

AN EMPIRICAL SCIENCE OF THE SPIRIT: (NEAR-)DEATH AND POSTMATERIALIST SCIENCE IN JAPAN, SWITZERLAND AND NORTH-AMERICA

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Description

Mainstream bioscientific and biomedical models of human conscious experience are dominated by materialist explanations of its production (through the physical processes of the brain) and its limits (at biological death). As such, humans are conceived of scientifically as biological entities whose lives end with the cessation of bodily or cerebral functioning. Contrarily, the emergent discipline of near-death studies (NDS), concerned with explaining the experiences of those who have died and come back to life, offers what I refer to as a 'postmaterialist' position.

Postmaterialism, while not precluding the involvement of physical processes, is defined by its openness to the possibility of non-material characteristics or functions of conscious experience, and the potential for it to continue after biological death. NDS researchers frame their work as an act of resistance against a stagnating scientific materialism, and offer that we sit on the cusp of a Kuhnian scientific revolution. They also express a moral impetus for their research by linking alienating and objectifying medical practices to the persistence of a materialist dogma in science and medicine, and propose that adopting a postmaterialist position could foster a more humane medical practice.

Building on literature that reveals death as a sociotechnical phenomenon, as well as a site of moral and political intervention, this research will undertake a multi-sited anthropological analysis of the practices and narratives of postmaterialist NDS, in Japan, Switzerland and North America, to explore how ongoing struggles to understand and define the boundary between life and death are acting as a catalyst for a scientific and political movement from the margins of institutional bioscience.

