Gauld, 1982, p. 222).

³ All the persons mentioned in this paragraph were members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in London in 1882 to study anomalous psychological and physical phenomena (Gauld, 1968). The ideas mentioned here may be seen in the context of the work and concepts of some early SPR members regarding the study of "thought-transference" as a human ability and as the explanation of apparitions of the living and phenomena produced by mental mediums, as opposed to ideas involving the concepts of subtle bodies and spirit communication (Cerullo, 1982; Gauld, 1968). Myers was the only leading SPR member to challenge such concepts in relation to apparitions, particularly reciprocal ones.

⁴ For a criticism of some of Bozzano's assumptions and conclusions see de Vesme (1934a, 1934b). Odeberg (1938) seems to agree with Bozzano's methods and concepts.

⁵ The study of phenomena that may suggest the possibility of survival of death, such as communications received through mediums and apparitions of deceased persons, has traditionally been an area of parapsychological research (for reviews see Gauld, 1982, and Stevenson, 1977).

⁶ For criticisms of Osty's views on the grounds that he ignored aspects of OBEs suggestive of the action of an objective subtle body, and for the general weakness of his arguments and assumptions see Bozzano (1934/1937) and Mattisien (1932).

⁷ Soon after the First International Conference of Parapsychological Studies, held in Utrecht in 1953, at which Hart presented a few papers (e.g., Hart, 1955), Hart initiated an International Project on ESP Projection to work on OBEs and apparitions through correspondence with other researchers (Hart and Collaborators, 1956).

⁸ See also C. D. Broad's (1948) remarks on the subject.

⁹ Irwin (1985) published several important methodological criticisms of Crookall's work. Among them, he pointed out that Crookall's classificatory scheme was unsystematic and extremely subjective.

¹⁰ Tart's attention to the psychophysiology of the OBE may be seen as a natural extension of previous developments in the study of the psychophysiology of diverse altered states of consciousness (e.g., Anand, Chhina, & Singh, 1961; Aserinsky & Kleitman, 1953).

¹¹ Also in the minority were defences of the importance of OBEs to the issue of survival of bodily death (e.g., Becker, 1983; Crookall, 1973), since most discussions on the topic during this period were skeptical on the issue (e.g., Blackmore, 1983a; Gauld, 1982; Moore, 1981). An important exception was Di Simone's (1984) attempts to compare the accounts of a subject's OBEs with the accounts of a supposed spiritual entity communicating through a medium relating encounters in a spiritual dimension.

¹² This period also presents much research on the so-called near-death experience (e.g., Greyson & Stevenson, 1980; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1981; Twemlow & Gabbard, 1984-1985). A useful overview of the field appears in Greyson and Flynn's (1984) anthology.

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