People who self-induce OBEs experience a distinct body-self separation

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Abstract: Individuals who have had an out-of-body experience (OBE) report that the centre of their awareness appears to, temporarily, shift to a location that is spatially distinct from the location of their physical body. Research suggests that some OBErs report a sensation of leaving their physical body prior to their OBEs, while others instead report spontaneously finding themselves outside of their body. The present study evaluated data collected from 194 participants who claimed to have had an OBE. Instances of spontaneous and autonomously induced OBEs were considered. Binary Logistic Regression identified one item that predicted whether a participant was more likely to have had an induced, rather than a spontaneous, OBE: whether a participant had experienced a sensation of leaving their physical body prior to the OBE.

Out-of-body experiences (OBE) occur when an individual experiences their sense of consciousness from a spatial location different to that of their physical body (Ellison, 1988). The present study builds upon De Foe, Van Doorn and Symmons’ (2012) research which considered responses from 370 respondents to an online questionnaire about OBEs. De Foe et al.’s (2012) study ascertained whether certain variables were predictors of OBE likelihood based on participant’s responses. A link between auditory hallucinations and the likelihood of having OBEs was found in the previous research. In the present study we utilise the same dataset and methodology used by De Foe et al. (2012) in order to ascertain whether specific factors could be relevant in predicting the likelihood of certain types of OBE, in particular autonomously induced OBEs, as opposed to spontaneous experiences.

OBEs can occur spontaneously (Ellison, 1998) or as the direct result of conscious effort (Irwin, 2007; Monroe, 1992). Meditation, guided visualisation practice and relaxation techniques have been broadly discussed in the literature as mechanisms for inducing a shift in consciousness away from the physical body (Irwin & Watt, 2007). Alvarado and Zingrone (1999) examined questionnaire responses from 391 OBErs and found that of these 37% had induced an OBE at will on at least one occasion. De Foe et al. (2012) reported similar results, noting that 45% of respondents claimed to have induced an OBE on at least one occasion. However, most OBE accounts tend to discuss spontaneous experiences, with a small ratio of induced-to-spontaneous accounts across OBEs reported from the same experient (Alvarado & Zingrone, 1999; De Foe et al., 2012).

Though research has indicated that a sense of leaving one’s body is typical in all, or almost all OBE accounts (Anzellotti et al., 2011), other research indicates that this is not the case (Irwin & Watt, 2007). In a number of cases experients note a spontaneous shift in their centre of
consciousness, indicating no sensation of floating away from the body. Anecdotes reported by Irwin and Watt are consistent with the research findings of other researchers including Blackmore (1986) and Blanke, Landis, Ortique and Seeck (2003) who suggest that the sensation of floating or progressively leaving the body is not universal of OBEs. However, De Foe et al’s (2012) study noted that 39% of experients reported a sensation of leaving the body during their OBEs (De Foe et al., 2012). Notably, 42% of experients in Alvarado and Zingrone’s (1999) questionnaire also reported a progressive sense of leaving one’s body as part of their OBE(s). These results indicate that while some experients do report a distinct sense of progressive body dislocation, such a sensation is not universal amongst OBE accounts.

The fact that some OBEs are associated with a distinct sense of leaving the body during to the experience, while others are not, suggests that particular differences could exist between certain types of OBEs. This supposition is based on Levitan and LaBerge’s (1991) lucid dreaming research related to instances of OBE. Levitan and LaBerge found that 10 out of 107 lucid dreams—that is, dreams where the individual can “report being able to freely remember the circumstances of waking life, to think clearly, and to act deliberately upon reflection, all while experiencing a dream world that seems vividly real” (LaBerge, 1990, p. 201)—qualified as OBEs. That is, the lucid dreams matched the characteristics of an OBE, including a sense of spatial dislocation of consciousness. Levitan and LaBerge’s (1991) results also show that over half of participants who had induced lucid dreams experienced a physical sensation of floating away from their body. Conversely, only a third of those individuals who had spontaneous lucid dreams experienced the same sensation of floating away from their physical body.

Notably, Levitan and LaBerge (1991) developed a distinction between spontaneous and induced lucid dreams; however, prior research has neglected to delineate a similar taxonomical representation of OBEs. In prior studies OBEs have been induced via external stimuli, such as via the use of electrical brain stimulation (see Blanke & Thut, 2007), and in popular literature several self-induced OBE techniques have also been discussed. For example, Bruce (2009) noted that some individuals can induce their OBEs by visualising themselves climbing a rope in order to bring about a sensation of leaving the body. Similar
techniques are noted throughout popular literature, suggesting that some people are able to induce their own OBEs via visualisation practices. An OBE which is induced autonomously (as opposed to a laboratory-induced OBE) seems to resemble a similar process of progressively leaving the body noted in accounts of wakeinduced lucid dreaming explored by Levitan and LaBerge (1991). Despite differences arising in how OBEs come about, few researchers have considered potential differences in content or sensations associated with OBEs based on whether the experience was spontaneous or induced.

