

**AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF OUT-OF-  
BODY EXPERIENCES IN TWO CASES OF NOVICE MEDITATORS**

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**Abstract**

The Out-of-Body Experience (OBE) is an anomalous experience that has been found to occur under a variety of circumstances. This paper will take as its focus the in-depth examination of the lived experience of having an OBE as described by two novice meditators. A qualitative approach was adopted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Two female participants who had OBEs whilst meditating took part in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Three interrelated themes emerged from the findings. Analysis highlighted the potential for the OBE to function as an adaptive form of behaviour in relation to how participants endeavoured to discharge existing need-related conflicts. Also emergent was the transactive nature of the out-of-body environments themselves, which were seen as meaningful places that facilitated participants' embodied, goal-oriented behaviours. Accordingly, participants took pragmatic views about their OBEs, seeing them more as tools or skills that can be utilized as an extension of their selves. Also emphasized was the role of absorption in the production of both the participants' meditative and out-of-body states.

**Keywords:** *out-of-body experiences; meditation, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative, embodiment*

## **Introduction**

The Out-of-Body Experience (OBE), whereby “the centre of consciousness appears to the experient to occupy temporarily a position which is spatially remote from his/her body” (Irwin, 1985a, p. 5) has been a research topic in psychology for over a century (Alvarado, 1992). Although phenomenologically diverse, three broad characteristics are typically reported in the literature; a sensation of being disembodied (Monroe, 1971), perceiving the physical body from a remote vantage point (Green, 1967), and the impression of travelling to distant locations (Peterson, 1997). OBEs can happen under a variety of different circumstances, such as; spontaneously occurring (Blackmore, 1986); during periods of illness or stress (Palmer, 1978); via voluntary induction, following techniques suggested by Monroe (1971) for example; under hypnosis (Cardeña, 1988) or when in trance states as utilized in some shamanic cultures (Peters & Price Williams, 1980); whilst under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Tart, 1971); as part of a near-death experience (Ring, 1980), and whilst meditating (Kohr, 1980). This article focuses its examination on OBEs as described by two novice meditators.

The phenomena of OBEs and the practice of meditation have generally been researched along independent agendas. Where previous research has considered the two together, it has been mostly in the form of surveys that have investigated, either wholly or in part, the occurrence of the OBE in various populations. This work has generally yielded positive correlations between OBEs and meditation (Alvarado, Zingrone, & Dalton, 1996; Hunt, Gervais, Shearing-Johns, & Travis, 1992; Kohr, 1980; Myers, Austrin, Grisso, & Nickeson, 1983; Palmer, 1979; Usha & Pasricha, 1989). However, this literature tells us little about the phenomena as they have occurred together. The lack of research interest in these experiences as they may

occur mutually seems surprising given the relative commonality of the OBE—approximately 12% of the general population have been estimated to have had one (Alvarado, 2000)—and the explosion in popularity of meditation since the 1960's (Blackmore, 2003). More recently, findings from an internet-based survey on OBEs conducted by Murray, Fox and Wilde (2006) found that 89 out of 1,110 experiencers (8%) reported having had an OBE whilst meditating. This accounted for the second largest category of circumstance. Of these 89 experiencers, 32 (2.9%) reported they had single OBEs and 57 (5.1%) reported they had meditation-related OBEs on more than one occasion, ranging from two to as many as five hundred separate occurrences. Furthermore, the respective literature sources for both phenomena also note that the two experiences share certain overlapping characteristics; particularly that they are both deemed to be altered states of consciousness and are related to dissociation and absorption. We shall now briefly review the evidence relating to these characteristics.

*OBEs and meditation as altered states of consciousness (ASC)*

An ASC can be defined as “a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of mental functioning such that the experiencer feels his [or her] consciousness is radically different from the ‘normal’ way it functions” (Tart, 1972 as cited in Pekala & Cardeña, 2000, p. 95). Much of the work investigating OBEs as ASCs has taken a similar path to meditation, i.e. from a neurophysiological, laboratory-based position, with individuals who claim to be adept at inducing OBEs willfully (Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; McCreery & Claridge, 1996; Tart, 1967, 1968, 1969). Alvarado (2000) concluded in his review of the psychophysiological data concerning OBEs that the OBE appears to be linked with states of relaxation or low arousal, states which are directly linked to and promoted in the practice of meditation.

Meditation itself has often been couched in terms of ASCs, for instance, Farthing (1992, p. 421) defined meditation as “a ritualistic procedure intended to change one’s state of consciousness by means of maintained, voluntary shifts in attention.”

Research has investigated the potential for meditation to induce ASCs mostly from the neuroscience perspective (Aftanas & Golocheikine, 2001; Austin, 1998; Bagchi & Wenger, 1957; Easterlin & Cardeña, 1998; Fenwick, 1987; Kamatsu & Hirai, 1966; Ornstein, 1986). Overall, Vaitl et al (2005, p. 109) concluded that there does seem to be examinable psychophysiological bases underlying the capability of person’s to enter ASCs via the “intentional self-regulation of attention”.

*Psychological absorption and dissociation and their links to OBEs and meditation*

OBEs and dissociative processes have been linked in numerous studies. In terms of the attentional processes potentially underlying entry into out-of-body and meditative states, the personality trait of absorption appears to be fundamentally important.

