

Phillip Cozzolino

Philip J Cozzolino is associate professor of research at the [Division of Perceptual Studies \(DOPS\)](#), University of Virginia School of Medicine who has investigated psychological aspects related to near-death experiences, children's memories of a past life and other parapsychological phenomena.

Career

Philip J Cozzolino earned his PhD in psychology from the University of Minnesota in 2006 and spent 17 years at the University of Essex, UK, before joining DOPS.

Cozzolino's research focuses on meaning-making processes, particularly positive psychological effects related to awareness of mortality. Inspired by empirical results from near-death experience research conducted within DOPS and elsewhere, Cozzolino developed a psychological model relating thoughtful reflection on human mortality to well-being, increased desires for self-direction, and more authentic living. His work has been featured in *Huffington Post*, *Psychology Today*, *Scientific American* and BBC Radio 4, and has inspired related research by psychologists internationally.

At DOPS, Cozzolino's major research concerns psychological processes that generate experiences reported by children worldwide who remember past lives. Supporting interests include near-death and out-of-body experiences, and psychological effects of knowledge of mortality.

Past-Life Memory Research

American Follow-up Study

Cozzolino and colleagues carried out the first follow-up study of 23 American adults who as children made reports of supposed past-life memories (PLMs). Originally interviewed at the University of Virginia, these participants were assessed an average of 35.8 years later using validated self-report questionnaires and telephone interviews. Results characterized this sample as consisting of normal, well-educated individuals leading productive lives. Spiritual well-being was found to be moderate-to-high, with slightly elevated but still within normal ranges for pathology levels of dissociation and fantasy proneness compared to unselected samples.

More than half said their memories had completely faded, while slightly less than half maintained some recollection. A substantial percentage believed that purported memories affected their lives, though very few described the effect as negative. Over 65% noted a positive belief in reincarnation – much above the general American statistic of 27%. This finding aligns with earlier follow-up studies carried out in Lebanon and Sri Lanka.^{[1](#)}

Parental Responses

In the DOPS database of past-life memory investigations Cozzolino analyzed 529 cases reported between 1962 and 2015, looking for the degree of acceptance or suppression by parents of their child's claim. Mothers were found initially to be more accepting than fathers, but this difference was found to have disappeared after an investigation had provided supporting evidence. Attempts to suppress the memories, by either parent, tended to correlate positively with the strength of indications of reincarnation.

Among fathers, strong cases were related to greater acceptance, whereas among mothers, strong cases were related to less acceptance.[2](#)

Xenoglossy

Cozzolino, together with Marieta Pehlivanova and Jim B Tucker, researched the DOPS past-life memory database for cases coded as exhibiting [xenoglossy](#) – the claim of individuals speaking a foreign language they should not naturally be able to speak. These 40 cases were compared to 872 cases between 1959 and 2020 that did not exhibit xenoglossy.

Results indicated that variables related to an ordinary explanation were not associated with the presence of xenoglossy. Rather, in support of the emotion-trauma hypothesis developed by this research group, such variables as children's emotionality, desires to return to purported previous family, claims of having died by intentional or violent means, and having stronger cases more suggestive of anomalous explanation were all associated with xenoglossy. Evidence points to this phenomenon of unnatural speech in a foreign language having a connection with – and being reinforced by – the expression of emotion, pathos, and violence or trauma that accompanies children's narratives of memories from past lives.[3](#)

Hidden Treasure Cases

Cozzolino and Pehlivanova analyzed cases of children's past-life memories involving 'hidden treasure' – private knowledge of valuables supposedly kept by the deceased individual the child remembered having been. Children in such cases were found also to have shown above average psychological connections to the previous individual. Cozzolino argues such research into

core psychological processes, particularly those relating to identity, can illuminate understanding of past-life memory phenomena more effectively than focusing on the sensational aspects.[4](#)

Near-Death Experiences

Cozzolino, together with Natasha Tassell-Matamua and Bruce Greyson, contributed a chapter to the *Handbook of the Science of Existential Psychology* published by Guilford Press. The chapter provides a history of near-death experience research and describes common features well-defined within the domain. The experiences elicit perceptions that challenge mainstream Western scientific conceptions regarding human consciousness.

Cozzolino and colleagues note that near-death experiences relate to meaning, purpose and value in human perception – not only profoundly transforming those who experience them but also affecting others who simply learn about them.[5](#)

Out-of-Body Experiences

Cozzolino and colleagues examined out-of-body experiences (OBEs), in which consciousness seems disembodied or separated from the physical body. Since OBE leads to dissolution of ego and breaking of physical self-boundaries, it may trigger empathy. Fifty-two percent reported increased family attachment after experiencing out-of-body experiences, while 54% reported more peaceful relations and 44% reported increased tolerance and understanding post-OBE.

The proposed areas that could be involved in mediating such prosocial effects include the temporoparietal junction (TPJ), which occupies a region related to bodily self-consciousness and mentalizing about others' minds. Another area that may have some role in integrating such transformative experiences is the default mode network, involved in self-referential processing. However, the authors note that results are based mostly on anecdotes and reports. Controlled studies are needed to test for third-party corroboration of any change in empathy after an OBE has been reported.[6](#)

Spirituality and Mental Health

In an article published in *Psychiatric Times*, Cozzolino and colleagues – Marina Weiler, Marieta Pehlivanova, and J Kim Penberthy – discussed implementing spirituality in psychiatric practice. The authors differentiate religiosity, a commitment to organized religious practices, from spirituality, a broader personal quest for meaning and purpose. Penberthy noted that in several diagnoses found in the DSM-5, particularly persistent depressive disorders, prolonged grief disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder where existential issues are relevant to mental health outcome, dimensions of spirituality are pertinent.

The article integrates terror management theory with an alternative approach-oriented framework for dealing with mortality awareness, showing how facing death directly can lead to personal growth and existential well-being. Neuroimaging studies have found that the default mode network and salience network are involved in spiritual experiences. Penberthy recommends structured spiritual assessments like the FICA tool, and therapeutic modalities including meaning-centered psychotherapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and mindfulness-based interventions for holistic psychiatric care.[7](#)

In an article published in *Psychiatric Times* the team gave an account of extraordinary spiritually-transformative experiences narrated globally. This presents evidence that near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, after-death communications, and memories of past lives of young children can be experienced by normative individuals without underlying psychopathology. The approach aims to normalize such transformative, non-pathological human experiences and avoid misdiagnosis that might lead to inappropriate treatments.[8](#)

Michael Duggan

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Pehlivanova et al (2024).
- [2.](#) Cozzolino et al (2025a).
- [3.](#) Cozzolino et al (2025b).
- [4.](#) Cozzolino & Pehlivanova (2025).
- [5.](#) Tassell-Matamua et al (2025).
- [6.](#) Weiler et al (2024).
- [7.](#) Pehlivanova et al (2025a).
- [8.](#) Pehlivanova et al (2025b).