What is it like to be in Out-of-Body?
Phenomenal accounts of experiencers

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Abstract

By using the description of the Out-of-Body experiences of 14 participants, we aimed to have a picture of what it is like to be in this particular state of consciousness.

All their information was grouped according to the following topics: consciousness status, self-boundaries, objects perception, colors perceptions, other types of perceptions, interactions with other people or beings, emotions, time perception, movement perception.

From these descriptions a very different way to perceive and know emerges, without the constraints of our brain and sensory organs, suggesting that our consciousness or identity is not a brain byproduct, but it is substantially in agreement with some philosophical and religious traditions.

Keywords: Out-of-Body; Consciousness; Phenomenology; Perception; Time; Idealism

Introduction

In order to have a more detailed description of how "it is like to be in OBE (Out-of-Body-Experience)", paraphrasing the title of the famous paper of Thomas Nagel "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (Nagel, 1974), it is necessary to know more about how OB experiencers (OBErs) perceive and know during such experiences.

The peculiar characteristic of a typical OBE is the subjective phenomenological first person experience of being outside one's own body. In other words, who is in this state of consciousness perceives him/herself out of his/her body almost always seen as it was before the start of that experience, e.g. on the bed.

This experience can be obtained after traumatic events, e.g. heart arrest, epileptic seizures (Blanke, Landis, Spinelli, & Seeck, 2004; Greyson, Fountain, Derr, & Broshek, 2014), or spontaneously (Cardeña & Alvarado, 2014) or else induced after specific visual stimulations (Ehrsson, 2007) or practices, e.g. meditation (Wilde and Murray, 2009) and also by hypnosis (Facco et al., 2019; Pederzoli & Tressoldi, 2018).

Surveys on the general population show that such a type of experience is not rare, ranging in frequency from 9% to 14% (Alvarado, 2015).

As expected, such a type of experience has been attracting all those interested in the relationship between mind/consciousness and brain, because it raises the fundamental question: is such a type of experience a proof that mind and consciousness can function separately from its biological substrate, the brain, or is a curious trick of it?

In order to settle out such a question, it is necessary either to explain how the brain can generate such a strange experience or to demonstrate that when in out-of-body state (OB) participants can manifest perceptual or cognitive performances incompatible with those observed when in the typical waking state of consciousness, for example like perceiving objects or events bypassing the constraints of sensory organs.

Those interested in explaining how the brain can generate OBE, have been using data from brain damaged participants and from neurophysiological correlates, e.g. EEG, fMRI. At present there is evidence that OBEs are associated with the functioning of the right hemisphere temporo-parietal junction, even if there are moderated effects of participant's position before the experience and hence of vestibular and proprioceptive information (Blanke & Arzy, 2005; Blanke, Faivre, & Dieguez, 2016; Smith & Messier, 2014).

However, finding an anatomical or a neurophysiological correlate of a mental experiences does not explain if it is its cause, unless postulating, as an axiom, that each mental experience is nothing but an expression or an emergent property of its neural correlate. Such a reasoning is like to infer that TV programs are produced from the electronic circuits of the television set, because their damage or malfunctioning impair the quality of those programs.

Waiting for a demonstration on how more or less complex bioelectrical signals can give rise to phenomenological experiences, an alternative approach is to demonstrate that phenomenological experiences derive from the interaction of consciousness contents, considered primary, with the brain and the sensory organs acting as a special filter, similar to special spectacles giving rise to our everyday experiences. However, differently from the previous approach, this one allows the possibility that bypassing these filters, different mental experiences are possible, like those reported by OBErs.

Even if there are many descriptions of such experiences, we thought useful to synthetize their characteristics by using direct first-person OBErs' accounts retrieved from the authors direct investigations and from some OBErs who make available their experiences.

Methods

Participants

Six participants with OBEs induced by hypnotic suggestions (Tressoldi et al., 2015) and seven with spontaneous or self-induced OBEs, see Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information and OBE method.