Absorption has been suggested to facilitate openness for ostensibly mystical and paranormal experiences (Gliski, Tataryn, Tobias, Kihlstrom, & McConkey, 1991; Wild, Kuiken, & Schopflocher, 1995) and as an essential meditative skill—i.e. the ability to concentrate without distraction (Smith, 1987). The construct of absorption has been defined by Tellegen (1992, p. 1) as “a disposition to enter, under conducive circumstances, psychological states that are characterized by marked restructuring of the phenomenal self and world. These more or less transient states may have a dissociated or an integrative and peak-experience-like quality. They may have a “sentient” external focus, or may reflect an inner focus on reminiscences, images, and imaginings.” Accordingly, absorption has received considerable attention in research into OBEs and meditation.

The majority of previous work on OBEs has been survey work conducted by comparing OBErs with non-OBErs. This research has found that OBErs tend to score higher on measures of dissociation, especially somatoform dissociation, and absorption (e.g. Irwin, 2000; Murray & Fox, 2005). Early studies (e.g. Irwin, 1980) established a positive correlation between absorption and OBEs. This finding has been replicated in several studies conducted since (Dalton, Zingrone, & Alvarado, 1999; Glicksohn, 1990 [2 studies]; Irwin, 1981; Irwin, 1985a; Myers, Austrin, Grisso, & Nickeson, 1983), though not in others (Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984; Glicksohn, 1990 [1 study]). When taken together these results show a moderate correlation between absorption and OBEs (Alvarado, 2000).

A significant positive relationship between OBEs and dissociation, as measured on the Dissociation Experiences Scale (DES), was found by Richards (1991). A number of studies have subsequently reported a similar relationship (e.g. Alvarado & Zingrone, 1997; Irwin, 2000). Dissociation in turn has been associated with trauma and PTSD (e.g. Carlson & Putnam, 1993) as have OBEs (Irwin, 1996; Spiegel, 1988). For example, Cardeña & Spiegel (1993) described how earthquake survivors in San Francisco reported more frequent episodes of their self detaching from their body and periods of narrowly focused attention in the week immediately following the earthquake than they did four months afterwards. Where trauma occurs early in life, is experienced as severe or has become chronic, dissociation may then become a coping mechanism. However, some commentators (e.g. Allen, 1993) consider dissociation more as a skilful ability to control one's attentional processes "that requires a certain degree of mental agility" (Waelde, 2004, p.149).

More recently somatoform dissociation—"dissociation which is manifested in a loss of the normal integration of somatoform components of experience, bodily reactions

and functions” (Nijenhuis, Spinhoven, Van Dyck, Van der Hart, & Vanderlinden, 1998, p. 713) has become of interest to OBE researchers. Building on the work of Nijenhuis et al (1998), Irwin (2000) bestowed key roles for absorption and dissociation in his model of OBEs. In Irwin’s theory, the foundation of the OBE lies in a union of dissociative processes beginning with a disruption of somatic input. The powerful realism of the OBE is explained by Irwin as a product of the strong absorption processes at work during the experience, as well as playing a certain role in directing the experient’s attention further away from their somatic sensations once the process begins.

In an updated review of the psychological and physical states and processes prior to and during the OBE, Irwin and Watt (2007) have emphasized that many OBEs happen under conditions of extremely high or low cortical arousal (such as meditation and certain trance states)—an important pre-cursive condition to the strong states of absorption Irwin suggests in part underlie the OBE occurrence. OBEers themselves often describe feeling relaxed, focused and clear minded during the experience. However, Maitz and Pekala (1991) reported that OBEers’ attentional processes during the experience, rather than being inwardly focused, are more like an externally directed perceptual experience, which is concordant with the above definition of absorption by Tellegen (1992). Irwin and Watt (2007) have also noted that a person’s capacity for absorption or to focus their attention is a key factor in OBE induction techniques used experimentally (Irwin, 1981) and those promoted by knowledgeable writers on the subject (often referred to as ‘astral projection’, e.g. Eby, 2002).

Absorption has been associated with various means by which a sense of bodily detachment may be brought forth, such as hypnosis (Cardeña, 2005) and meditation (e.g. Hoelzel & Ott, 2006; Holroyd, 2003). The Compact Oxford English Dictionary

(2005) defines the word 'meditate' simply as "to focus one's mind for a time for spiritual purposes or for relaxation". Developing an ability to progressively reduce one's reactivity to distracting stimuli and prolong and deepen periods of focus is the key element (and often greatest hurdle) for beginners to master when starting meditation (Blackmore, 2003; Ornstein, 1986). Some people are better than others at this task suggesting that this ability is a personality variable. The idea that intending to regulate one's attention is involved in the process of meditation as a function of personality has been investigated by Hoelzel and Ott (2006). They hypothesized that people who had a high absorption trait would be able to enter deeper meditative states more easily than those who had a lower capacity for absorption. Their hypothesis was supported. The results showed that absorption had a stronger, positive influence on meditative depth than did the length of time a person had been practicing the technique. This finding is interesting in the context of this review as it implies that a novice meditator who is high in absorption could attain ASCs, and therefore potentially have an OBE, more easily than those individuals lower in absorption who may have been practicing longer. Additionally, Davidson, Goleman & Schwartz (1984) noted that absorption was greater and anxiety lower in longer-term meditators than it was in controls and beginners, suggesting a training effect with prolonged practice. Translating these results to the phenomenon of OBEs could lend support to Alvarado's (2000) suggestion that a possible explanation why people have multiple OBEs is that, after they have had the first one, with each subsequent OBE they become more adept at recognizing the experience and may gradually develop greater cognitive abilities to assist the progression of the experience when it starts.

