Application of Qualitative Thematic Analysis to Near-Death Experiences

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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 data and is commonly used in qualitative research to classify data into thematic categories. All study participants met the inclusion criteria (i.e., Greyson NDE scale’s total score ≥ 7) 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.

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-scale and are concomitant with studies supporting the universality of this phenomenon.

REFERENCES


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

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