Id	Gender	Age	OBE method	Source
S	M	26	hypnosis	Tressoldi et al. (2015)
Al	M	30	hypnosis	idem

A	F	32	hypnosis	idem
F	F	53	hypnosis	idem
E	F	41	hypnosis	idem
D	F	26	hypnosis	idem
P	M	55	spontaneous and self-induced	Patelli (1984)
GN	M	45	spontaneous and self-induced	Nicholls, Pederzoli & Tressoldi (2019)
C	M	54	spontaneous and self-induced	Melendez (2016)
M	M	50	spontaneous and self-induced	Seller (2016; 2017)
DJ	M	55	spontaneous and self-induced	DeGracia (2006)
CRJ	M	n/a	spontaneous and self-induced	Johnson (2016)
K	M	n/a	spontaneous and self-induced	Kellogg (2016)

Procedure

Using their personal statements retrieved from the sources indicated in Table 1, we selected and transcribed verbatim all information related to how they perceived themselves and the environment in which they felt immersed. All this information were grouped according to the following topics: consciousness status, self-boundaries, objects perception, colors perception, other types of perceptions, interactions with other people or beings, emotions, time perception, movement perception.

Results

Consciousness status

Beatitude; I feel free (A); Expanded; very pleasant (AL); I feel very light; very well (D); I'm pure awareness; It is a state of awareness (F); Like a thought (S); State of extreme lucidity and presence to myself (P); Clarity, expanded awareness, and beauty (GN); Your quantum of energy or consciousness pours into the space around you (M); Perhaps at first we continue to identify with ourselves as 'I', but after a time in the white space, there's not much for the ego to bounce off. When everything dissolves, what remains? When we spin a rainbow spinning-top, the colours merge into whiteness. When the rainbow of conscious experience merges into white light, self-perception and ego dissolve. What remains is lucid awareness (CRJ).

Self-boundaries

I have an external point of view, but I cannot see my hands, feet or body (A); No, no boundaries (AL, D, S); I feel totally free; I do not perceive boundaries or shapes (F); You feel like you're in a voluminous space and you can't see anything around but you are away of the space, flowing, independently of the physical body, as a point of consciousness (C); I'm in whitish space, endless neutral light (CRJ); My OBE body generally seems a close counterpart to my physical body, stable in form, resistant to change, made of some sort of elastic semitransparent whitish material, that can feel either very light or very dense (K).

Objects perception

Whatever I focus on is clear, perfectly defined. Everything is more defined. I could perceive them simultaneously from all points of view (A); Less sharp, maybe because they are unimportant. I could see them from above, as if from the ceiling (AL); I was watching them from one point of view at a time, but I perceived them as a whole; I saw all aspects of them simultaneously (D); At first, I see them from above as from a satellite, then if I zoom in on something I feel an attraction to it and I can then see all the details. I could see them any way I wanted, depending on my level of attention to them (F); Whatever I look at is well defined and I see everything clearly, If I focused on them, I could see everything simultaneously; otherwise, only one side at a time (S); I have a better sense of space and volume. (E); Everything is in focus. I can even see things from the inside; I can feel their consistency and can feel what they are made of (D); Zooming the visual field resulting in unusually close up and detailed perception. Sometime a 360 degree vision (GN); You can see from all directions at once, able to perceive with 360° vision (M); Upon separation the room appeared to me just the same with normal eyesight. But it was only a good year and half or so later that I was able to see things that I normally couldn't see - and this is just things hidden by location (C).

Color perception

Brighter, clearer. (A); Some colors are very bright, others faded. There are more intense than in the physical body (F); I see them very well, but they are fuller and independent of surrounding light. The colors of what I focus on are clear, but seem different to real ones. I see colors like in the physical body, but all are brighter and with no shadows (S); I find it difficult to see them; everything seems black and white (E); They are purer, but I see everything superimposed. It looks blurred. Clear but intense, fuller than with the physical body (D); The profusion of shades and the glitter of the of colorations is such that nothing similar is given to see on Earth, not even in certain shining spring days in the spring days when the sun shines on our valleys. These, if taken as comparison, express only a pale, washed-out reflection (P); At this high level, everything was way more alive and vibrant in optimum condition. I was mesmerised simply by the color of the grass for what felt like maybe twenty minutes (C).