There are two types of meditation; concentration and awareness meditation, both of which essentially utilize the attentional processes in different ways. In the former,

the meditator voluntarily narrows their attention and in the latter they expand it (Blackmore, 2003; Ornstein, 1986). Bogart (1991) has suggested that, via the practice of either sensory reduction or excess, the brain's ability to process information is radically transformed, allowing for states of 'flow' to arise that are "characterized by perceptual expansion and sharpening" (p. 14). Hoelzel and Ott (2006) have also noted that some of the manifestations of entering into absorptive states (and so the potential to enter into ASCs and OBEs) are an increased sense of realism regarding the object(s) of attention and an altered sense of self. The notion that meditative practices, whether harnessing sensory engrossment or reduction, can lead to entry into ASCs (and therefore OBEs) is reminiscent of what was mentioned earlier in relation to the high/low cortical states of arousal underpinning Irwin's (2000) dissociational theory of the OBE.

### *Rationale for study*

Although the above review is not exhaustive, it does highlight that there is significant gap in the literature surrounding the phenomenon of OBEs as they happen in relation to the practice of meditation that warrants some attention. As can be seen, much of the previous work on the OBE has been nomothetic and quantitative in nature, usually taking the form of experimental work (e.g. Tart, 1972 ) or survey studies (e.g. Blackmore, 1984). This research has increased our overall understanding of the OBE immensely. However, if we return to Tart's (1972) definition of the ASC, we note the reference to "a qualitative alteration" from the normal modes conscious functioning, suggesting that OBEs (as well as other ASCs) are distinctly individual in nature, ergo the averaged data obtained from quantitative studies may be relevant only to an average person; perhaps at best only a theoretical construct (De Waele, 1986;

Flick, 2002). Some qualitative work on OBEs has been carried out (e.g. Blackmore & Wooffitt, 1990; Irwin, 1985b). Where this is the case a descriptive phenomenological approach has usually been taken that has tended to either describe categorically the broad after-effects of the OBE, or to distil a rich and widely varied experience down to a range of common features, for example, sensations experienced during onset and cessation, content and vividness of the experience, and the psychological state of the experient (see Alvarado, 2000 and Irwin & Watt, 2007 for more in-depth reviews). It seems by taking a single stranded, reductive approach researchers have methodically objectified, depersonalized and rationalized these experiences—essentially removing all sense of a person in there having an OBE—which somehow seems inadequate in view of the epistemological basis of the approach taken. Conversely, when examining the verbal accounts of OBErs, it is evident that the OBE should perhaps not be viewed as a unitary experience, but rather as a collection of comparable experiences, subtly different depending upon their arising circumstances and/or the situated, embodied, historical contexts of the experients lives.

In order to address these issues, the aim of this study was to conduct an in-depth examination of the lived experience of having an OBE during meditation, and to examine what meaning experients attribute to their OBEs. Such work would be expected to contribute more to a further understanding of the OBE rather than any particular meditative practice.

### **Method**

#### *Study design*

This study was conceived within the framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996). Theoretically and philosophically, IPA is a founded on

a blend of phenomenology, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. IPA is phenomenological in that it seeks to obtain and honour a person's experiences, understandings, perceptions and accounts (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). There is no attempt to construct an objective truth about an experience; rather IPA is more concerned with the subjective account and meaning of the experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). However, IPA also acknowledges that in order to reach a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world, it is important to consider how the human being interprets their world, both individually and socially, and in attempting to gain access to another person's world that "access depends on and is complicated by the researcher's own conceptions...required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity" (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, pp. 218-219). The skill of attempting to understand another person's experience from their perspective has been termed 'vicarious introspection' by Self-psychology authors (e.g. Bacal, 1995; Ornstein & Ornstein, 1995).

### *Sampling*

The intense analysis of individual accounts and the examination of shared meaning, along with any nuances in these meanings, are reflective of the idiographic characteristic of IPA, which is generally characterized by small and homogeneous samples (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Having noted this, there has been a recent tendency for IPA studies to include samples of two participants (e.g. Knudson & Coyle, 2002; Parke & Griffiths, 2005) or to use single participant case studies (e.g. Bramley & Eatough, 2005; de Visser & Smith, 2006).

Given what was outlined in the introduction, it must be noted that this study is relatively exploratory in nature, involving a very small sample size and therefore

broad claims about the generalisability of the results to the wider OBE population are not attempted here. While IPA is not opposed to more general claims for larger populations, it is “committed to the painstaking analysis of cases rather than jumping to generalizations” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54). While generalisable claims regarding a sample in a single IPA study are not made, as more studies with other samples are carried out with similar findings, more general claims become possible. Smith and Osborn (*ibid*) refer to this as 'theoretical generalisability', rather than 'empirical generalisability'. While we do not make any claims that the experiences described herein are universal to all OBEs or OBErs, we have explicated the meanings of the OBE which emerge for both our participants. Furthermore, as Brown and Engler (1986) and Shapiro, Schwartz and Santerre (2002) have noted, meditation is a developmental process, and therefore the findings of this study may be considered pertinent at best to beginner meditators, but not to more advanced practitioners.

Participants were eligible for this study if they could confirm upon initial contact that they had previously had one or more OBEs (i.e. the OBE(s) they nominated included the perceived temporary dislocation of consciousness as a key component of the experience (see Irwin’s definition at the beginning of the introduction); their OBEs occurred during a period of meditation; they were willing and able to talk about their OBEs using English as a first language, and they could be consented in a fully informed manner. In considering our definition of meditation, the authors recognize that there is a difference between the traditional conceptions of meditation as an Eastern spiritual discipline and contemporary Western conceptions, where meditation is an umbrella term for different practices (e.g. forms of relaxation training, guided imagery and hypnosis-related techniques). Herein, we refer to meditation as defined by Shapiro, Schwartz and Santerre (2002, p. 632): “Meditation refers to a family of

techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a non-analytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ‘ruminating thought’.” Shapiro et al outline certain elements to this definition which we think highlight the broad inclusivity of this definition. Firstly, the definition includes the phrase ‘conscious attempt’ signifying that there is deliberate behavioural intention to focus one’s attentional processes. Secondly, the definition does not imply that meditation must be carried out within a religious framework. Indeed, as meditation has become more popular in the West, it has gradually been peeled away from its original religious origins and been ‘re-packaged’ as a more secular path to personal and spiritual development, or as a technique for health improvement (Blackmore, 2003; Ornstein, 1986).