For the purposes of the present study we define a spontaneous OBE as an experience that occurs with no clear distinguishable trigger, and an autonomously induced OBE as one that is brought about by the explicit will of an experiemnt. Based on Levitan and LaBerge’s (1991) findings related to lucid dreams, such a distinction could prove useful in ascertaining whether a sense of leaving one’s body is more prominent in induced OBE accounts, than in spontaneous accounts of OBEs. As these authors suggested that some overlap between lucid dreams and OBEs exists, we propose that similarities between wake-induced lucid dreams and induced OBEs could also be present. Therefore, we hypothesise that a sensation of leaving the body will be present during autonomously-induced OBEs, and less frequently reported during spontaneous OBEs.

Method

Participants

The present study was based on data obtained from De Foe et al.’s (2012) research questionnaire. The dataset consisted of valid responses from 370 participants (159 men and 211 women) aged between 18 and 65 years ($M = 37$ years, $SD = 13$ years). Responses from those participants who had completed the entire questionnaire and had reported previously having an OBE were considered in the present study ($N = 194$). The distribution of gender and age of OBErs and non-OBErs was reasonably proportional.
Materials

The questionnaire contained 20 items which were a part of five sections based on: (1) general participant information; (2) OBE related sensations such as a sense of floating while lying in bed; (3) personality characteristics; (4) background and experience with OBEs; and (5) a final section about OBEs which was administered only to respondents who had reported previously having at least one OBE. The final section contained questions relating to the type of OBE (induced or spontaneous) and content associated with participant’s previous OBE(s).

Procedure

Participants completed the survey online, which was hosted on the Survey Monkey™ website. The process of completing the survey took participants around 10 to 15 minutes. Responses were stored on the Survey Monkey™ server until the closure of the survey, upon which data from the responses was exported to the statistical software ‘SPSS’ for analysis.

Question 17: ‘Can you experience an OBE at will? Explanation: Have you ever had an induced (not spontaneous) out of body experience? That is, an experience that you have induced via meditation, visualization or other intended efforts?’ was considered as part of a Binary Logistic Regression (BLR) analysis. The BLR assessed responses (0 = no, 1 = yes) to the variable ‘have induced an OBE’ to determine predictor variables relevant to having had an induced OBE in the past.

Results

Responses to individual questions were analysed as potential predictors of a participant’s ability to induce an OBE. Collinearity tests were conducted to assess correlations between possible predictor variables and no redundancy was found (i.e., each question assessed a unique factor that might contribute to an induced OBE). Factors relevant to autonomously inducing an OBE were considered by collapsing responses from participants who indicated ‘Yes, in all of the instances that I have had an OBE’ and ‘Yes, in almost all of the instances that
I have had an OBE’ into a new variable: ‘All or almost all induced OBEs’. Responses that indicated ‘some’ or ‘few’ instances of prior induced OBEs were removed from the analysis. Thus, the only two variables that were considered in the BLR were: (i) an induced OBE in all or almost all instances \((N = 23)\), and (ii) only spontaneous OBEs (no previously induced experiences) \((N = 107)\).

A Binary Logistic Regression was conducted using 19 variables: (1) gender; (2) age; (3) familiarity with the term ‘OBE’; (4) belief in OBEs; (5) experience of floating sensation; (6) occurrence of floating sensation based on minutes prior to sleep; (7) religious inclination; (8) daydreaming propensity; (9) daydreaming absorption; (10) relative who is diagnosed with schizophrenia; (11) kinaesthetic hallucinations; (12) auditory hallucinations; (13) visual hallucinations; (14) visual hallucination frequency; (15) whether the participant has had an OBE; (16) whether the participant has induced an OBE; (17) sensation of leaving the body prior to an OBE; (18) environment type during OBE; and (19) sensation of returning to the body after an OBE.

These variables were subjected to Forward Stepwise Entry in an attempt to establish factors that predicted whether or not a participant had experienced an induced OBE prior to completing the questionnaire.

Text-entry variables related to participant’s OBE accounts were excluded from the quantitative analysis due to the difficulty in coding these responses. As part of the BLR analysis only the predictor variables that were most predictive of having induced an OBE were retained.

The analysis identified one item that predicted whether or not a person had an induced, or spontaneous OBE as a binary response \((0 = \text{spontaneous}, 1 = \text{induced})\). This item was a participant’s response to the question “In recalling your previous OBE(s), did you have a distinct sensation of leaving your body at the beginning of the experience?” (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

Binary Logistic Regression Analysis (Results for Induced OBE Predictors)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B (SE)</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.21</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>11.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.37)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensation of Leaving the Body Prior to OBEs</td>
<td>1.49*</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.42</td>
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Note: $R^2 = .08$ (Cox & Snell, 1989), .12 (Naglekerke, 1991). Model $\chi^2(1, N = 370) = 94.84, p = .002$. *$p = .002$

Table 1 shows that the regression coefficient (B = 1.49) for ‘sensation of leaving the body prior to OBEs’ is significant ($p = .002$), suggesting that the experience of leaving one’s body is a significant predictor of whether a person also had reported experiencing most, or all, induced OBEs in the past. The coefficient B indicates that for every one unit increase in the ‘sensation of leaving the body prior to OBEs’, a 1.49 increase in the log-odds of induced OBEs occurred, holding all other independent variables constant. The odds ratio suggests that a participant who experiences a sensation of leaving their body at the beginning of an OBE is 4.42 times more likely to induce OBEs most, or all, of the time.

