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

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Hannah Joy Young
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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.

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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 derogue 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.

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