With these considerations in mind, two women—Patricia and Louise—were recruited. Louise was recruited from a database of respondents who had taken part in previous research studies on OBEs. Patricia contacted the researcher after conducting her own research about OBEs on the internet and found a link to the researcher’s web page at the University. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity is maintained.

### *Participants*

Patricia (White British, age 31) estimated that she had had between 2-5 OBEs whilst meditating. Patricia recalled early experiences (between four and seven years old) of staring at a poster on her bedroom wall and then starting to feel as if everything around her was shrinking and “the room was the size of postage stamp and I was size of a pinhead”. Her first OBE happened at the age of 14 while she was attending an art class at her new school. She remembered feeling unsettled at the

school and felt that she was being bullied by some of the other girls. However, she found peace and comfort in drawing and painting. Her OBE happened one day while she was engrossed in drawing a picture. Although she felt anxious about what was going on around her, she became progressively focused on her drawing and then suddenly noticed that she could see her hand, her drawing and the room from above. Later, at the age of 19, she was studying to be a dancer at college and became very ill with glandular fever. Concerned that her illness might become something more chronic she began practicing Transcendental Meditation. During the meditation ceremony she received her personal mantra and was then taken through a guided meditation during which she had an OBE. Patricia described how she initially felt her mind “focusing in” and her body coming “down and down”. She then exited her body through the top of her head. She continues to meditate today, not for health reasons, but simply to relax and keep her mind clear.

Louise (White British, age 36) had her first and only OBE during meditation three years prior to the interview. She began a ‘Meditation for Health’ course in an attempt to relax and de-stress herself after leaving a long-term relationship with a violent partner. She found the course difficult and struggled for the first few weeks to relax and let go of her thoughts and feelings and enter the meditative state. Her instructor encouraged her to continue and she eventually went into a meditative state in her sixth class. Her instructor was guiding the class through a Jungian meditation that described a ‘journey’ to a forest.<sup>1</sup> She felt very relaxed prior to leaving her body and very aware of the instructor’s voice. After a while she realized she could not hear the instructor’s voice anymore and felt that she really was in the place that was being described in the meditation. She felt disembodied and disconnected and experienced some very

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<sup>1</sup> This type of guided imagery - visiting comforting places such as meadows, mountainsides and forests - is a familiar ‘script’ technique used in hypnosis to help treat various clients with various problems, for example, Bulimia nervosa (Esplen & Garfinkel, 1998).

powerful emotions. She recalled seeing her physical body curling up on the floor below her. She came out the OBE when roused by her instructor, who had also noticed her curling up on the floor and crying. Although she enjoyed being in the OB state, she was profoundly upset at the vulnerable condition she perceived herself to be in. She went back to the class the following week and during that evening's meditation session she felt as if she was "moving off" to have another OBE. This frightened her and she terminated the experience and the meditation. She never went back to the class again. Although she was very frightened by the experience, she also remembered the peace and tranquility of being in the OB state and said she would like to try meditation again, but only if she thought she could feel safe whilst doing it.

### *Interview schedule*

An interview schedule was constructed according to guidelines set out by Smith and Osborn (2008). Interview questions were derived from an in-depth literature review and from an analysis of the experiences of 1,110 OBEs who took part in a previous web-based questionnaire study about OBEs (Murray, Fox, & Wilde, 2006). As part of that study, OBEs were asked to provide accounts of their only or most recent OBE. Details supplied during this study directed the researchers to consider the OBE more broadly as a life-event and to design the interview schedule for this study to try and capture the OBE in some form of biographical perspective, rather than simply investigating the experience in isolation. As a result, a pre-prepared interview schedule was constructed that contained a list of main topics to be covered, including biographical details, background to the and full details of the OBE, what happened immediately after, and questions about the person's life since and any other

experiences they may have had. All questions were open-ended and inquired about OBEs generally without trying to focus on either positive or negative aspects.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Ethical approval for the study was obtained in accordance with local institutional research governance procedures. Both interviews were conducted by the first author. Patricia's interview was conducted at her home. Louise's interview was conducted at a UK University that she was attending. Both interviews were digitally recorded and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were fully transcribed by the first author.

There are numerous, detailed worked examples of IPA (e.g. Smith & Eatough, 2006) that guide the researcher through the analysis process. The analysis of the transcripts in this study followed a similar procedure. During the transcription phase notes were kept of first impressions of any points of interest. Upon completion of all transcription, one transcript (Patricia's) was chosen for analysis by the researchers and read several times. During each subsequent reading, researchers made further notes of any preliminary thoughts or interpretations in the left hand margin of the transcript. Examples of such notes are "Since OBEs: better able to cope with past situation, feels calmer, other people say she seems calmer" (Louise) and "Experience felt familiar, like re-learning a childhood skill" (Patricia). When this process seemed to come to a natural point of exhaustion, the transcripts were read again, this time attempting to move from note-taking to the elicitation of higher level themes. These were written in the right-hand margin. At this point care was taken to remain true to "the essential quality of what was found in the text" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 68). For example, the preliminary notes mentioned above later translated into early themes, such as 'new self/old self - transformative experience' (changed later to 'Selves in transformation:

The adaptive value of OBEs') and 'Control/skill/learning' (later to become 'Tools, skills and learning: the OBE as an embodied experience'). This procedure was replicated with Louise's transcript. New information emerging from Louise's transcript augmented the themes initially identified from Patricia's transcript. This necessitated revisiting Patricia's transcript in order to validate the congruence and robustness of the analysis. Finally, after both transcripts were fully analyzed, a summary table of themes was produced. This table was supplemented with line/page number references and a textual extract to support each theme to again ensure that an 'audit trail' could be traced back to the raw data.

