

Have an Out-of-Body Experience

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Hack #89

Have an Out-of-Body Experience

Our regular experience of the world is first person, but in some situations we see ourselves from an external perspective. These out-of-body experiences may even have a neurological basis.

We are used to experiencing the world from a first-person perspective, looking out through our eyes with our bodies at the center of our consciousness. This is sometimes known as the *Cartesian theater*.

Some people, however, claim to have out-of-body experiences, in which their consciousness seems separated from their body, sometimes to the extent that people feel as if they are looking down on themselves from a third-person perspective, rather than looking out from the inside. These claims are not common, but most people can experience similar out-of-body phenomena, in the form of memories of past events. Furthermore, research has identified certain specific brain areas that may be involved in producing the egocentric, “looking out of our eyes” perspective and found that out-of-body experiences can be induced by unusual activity there.

In Action

Remember back to when you were last lying down reading something: perhaps it was on holiday at the beach, in a local park, or just on the couch at home. Try and fix that image in your mind.

Now, notice where your “mind’s eye” is. Are you looking at yourself from an external point of view—much like someone wandering by might have seen you—or are you remembering yourself looking out through your own eyes as you are while reading this book right now?

The majority of people remember a scene like this from a seemingly disembodied third-person perspective, despite originally having experienced it from a first-person point of view.

How It Works

The first study to explore this effect in detail was published in 1983 by Nigro and Neisser [1]. They made the link between the likelihood of recalling a memory as either a first-person or third-person image and emotions and discovered that asking someone to focus on their feelings at the time of the event was more likely to result in a first-person memory. The example in the preceding “In Action” section focused on a situation and was probably a fairly neutral emotional experience, so is likely to produce a third-person memory in most people.

Although this is a common experience when remembering the past, the majority of people do not have out-of-body experiences in the present. People who have recounted out-of-body experiences have sometimes been suspected of being over-imaginative or worse, but such experiences are a well-known phenomenon in certain types of epilepsy and with specific forms of brain injury. This does not mean that people who experience out-of-body states necessarily have epilepsy or brain injury, but these sorts of conditions suggest that normal, but usually hidden, aspects of brain function may be involved in producing such experiences.

A study by Blanke and colleagues [2] examined five neurological patients who had frequent out-of-body experiences. On one occasion, a surgeon managed to reliably induce such an experience by electrically stimulating the cortex of a patient during brain surgery. When the surgeon stimulated the temporo-parietal junction (the area of the brain where the temporal and parietal lobes meet “Tour the Cortex and the Four Lobes” [Hack #8]), the patient reported that she felt an instantaneous sensation of floating near the ceiling and experienced the operating theater as if she were looking down on it, “seeing” the top of the doctors’ heads and herself on the operating table. Ceasing the stimulation “returned” the patient to her body, and resuming it caused her to feel disembodied once more.

Brain imaging studies have shown that the temporo-parietal junction is activated in situations that involve calculating point of view from an egocentric perspective and mentally switching between views to understand a scene (for example, mentally working out a good place to stand to get the best view of a football game). With this in mind, it is perhaps not so surprising that unusual activity in this area might cause feelings of being detached from the body.

Although it is too early to say for sure, it seems likely that when we recall images that appear in the third-person perspective, the temporo-parietal junction is being recruited to help create this image. The previous exercise demonstrates that, in the context of memory, we all have the ability to expe-

rience the out-of-body state. It also suggests that there may be a sound neurological basis for such experience and that healthy people who report out-of-body experiences are being less fanciful than some skeptics presume.

See Also

1. Nigro, G., & Neisser, U. (1983). Point of view in personal memories. *Cognitive Psychology*, *15*, 467–482.
2. Blanke, O., Landis, T., Spinelli, L., & Seeck, M. (2004). Out-of-body experience and autoscopia of neurological origin. *Brain*, *127* (Pt. 2), 243–258.

—*Vaughan Bell*