Other types of perceptions

The most common form of exteroception was temperature, touch and ‘texture’ perception. Auditory sensations were apparent in 72% of the experiences (GN); I can smell different aromas and taste different tastes, even if I am not eating anything. You can feel the shape of objects at a distance. Hear what is happening in the distance (M); I was able to touch objects at a distance. I don't have to physically see the object to know what it is. I just feel it with my extended consciousness. When listening to music, I perceive the color of it “as each sound has its own color” (C).

Interactions with other people or beings

The person I am trying to communicate with will simultaneously ignore me on a physical level but engage me telepathically to say that he is busy and cannot talk; … in communicating this rather strange phrase (remember that when I say talk, I mean telepathic conversation ... (P); Information is instant telepathic thought (M); I am only using this entry to illustrate that there seemed to be telepathy between me and the rhino (DJ).

Emotions

I feel lighter. I can sense feelings and emotions (AL); I would not use the term emotion, it is more an attraction for something or other. Emotions belong to the psychical body, as long as it is attached to the physical body (F); I do not really feel emotions. Emotions are for the physical body and consciousness (S); They are not real emotions, they are lighter, and I can feel them all together, but not in their fullness. I can sense them but there is no need to (D); Emotions are experienced in a much more intense and strong way than in the physical and it is necessary to pay particular attention not to be overwhelmed (P).

Time perception

I didn't have any sense of time (A); I felt no sense of time traveling to Padova; I could sense it while moving around the room and while watching the objects as if I were in my physical body (AL, S); I did not experience it while moving from one place to another; while watching an object I realized time was passing, but I had no sense of time (D); Not at all; I was aware of the succession of events, but not of time. I could sense time if I moved slowly (F); There is no perception of the passage of time (P); Very little perception of time. In 10% of the experiences, a movement forwards or backwards within "some form of time" (GN); In the OBE state, neither time nor space exists. I discovered that the past, as such, is not fixed; it can be changed because it does not exist separately. It is a part of the present, as is the future, so both could be changed with intense feeling-based intention directed at whatever you wish to change (M).

Movement perception

I will it (A); I am horizontal. I feel like I am rolling. Almost like crawling. I can move at will a body which seems almost gelatinous (AL); A bit like zooming in immediately (D); I intend it and I get there in zero time (F); I fly. I simply have the thought and I can do it (S); I fly. I can initiate motion with my intention. I am light and I can go through everything (D); Instantaneous movement in the majority of cases, e.g. "Once the flowing sensations running through my body subsided, I simply found myself at a very tall building, which appeared to be in London" (GN); There was no sense of travelling the 10 miles from my house to his room; it was instant, exactly like an edit on a film (C); I seemed to be floating, without legs or feet. Movement seemed to result simply by me thinking of moving (DJ).

Discussion

Consciousness status

Apart the positive feeling and emotions, the consciousness status is characterized by an high level of self-awareness very similar to a thought without content as that perceived in some meditation practices as pure or pre-reflective consciousness.

Self -boundaries

The most common characteristics is to exist with no boundaries, highlighting a kind of paradox of a defined and distinct Self, but without boundaries, similar to a physical particle without mass, like photons.

In one case, i.e. K, a sort of semitransparent whitish body was described, that can be felt either very light or very dense. This sort of body is similar to the descriptions of the etheric or subtle body experienced in the initial phases of OBEs (Tressoldi et al., 2015)

Objects perception

A general feature is that objects perception is not constrained by the characteristics and functionality of the visual system. It is described as a sort of mental perception where it is possible to see the target from all point of view simultaneously and zooming in or out on the details depending on the interest of the perceiver.