### *Ensuring the validity of the analysis*

This study employed a variety of procedures throughout the analysis phase to ensure the integrity of the final interpretations. Firstly, the authors met regularly to compare their independent analyses of a selection of the transcripts. The analysis conducted by the first author was evaluated alongside the second author's. This process enabled the achievement of deeper understandings of the data: similar and additional interpretations of the data provided by both researchers were analytically engaged with to produce definitive themes and interpretations. This activity served as one indication of the trustworthiness of the analysis. However, the aim of this process is to ensure the credibility of the analysis rather than to produce an analysis which is objectively 'true' (Yardley, 2008).

Two further suggested criteria to assess the integrity of qualitative research are internal coherence and presentation of evidence (Smith, 1996). Internal coherence refers to whether the argument presented within a study is internally consistent and supported by the data. Presentation of evidence refers to there being sufficient data

from participants' discourse within a report to enable readers to evaluate the interpretation. Therefore, the emergent themes presented are supported by participants' actual discourse, in order that the integrity and credibility of the interpretations can be assessed by the reader.

## **Findings**

Three main themes emerged from the analysis, which provide a cumulative, condensed account of the subjective meaning of our participants' experience of their OBEs: (1) Selves in transformation: The adaptive value of OBEs; (2) OBEs in their place: the transactive nature of out-of-body environments; and (3) Tools, skills and learning: the OBE as an embodied experience.

Each theme will be discussed in turn and illustrated by direct quotations from the transcripts.<sup>2</sup>

### *Selves in transformation: the adaptive value of OBEs*

This theme relates to the impact participants' OBEs had upon their sense of self, and is concerned with the potential for the OBE to function as an adaptive form of behaviour. When Patricia moved to another area of the country she found life at school initially difficult. She was the new girl in class and perceived her environment to be hostile and intimidating. It was under these conditions that she had an OBE one day in her art class. She described how she only saw part of herself—her hand—from above. Later, as an adult, she confessed that she had a tendency to want to withdraw into herself to escape from periods of stress or conflict. She drew a distinction

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<sup>2</sup> Transcription conventions: Prior to each quotation, the participant's pseudonym will appear followed by the line numbers identifying the extract within the flow of the interview. Any words appearing between two square [] brackets indicate where notes of clarification have been added by the authors. Ellipsis points indicate where a quotation has been abridged.

between her professional and personal selves; feeling it was acceptable for this ‘tuning out’ to happen in her professional life, but not her private one:

Patricia, lines 869 to 879

I’ve got this ability to sort of just disappear a little bit and it can be quite odd, I think, sometimes if I’m not sort of happy with things...so instead of like talking about how I feel...I can almost not hear things and disappear and I didn’t really know I did it...I think when I’m working it’s fine, I’m allowed to do that, but when it comes to sort of more everyday life I’ve realised that’s a little bit odd.

She disclosed that being able to leave her body had made her more comfortable in withdrawing from the world in order to sort out her problems as if it has legitimized the behaviour in some way. Upon reflection, though, she felt there had been both positive and negative results to her OBEs:

Patricia, lines 928 to 934

In a good way...the sense of kind of expansion and focus and really good positive sense of yourself and...in a bad way in that, when I tell people I’ve even felt sort of weird about it and I think there’s a sense of isolation from it as well, not only by having the experiences but by doing the experiences regularly, it can isolate me a little bit, but I’m used to stepping out of things, which can sometimes be quite odd for people.

Louise had endured some major life events which have had severe effects on her sense of self, of which the OBE is one. After a three-year violent relationship ended she was diagnosed with PTSD and began taking an interest in personal development issues. In considering meditation, she described searching for something that could be beneficial in terms of alternative ways of dealing with stress. She did not expect to

have an OBE. Although she was unnerved and disconcerted by what happened to her in the class, she felt the OBE component was helpful and positive in that it took her away from her stressful life situation:

Louise, lines 240 to 242 and 492 to 493

Just that there was...a place of complete tranquillity and peace, which is something that I hadn't had for such a long time, emotionally, just to know that was there, was just fantastic...I remember feeling really grateful for the experience.

Since her OBE, she had noticed a reduction in the frequency of her nightmares. She no longer had sudden crushing feelings or terror attacks and she had become more introspective and better able to cope with past situations. She expressed how much more adept she was at being able to manage highly emotional situations or events, such as a recent bereavement:

Louise, lines 711 to 719

I was also able to cope with it better...I think I was able to be quite introspective about it...before I was one for being quite loud and dramatic about it and that's kind of calmed me.

Louise was disinclined to say that either the OBE or the meditation were “cure all pills” to such difficult life events. She did, however, express a wish to find those feelings of peace again and is looking to take up meditation once more. She felt that her OBE has in some way helped her become more self dependent and not reliant on the help of others or therapies.