The Standard Error (SE = 0.49) shows that the coefficient is significantly different from zero. It also helps establish that the 95% Confidence Interval (CI) is above 1.00, suggesting that the predictor variable (a sensation of leaving the body prior to OBE) increases the chance of having an induced OBE. In fact, the 95% confidence interval indicates that those people who have experienced a sensation of leaving the body prior to an OBE are between 1.70 and 11.48 times more likely to experience an induced OBE than those people who have not experienced a sensation of leaving their body. Further evidence supporting the link between experiencing a sensation of leaving the body prior to an OBE and likelihood of having induced
OBEs is apparent when one compares the figures of Cox and Snell (1989), and Naglekerke (1991), which demonstrate “goodness of fit” in logistic regression (see the note under Table 1). These tests calculate the improvement in prediction by the model from the base (null) model and suggest the model fits the data quite well. Note also that the chi-square test result indicates a good fit, $\chi^2(1, N = 370) = 94.84, p = .002$.

**Discussion**

The findings indicate that participants who experienced induced OBEs all, or almost all, of the time were significantly more likely to have had a sensation of leaving their body prior to the OBE than were participants who experienced spontaneous OBEs. This supports previous research by Ellison (1988) in that accounts of spontaneous OBEs seem to rarely include a description of leaving the body; accounts of spontaneous experiences suggest that participants suddenly find themselves outside of their physical body, with no prior sensation of exiting the body. Our findings also coincide with research conducted by Levitan and LaBerge (1991) as these authors noted that a substantial number of participants who intended to have wake-induced lucid dreams had also described a sensation of leaving their body. Levitan and LaBerge noted overlap in characteristics between some lucid dreams and OBEs. Our findings support this notion and provide evidence that autonomously induced OBEs are characterised by a sensation of leaving one’s body, a factor previously noted as typical of certain wake-induced lucid dreams.

Gelkopf and Meyerson (2004) noted that one’s ability to realistically sense leaving their own body during a hypnotically-induced OBE is paramount to achieving a realistic sense of body separation which can be conducive to hypnotherapy-work (such as where body dissociation is advantageous). Our findings provide support for this argument in that inducing OBEs within a therapeutic context could be efficacious to the treatment of certain conditions (e.g. anxiety disorders where a distinct sense of body dislocation is beneficial). The findings in the present study also suggest that other induced anomalous phenomena could be linked with a sense of progressive body separation. Those who experience a distinct sense of leaving the body during their induced OBEs could also be susceptible to other tactile sensations/hallucinations;
for example, increased instances of phantom limb pain or tactile hallucinations during the hypnagogic pre-sleep state (see Schacter, 1976).

Further research could help shed light on other self-induced psychical experiences apart from OBEs. Clarifying the potential benefits of self-inducing OBEs could highlight potential links between one’s ability to induce an OBE and one’s ability to induce other related experiences such as wake-induced lucid dreams or meditative states. As a sense of progressive body separation was noted here to be distinct in certain wake-induced lucid dreams as well as spontaneous OBEs, such a sense of body separation could also be related to other psychical experiences.

The taxonomical representation of OBEs into two distinct types (autonomously induced and spontaneous) seems warranted as we have found a distinct predictor of induced and spontaneous OBE types, a factor not explored in prior studies. Our results offer compelling reason for classifying OBEs into particular types in a similar way to lucid dreaming types, which could offer valuable opportunities for studying OBEs in further depth (for example, related to particular therapeutic interventions). Most prior OBE research has not made such classifications. Although Blackmore (1986) and Blanke and Thut (2007) have discussed the notion of inducing OBEs within a laboratory environment, the particular characteristics of autonomously induced OBEs (or self-induced OBEs), and how these differ from the characteristics of spontaneous experiences, have not been studied in depth.

In conclusion, the present study found a link between induced OBEs and the sensation of leaving the physical body at the commencement of an OBE. Ongoing research should aim to determine whether potential benefits do exist in relation to inducing an OBE within a therapeutic environment. Further research is also required in order to determine whether a link exists between body displacement sensations such as a sense of leaving one’s body, and other autonomously self-induced experiences, for instance, meditative states or other psychical experiences. The present research has considered some of the potential benefits of classifying OBEs into autonomously induced, as opposed to spontaneous experiences, indicating that differences do arise in reports of both types of experiences in anecdotal accounts. Thus, future research should consider other characteristics which could be unique
to autonomously induced, as opposed to spontaneous OBEs, as these distinctions would help clarify the differences between these two types of OBE.

References