Color perception

Color perception seems characterized by more vivid and brighter colors: it seems deriving from a sort of energy within the objects and not from the reflection of an external light.

Other types of perceptions

Smell, taste, auditory and tactile perceptions seem available even if in some cases they seems synesthetically related. Even in this case, these perceptions are not constrained by the characteristics of the sensory apparatus.

Interactions with other people or beings

It seems the exchange of information is based only on telepathic means without using language.

Emotions

Emotions and feelings are experienced, but their valence and intensity are not similar as to when experienced in the physical body. Very probably this is due to the differences of the types of interactions and perceptions in this particular state of consciousness.

Time perception

The main characteristic is that in the OBE there is not a perception of time even if there are perceptions of the changes of experiences, that seems a contradiction. A sort of timeless dimension where multiple experiences take place.

Movement perception

In general, there is no perception of movement, but only a change of place after a simple wish or intention. It seems than that there is not a space as perceived in the physical body, with distances among objects or places, but a sort of 'spaceless place'.

For sure, OB experiencers describe a 'strange' reality, strange with respect to our everyday one, obviously. But how can we proof that this reality exists apart the convergent descriptions of those who got such a type of experience? Furthermore, if this other reality exists, is it independent from our ordinary one or do they interact each other? In other words, can OBErs interact with the ordinary reality? In order to respond to such questions it is necessary to devise experiments where OBErs are requested to perform tasks that can be verified in our ordinary reality by third person witnesses.

The number of OBE experimental veridical accounts is not high, but there are some. Paquette (2012), in his description of 64 records of personal OBEs, reported that 50 (78.1%) had demonstrated veridicality. The main limitation of the veridicality control is that it is based on only Paquette's accounts. For example, "*I was on the phone with a friend who lived in California, named Lisa Moore. Moore interrupted the conversation to ask if I'd dreamed about her recently. I thought I might have but wasn't sure and offered to check. She agreed, as if she expected I had dreamed of her, so I went upstairs to find the dream I had in mind. I came back to the phone with my journal and read an account from about two weeks earlier. I hadn't written her name in the record, but one of the people in the dream reminded me of Moore and that was the basis for selecting the dream. Moore said it was a fair description of recent events in her life connected with the death of her cat during veterinary surgery after it was run over by a car. Impressively, the unusual detail of decapitation was included in my notes"* (pp. 797-798).

Ballati, Prati, Pederzoli, & Tressoldi, (2020) and Tressoldi et al., (2014) devised two different experimental procedures in order to verify whether OBErs were able to use their perceptual and cognitive skills for obtaining information at a distance without any possibility to use conventional means. In Tressoldi et al. (2014), five selected participants, after being induced in a OB state of consciousness by using Pederzoli & Tressoldi, (2018) hypnotic procedure, were requested to identify images located in rooms hundreds of kilometers far from their location. Participants correctly identified 46.7% of images well above the chance expected of 25%. Ballati et al. (2020), instead, requested to four selected participants to describe five different and unknown buildings located hundreds of kilometers far from their location, after being induced in OB by using the same procedures. Participants were able to detect 55% of correct information. From the results of these two studies, it seems then that some participants can apply the perceptual characteristics of the OB condition in our typical reality showing that a connection between these two realities is possible. If this interpretation holds, it suggests that humans can both use the perceptual and cognitive skills of an OB state and of a typical everyday condition simply changing their state of consciousness.

The implications for the response of the foundational question "who we really are" are clear: our consciousness is not a product or an emergent property of our brain, but it is primary and use the brain and the sensory organs as 'special devices' for generating our ordinary everyday experiences. Without such a 'special devices' we can have different experiences and probably a more direct hint of "who we really are" in agreement with some philosophical traditions like Idealism (Kastrup, 2018), Dual-aspect monism (Walach, 2020) and Non-duality (Indich, 1995; Sedlmeier & Srinivas, 2016).

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