*OBEs in their place: the transactive nature of out-of-body environments*

Our participants' OBEs happened in different out-of-body (OB) environments, which were perceived multi-modally and characterized by moments of strong affect. Both Patricia and Louise described how they took cues from these environments, and, particularly in Patricia's case, also cognized, planned and experimented with them. She did point out that her degree of control in achieving these OB states was quite variable; however, once in the OB environment, she described having a great deal of control over where she goes.

For example, during a business trip to Europe, she felt homesick and so began meditating with the deliberate aim of leaving her body. She felt herself exit through her head and ascended through the roof the building<sup>3</sup> where she was staying:

Patricia, lines 469 to 489

I saw myself...I was against a wall and a mattress and...seeing my room from above and then the red roof of my block of flats and the street outside...and seeing like the [town] outskirts...and sort of being able to say, ok, that must be Warsaw over there, that must be Krakow down there, that must be Berlin over there...ok that's the Baltic, almost like being in an aircraft, I suppose...that must be Scandinavia, that must be Russia, that must be France, and coming up and then finding Britain and sort of tracing through Britain...and sort of coming in down into places...and sort of seeing the top of my parents' house...focusing in and going down and trying to sort of see streets and identify places where I used to live or where people would be.

Some are not as effortless as others. Since her first meditative OBE, she has tried several times to induce an OBE during her meditations, without success. However,

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<sup>3</sup> Known also as 'astral projection' or 'astral travelling'. In the early part of the twentieth century, French researchers used hypnotic suggestion as a way of inducing OBEs but this was abandoned for a time because of criticisms levelled at the demand characteristics of the technique and that hypnotically induced OBEs may not be comparable to spontaneous OBEs (Irwin & Watt, 2007). However, more recently the use of hypnosis as a method of inducing and studying OBEs has been employed by several researchers (e.g. Irwin, 1989; Cardeña, 2005; Nash, Lynn & Stanley, 1984).

sometimes when meditating, she becomes conscious of the OBE when it is going to happen, and she tries to control it, with mixed success; sometimes it will stop, other times she can almost "steer" the experience to a full OBE. Other times, such as in the Europe OBE, she just lets them happen.

Louise's OBE happened during a guided meditation in which she was asked to visit a forest and it was characterized by a high degree of awareness and coherence. After an initial period of guidance, Louise became aware she was no longer following her instructor's voice and found herself autonomously directing herself within the OB environment:

Louise, lines 166 to 228

I just remember being there in this place...Just physical sensations of walking, sounds, feeling the sun coming through, and as you were walking through the forest and then, you could almost touch the water, feeling this but very, very vividly.

Although similar to Patricia's OBEs in terms of perceived realism, Louise's experience differed in that it was imbued with positive emotions. Different also was the distinct sense of place that defined the experience for Louise in contrast to the more functional, cognitively coherent environments portrayed by Patricia. Louise immediately embraced this and described it as a "safe" place.

*Tools, skills and learning: the OBE as an embodied experience*

As a professional dancer, Patricia utilized her mind and body as tools for expression in her daily working life. Similarly, she appeared to have embodied the OBE also, viewing it as a tool which could be manipulated to serve a variety of purposes in her life; helping her in her work and to make connections with others over

large distances. Her first OBEs happened as a child, then in later life they reappeared under stressful conditions when attending a new school, and once more when she learned to meditate. Her adulthood OBEs had mostly happened when she had been in states of deep psychological absorption, that is, when resting, or practising yoga or meditation. The roots of her openness to experiencing OB states may have been put place in her childhood, and then later reinforced with repeated experiences. When she learned to meditate, she had in place the cognitive skills and understanding of her own body and its limits from being a dancer to take advantage of her OBEs whilst meditating and use them as an extension of her self. In the next extract, Patricia describes how she felt after she had her first meditative OBE during her Transcendental Meditation ceremony and what it subsequently meant to her:

Patricia, lines 417 to 419 and 698 to 703

For me it felt like something that I already knew how to do as a child, it was something that was quite familiar to me; it was like a skill I'd forgotten how to do, and this [the meditation] had helped remind me how to do it...it gives you a really good perspective on yourself that you're not sort of entrapped within yourself; you can go out yourself and also experience the gift to travel to other people's minds almost...or to be outside of just this place that we are in, it's not just this body but also just this environment that, you think you're stuck in.

Patricia's self is in one instance a very rooted, embedded, pragmatic person who wishes remain firmly fixed "in the dirty, messy, complicated, weird, useless world", whilst at the same time taking advantage of seemingly extra-corporeal travel and the supra-normal abilities it suggests, such as flying over cities and countries. For instance, the OBEs she reported during meditation took place in replicas of real life places and are described as "pure moment[s] of consciousness", characterized by

feelings of dislocation, timelessness and of being outside of the moment, with a high degree of perceived realism. She further likened the art of dancing, of being completely in the moment of a very technically complex set of movements, to the OB state:

Patricia, lines 832 to 840

There's a relaxation that comes with that, with working at that sort of really high level, and it's something about the clarity of the mind, it's not about the body - it's about the clarity of the mind, and that's similar to when you're sort of outside yourself...they're remarkably similar, rather than being actually the opposite extremes; it's about tapping into the same thing, the same clarity of yourself.

