

# **A Retrospective Analysis of the Phenomenology of OBE Accounts Collected Via the International Computer Networks**

Donald J. DeGracia  
[dondeg@compuserve.com](mailto:dondeg@compuserve.com)

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*Web Site: [Collected Writings of Donald DeGracia](#)*

## **Introduction**

The world is now linked by global telecommunications. From the ubiquitous Internet, to the commercial on-line services such as CompuServe, Delphi and others, these computer telecommunication systems have linked the world together into a virtual community. This situation represents an unprecedented new opportunity for researchers interested in collecting data about any number of topics.

The purpose of this short communication is two-fold: 1. to show how large amounts of data can be collected, using electronic mail (e-mail) on the ever-growing, international network of computers, and then easily analyzed with the appropriate software, and 2. to illustrate this data acquisition and analysis process by performing a retrospective analysis of e-mail collected which pertains to out-of-body experiences (OBEs).

## **Methods**

During May and June of 1994, the author conducted an on-line class on CompuServe on how to achieve OBEs. The author himself has had numerous OBEs and was asked by CompuServe staff to conduct this class. For the purpose of the class, an electronic textbook (entitled DO\_OBE) was written on how to achieve OBEs. In the text, the author invited anyone reading the material to share experiences with the author. This invitation resulted in the exchange of 848 e-mail letters during the period of 4/20/94 to 8/8/94.

All of these letters were then placed in a database program (Microsoft Access version 1.1) and organized and analyzed by criteria described below.

It should be explicitly stated that there was no study design involved in the acquisition of the data to be presented. All OBE accounts were obtained in the context of instructing individuals on OBE techniques. Thus, the following analysis is a retrospective analysis and no attempt was made to perform statistics. In some respects, this proved to be a more suitable vehicle for data acquisition than a traditional survey design. Subjects were very frank and open about their experiences and allowed to express their experiences in the text form instead of being limited to typical questionnaire/survey answers. This made analysis more difficult, but difficulties were offset by the ease of importing the letters, which were already in digital form, into a database for retrospective analysis.

**Results**

Of the 848 letters in the database, 390 were written by the author and the remaining 458 letters were from other people. There were 107 people who responded during the stated time period. The number of letters per person ranged from 1 to 52.

Some demographic data could be obtained about these 107 people. People from at least 11 countries responded: Belgium -1, Canada -5, Denmark-1, Europe-1, Finland-2, Germany-6, Netherlands-2, Norway-1, Singapore-1, UK -5, USA -23, and the remaining 59 people were unknown. There were 13 females and 83 males, with 11 unknown. 63 people wrote from CompuServe, 23 from the Internet, 5 from America On-Line, and 2 from Delphi.

Once into the database, the e-mail was categorized by content. Four categories were devised: 1st (1st person accounts of OBEs or related phenomena), Adv (the author giving advice about achieving OBEs), Dis (discussions related to anything but OBEs), and Inf (people seeking information on how to obtain DO\_OBE or about class schedules, etc.). The number of letters in each of these categories was: 1st = 168, Adv = 112, Dis = 523 and Inf = 173.

The 168 1st letters represent 53 people (49.5% of all respondents). 12 of these people made unsubstantiated claims of having had OBEs, the remaining 41 people described some specific first hand account of an OBE or related phenomena. The 168 1st letters were isolated from the rest and further analyzed in terms of the phenomenology reported in these first hand OBE accounts. Two broad phenomenological categories were defined: 1. those phenomena related inducing the OBE and 2. the actual content of the reported OBEs. A number of different phenomena under both of these categories were defined and the number of people reporting such phenomena were counted. This counts are shown in the following table.

<b>Induction Related</b>	<b>Content Related</b>
eye problems .....4	At parent’s house during OBE ..... 4
hypnogogia to visual imagination..... 3	bilocation .....10
hypnogogia.....23	contact with beings..... 7
ideoretinal lights .....12	cross wired .....3
kinesthetics .....24	dream control..... 6
paralysis .....10	false awakening..... 3
heard sounds .....10	flying..... 4
vibrations .....14	lockmold related .....7
white light .....3	lucidity to nonlucidity lapse .....3
use devices .....4	slow motion movements..... 2
	void .....9
	wind force..... 2

Brief definitions of each of these phenomena are:

### **Induction related:**

1. Eye problems - person reports some physical difficulty with eyes, such as twitches, strange muscular sensations, etc.
2. Hypnogogia to visual imagination - person reports seeing hypnogogic images transform into images in their visual imagination (i.e. "mind's eye")
3. Hypnogogia - the perceiving of visual images behind ones closed eyes. Usually associated with falling asleep.
4. Ideoretinal lights - visual perception of pinpoint like lights filling ones visual field.
5. Kinesthetics - bodily sensations of either slipping, falling, floating, drifting, tipping, etc. Highly related to the perception of "leaving" one's body during the induction of an OBE.
6. Paralysis - the report of being aware and conscious, but unable to move. This phenomena is also known as "sleep paralysis".
7. Heard sounds - the hearing of strange sounds while "leaving" the body such as whines, haunted house noises, rushing sounds. etc..
8. Vibrations - the feeling of tingles or vibrations passing through ones body when attempting to induce an OBE.
9. White light - the visual perception of white light. This is a form of hypnogogic imagery.
10. Use devices - uses some type of device to help induce OBE such as tapes, dream goggles, etc.