Louise's OBE occurred during a guided meditation during which she was directed to visit a forest and was characterized by a degree of dual awareness. While in the OB state, she saw her physical body below her curling up on the floor into a foetal position with other people around her. She felt she was aware of the room and her body, but at the same time felt quite disconnected from both. She noted physical sensations congruent with the environment she was in; warm sunshine on her face and the sound and feel of water against her hands from a nearby stream. She likened this state of being to previous violent episodes in her relationship with an ex-partner, where she would, at times, step out of herself and view the attacks as a third party observer. That disconnected feeling is something which Louise parallels with being in the OB state. Although she does not think they are one and the same, she did acknowledge that they may be related:

Louise, lines 266 to 310

When the last attack happened, I was literally disconnected from, and felt as if I was watching it being played out rather than being in the middle of it...and I was there kind of pre-empting what was going to happen next and that was quite bizarre...this is why I'm saying that this out-of-body experience...can quite definitely be the product of years of feeling very disconnected and looking for safety.

She has reflected long and hard about her OBE and has studied the scientific literature about them as an undergraduate psychology student. This has led her to theorize about the possible nature of her OBE. She felt that being diagnosed with PTSD had opened up the possibilities for several explanations as to why she has had her OBEs. One theory she had was that, because of her emotionally vulnerable state, she might have been looking for a route to escape the brutality of her everyday emotional and psychological existence. Her crying upon her exit from the OB state could have been a sign of a release of that emotion. She also struggled with what the experience actually qualified as<sup>4</sup>. At some points during the interview, she called it an OBE, and at other times, she preferred to think of it as an altered state of consciousness (ASC). She felt that she could accept that it was an ASC rather than an OBE, as she found it difficult to reconcile her experience with what she was working towards in her scientific psychology studies. She confided at the end of the interview that she had not reached any conclusions either way, but also admitted that she had not done enough reading or talking to people about it yet.

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<sup>4</sup> During the earlier peer review process for this paper, one reviewer commented on how some participants may misinterpret their OBE for another experience, e.g. autoscopy. This problem is mainly intrinsic to OBE research involving self-report, self-selection questionnaire surveys where the respondent is asked to identify their experience with a 'screening' definition of the OBE provided by the researcher, usually with a dichotomous response choice, such as 'yes/no'. Using this method, the researcher cannot be fully certain which way the respondent has interpreted the definition of the OBE they have provided. This 'false positive/negative' problem has important methodological implications for incidence rates. However, this is not such an issue in studies such as this one, where the interviewer has the ability to explore the nature and meaning of the experient's OBEs and ascertain which are genuine OBEs and which are not. Readers interested in finding out more about this issue are referred to the debate between Neppe (2007) and Murray and Fox (2007)..

## **Discussion**

One of the novel findings from this study is the way that participants utilized their OBEs, particularly with repeated experiences, to function as an adaptive form of behaviour in relation to how they endeavoured to discharge their existing need-related conflicts. Indeed, Irwin and Watt (2007) have noted that in some OBE cases, the experience may facilitate the social needs of some experiencers, “such as the need to be with a particular person” (p. 177), which would fit well with some of the findings here. For instance, Patricia’s OBEs have dual functions, one to act as a kind pressure valve; relieving tension from the internal and external pressures of everyday life and providing a sense of freedom, while at the same time being a means by which to try to connect with others. Tentatively, the findings of this study suggest that participants were not completely leaving the psycho-affective substrate of their everyday life worlds behind when entering the OB state, rather they took socio-cultural behaviour patterns with them and employed embodied, situated actions and skills in an attempt to resolve those tensions.

The idea that the OBE could be a tool that can be utilized as an extension of the self (Hall, 1969) and developed is entirely consistent with the practical applications of meditation in the same context. As we noted earlier, practice effects have been found for meditation by Davidson, Goleman and Schwartz (1984) and advocated for OBEs by Alvarado (2000). Additionally, McCown (2005) has reported anecdotal evidence of mindfulness meditation being used by lawyers and physicians for the practical advantages it gave them, in terms of being able to attend more closely to their respective client’s needs. Similarly, it has also been noted by some OBE researchers (e.g. Ehrenwald, 1974) that shamans and mystics make use of OBEs as a way of

embarking on 'shamanic flights' as part of their ritualistic work (Eliade, 1964; Ichazo, 1973; Peters & Price-Williams, 1980).

In this study, Patricia revealed how she drew upon both her experiences in meditation and her OBEs and applied that understanding in her work teaching dance students. Furthermore, she also described high degrees of skilful navigation and interaction within her OB environments for the deliberate purpose of exploration and information acquisition. It has been suggested by Irwin and Watt (2007) that the majority of such perceived control within the OB environment is solely cognitive and directed towards a desired location, or as mentioned above, to a particular person.

What is interesting with Patricia's case is her descriptions of her psychological processes whilst dancing and her OB states during meditation, clearly involving deep psychological attention being directed towards physical states of being. As we noted in the introduction, many authors (Cardeña, 2005; Gow, Lang, & Chant, 2004; Holroyd, 2003; Irwin & Watt, 2007) have highlighted the role of absorption in the production of states of being that are characterized by a sense of detachment from the physical body. Such states are meditation, OBEs, hypnosis, trance states related to rhythmical music and dancing such as the 'whirling dervishes', as well as 'automatic' behaviours and activities such as walking, running, and playing a musical instrument.

Phenomenologically speaking, Mauss (1950 as cited in Csordas, 1993, p. 139) has emphasized the role of the attentional and imaginal processes related to the attainment and perfection of physical skills, for example by sports athletes. Csordas (*ibid*) termed this "somatic modes of attention", defined as "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (p. 138), and which could be extended to states of transcendence, such as those suggested by meditation and OBEs. Moreover, the progressive embodiment of the

OBE over time such that it becomes a skill is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concepts of 'intentional arc' and 'maximum grip'. For Merleau-Ponty, skills are attained in the course of interacting with objects and situations. The intentional arc defines the process by which these skills are first encountered, learned and then finally merged into the person's being. This leads to the concept of maximum grip—to achieve an increasingly superior grasp of lived situations. That goal directed behaviour was also reported suggests that at least some of the skills involved were cognitive in nature. As Anderson (2003, p. 105) has written:

We imagine a goal as being at some place ahead of us, and employ strategies for attaining it analogous to those we might use on a journey to a place. We plan a route, imagine obstacles, and set landmarks to track our progress. In this way, our thinking about purposes...is rooted in our thinking about space. It should come as no surprise to anyone that our concepts of space...are deeply tied to our bodily orientation to, and our physical movement in, the world.

On the basis of these considerations, then, our participants' OBEs can be considered to have happened in places or spaces; there is a dynamic quality to these experiences—they are never static and are characterized by multi-modal sensations—"as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place" (Feld, 1996 as cited in Geurts, 2003). Here we refer to western environmental psychology literature; principally in relation to the person-environment transactional approach, emblemized by the work of Ittelson (1973) and Stokols and Schumaker (1981). In so doing, it should be noted here that the concept of environment should be considered in its broadest meaning, not just its "simple physical-perceptual characteristics" (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995, p. 35). In this respect, the OB environment may then be

conceptualized, not simply as a psychologically and affectively inert setting, but as a meaningful place, and the OBEr as perpetually occupied in balancing need-related, goal-oriented activities with the perceived demand characteristics of that space; be they “‘resistant', 'supportive' or 'facilitative' with regard to the participants' behaviours” (ibid, p. 61).

The transactive approach under consideration here also recognises a cognitive-hermeneutical role for the experient–meaning and understanding emerge from the experience and are not determined by the characteristics of either the environment or the percipient (Ittelson, Proshansky, Rivlin, & Winkel, 1974). Emotions are considered equally as important with regards to goal-oriented behaviours. With reference to place and its relationship with the self and identity, Tuan (1974; 1979) proposed the concept of ‘topophilia’ indicative of “all the [positive] affective ties of the human being” with the environment, whereas negative ties, such as anxiety or fear, were conceptualised as ‘topophobic’. This is illustrated in our data by Louise’s account of her OBE, which was flooded with intense and passionate joy and profound peace, and tied to the place that she found herself in.

Finally, in this section, as we have touched on identity, we must therefore briefly consider place identity, often considered as a sub-structure of the self identity. Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983, p. 61), viewed place identity as “developed by thinking and speaking about places, through a process of distancing which allows for reflection and appreciation of places”. Central to this vision is the idea that by reflecting on, and talking about places, those places become imbued with meaning and thus make significant contributions to the identity formation process. This point is important, because both of our participants had problems with disclosure, fearing ridicule or embarrassment should anyone discover they were disposed to leaving their

bodies, in a sense a kind of powerlessness, which not only impinges on the integration of the OBE (as discussed above), but may also be problematic in how the person comprehends and identifies with themselves as being an OBEr.

### **Conclusion and suggestions for future research**

The findings presented here supplement current knowledge of OBEs in several ways. All participants demonstrated a desire for control over their lives, usually in relation to specific, unfulfilled needs that had germinated in earlier stages of their lives. This led them to begin meditating in the first place. Their OBEs were unexpected events, but once introduced into their lives, became integral parts of their evolving self identity, providing adaptive avenues by which they could manage existing need-related conflicts. Related to this were the challenges (real and perceived) that they encountered in trying to share their experiences with others and the strategies they employed to manage this disclosure. However, as part of this process, fresh uncertainties and conflicts also began to emerge, which subsequently impinged upon their beliefs, attitudes and sense of self. Also emergent is the transactive nature of the OB environments themselves. It is argued here that, rather than taking place in psychologically and affectively inert settings, our participants' OBEs were situated experiences occurring in meaningful places, sometimes imbued with positive emotions, and that they interacted with those surroundings in goal oriented ways. In doing so, they performed embodied actions and motions. In Patricia's case, these were learned from earlier OBEs or experiences of a similar nature and cultivated with repeated practice.

Moreover, the explorative findings from this study raise some interesting questions that may be used as the basis for future research directions. For instance, further in-

depth examinations of the issues surrounding control, skill acquisition and development, and embodiment need to be conducted. In this respect, studying OBEs recruited from populations of sportspersons, dancers, performers, etcetera, may be particularly fruitful. The tentative finding suggesting that there are socially motivated needs related to the OBE also require further exploration, not only in terms of how these needs affect the content of the experience, but also how they may impinge on its occurrence. The function of the OB environment has been highlighted in this study as something potentially important both to the meaning that the experient attributes to their OBEs, and reciprocally in terms of cognitive skill development. Future research should investigate more thoroughly the relationship between the different types and qualities of the environments that OBEs take place in, the needs of the experient and how these act together in order for an experient to draw meaning from the experience. Finally, this study examined the lived experiences of OBEs in two novice meditators. Both of our participants chose meditation as a means to address health related issues. Future studies should look at OBEs as experienced by advanced meditators who have been training with a specific form of meditation for a long period of time, as well as those meditating with the aim of spiritual and personal development.

The interpretative phenomenological approach taken in this research has been instrumental in highlighting the subtle social, perceptual and affective dimensions of the phenomenon of OBEs. They are complex, novel and meaningful events that are a rich part of an experient's life and as such they will cognize about them and wish to talk about them. Additionally, the personal biographical framework in which IPA works—viewing the participant as a situated, embodied, historical person—which is not traditionally a concern of phenomenology, as well as its cognitive focus, is ideally suited to investigate the multi-dimensional nature of these unique experiences.

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