### **Content related**

1. At parent's house during OBE - Subject appears at parents house during an OBE. This is related to symbolic interpretations of the OBE content.
2. Bilocation - person experiences the sensation of being both in the OBE and feeling their physical body at the same time.
3. Contact with beings - interacted with a person or creature during the OBE.
4. Cross wired - impaired judgment; lack of ability to distinguish events or thoughts on a rational basis during the OBE.
5. Dream control - could manipulate or control some aspect of the OBE environment by thought alone.
6. False awakening - thinking that one has waken up when still actually out-of-body.
7. Flying - flies during the OBE
8. Lockmold related - "lockmold" is a term that refers to the quality of sensory perception during and OBE. It is possible to "blink in and out" of perceptual realms during an OBE, and the degree of lockmold is an indicator of how stable one's sensory perceptions (sight, hearing, etc.) are during an OBE.
9. Lucidity to nonlucidity lapse - person recalls that during the OBE they lost their lucidity of being in the OBE state and essentially reverted to a normal dream.
10. Slow motion movements - person moved as if in slow motion during the OBE (the identical sensation to what occurs sometimes in dreams when one tries to run but movements seem as if occurring in slow motion.

11. Void - this is the experience of being in a dark realm of literal nothingness. The subject is literally a disembodied awareness floating in the midst of pure darkness, though often one can seem to move through this void.
12. Wind force - this is the sensation of being dragged or carried along by a powerful gust of wind during an OBE.

### **Discussion**

First, it is clear that by the methods reported here, a very large amount of textual data can be processed relatively easily. The total amount of letters in the database were roughly 1.5 Megabytes of information, which is the equivalent of almost 1000 single spaced pages. This huge amount of information was easily handled because it was already in digital form and could easily be processed by different types of software.

The demographic data, though highly incomplete, illustrates that computer based studies no longer need be limited by geographical constraints. People from all over the developed world are represented in the above letters. In a truly design based study, obtaining such demographic information would be trivial: one would only need ask study participants.

Interestingly, 77% of respondents were male. I do not believe this reflects any gender based difference in OBE ability. Instead, I think this high male response reflects the fact that computer users, and especially users of telecommunications are at present predominantly male.

One of the obvious shortcomings of the above retrospective analysis was that the majority of letters were not related directly to OBEs. Only 168 of 848 letters (roughly 20%) were relevant. Again, in a designed study, such superfluous information would never occur. In the present study, this superfluous information was easily separated from the rest by placing the letters in the database and categorizing them. It thus became trivial to isolate relevant material.

Now, in terms of the retrospective analysis of the OBE phenomena itself, it is clear that excellent data was obtained. However, a couple shortcomings must be mentioned. First, the phenomenological categories listed above are only a subset of all the phenomena actually reported. Furthermore, the categories reported reflect and emphasize the author's own OBE experiences. Other investigators would likely highlight other phenomena. Secondly, and more importantly, presenting these phenomena as above is highly artificial. In reality, each person must be looked at on a case by case basis. The people who reported 1st hand accounts covered every single degree of skill level with the OBE. Some subjects were just learning OBE techniques, others have been having OBEs for years. This type of distinction is completely lost in the above numerical breakdown. Furthermore, by attempting to define phenomenological categories, the unique aspects of each person's OBEs are lost. In themselves these can be extremely dramatic. One individual, for example, reported being in several OBEs simultaneously. Another individual, with great experience in OBE work, reported "traveling" to places during the OBE completely different from every other respondent. Such difference can only be looked at on a case by case basis taking into account the inherent skill level of the individual.

With these shortcomings pointed out, however, valuable information can still be gained from the above numerical tabulations. First, it is clear that different people are reporting identical

phenomena during the OBE. Regarding the induction of the OBE, roughly 50% of respondents reported seeing hypnogogic images and feeling distinct changes in kinesthetic sensations. This very clearly suggests that there is a highly objective basis to OBEs.

Also, though this is not obvious from the above data, a close scrutiny of the reported OBE accounts reveals that OBEs appear to be closely related to dreams. As a matter of fact, it appears that OBEs are a unique type of dream in which the subject is aware that they are not in the physical world, yet are highly aware of themselves in the same sense they are self-aware when awake. This suggests that OBEs and lucid dreams may be essentially the same phenomena.

### **Conclusion**

This retrospective study illustrates the feasibility of conducting research through computer networked telecommunications. Though the above study is highly incomplete and not at all "tight" in terms of experimental design, one could easily ameliorate such difficulties with a well thought out design. What is illustrated above is that electronic mail based research allows the acquisition of very large amounts of data, over relatively short time periods, which can subsequently be easily analyzed.

In the Spring 1994 issue of the Network, Dr. Rupert Sheldrake's raised the issue that good research can be conducted cheaply. Though telecommunications based research is not as cheap as the experiments Dr. Sheldrake suggested, they are still very inexpensive compared to normal research costs. Starting from scratch, telecommunications based research can be conducted for roughly \$3000. This would cover \$2000 for a functional modem equipped computer, \$500 for the appropriate software and another \$500 for telecommunication expenses. However, for members of institutions already connected to the Internet (particularly University staff and faculty), costs become almost trivial because the computer access and telecommunications costs are eliminated. Thus, the methods outlined here provide another avenue into inexpensive research opportunities that can still produce high quality results.

In terms of the OBE retrospective analysis, it is apparent that there are many phenomena associated with OBEs that are common to different people from different cultures and nations. This clearly indicates that the OBE is some type of objective phenomena in itself and is not by any means a mere fantasy occurring in people's imaginations. Furthermore, it is clear that the OBE phenomena is closely related to both the study of hypnagogia and dreams, as has been pointed out by other investigators in this field (c.f. Stephan LaBerge).