

CHILDREN'S REPORTS OF PAST-LIFE MEMORIES: A REVIEW

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Researchers have studied young children's reports of past-life memories for the last 45 years. The children usually describe a recent, ordinary life, and many of them have given enough details so that one particular deceased individual has been identified to match the children's statements. These cases occur worldwide, and although they are easiest to find in cultures with a belief in reincar-

nation, many cases have been found in the West as well. This review explores the facets of this phenomenon and presents several recent American cases.

Key words: Reincarnation, memories

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INTRODUCTION

In 1960, Ian Stevenson, then chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, wrote a review of 44 previously published cases of individuals who had reported memories of previous lives.¹ He then began to hear of new cases and the following year took a trip to India after learning of five cases. He was there for four weeks and found 25. He achieved similar results in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and realized that the phenomenon was much more common than anyone had known.

He took an analytical approach to the cases. Psychiatrist Harold Lief later described him as "a methodical, careful, even cautious, investigator, whose personality is on the obsessive side."² He never assumed he knew the cause of the cases but instead simply worked to determine precisely what the facts of each case were. He made no grand claims about the work, as indicated by the title of his first book on the phenomenon, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.³

Though Stevenson's efforts did not produce mainstream acceptance of his work, it did garner some respect in mainstream circles. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reviewed one of his books in 1975 and stated that "in regard to reincarnation he has painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases . . . in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds."⁴ In addition, Carl Sagan, the late astronomer, was very skeptical of nonmainstream work but wrote, "There are three claims in the [parapsychology] field which, in my opinion, deserve serious study," with the third being "that young children sometimes report details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation."⁵

Stevenson retired in 2002 but continued to write, including a final paper summarizing his career.⁶ He died in 2007, but several

researchers are continuing the study that he began more than 45 years ago of this phenomenon.⁷⁻⁹

TYPICAL FEATURES

The subjects in these cases tend to be young children. They typically begin describing a previous life when they are two or three years old, and they usually stop by the age of six to seven. They make the statements spontaneously without the use of hypnotic regression. They describe recent lives, with the median interval between the death of the previous individual and the birth of the child being only 16 months. They also describe ordinary lives, usually in the same country. The one part of the life that is often out of the ordinary is the mode of death, as 70% of the deaths are by unnatural means.

Some subjects report having been deceased family members, whereas others say they were strangers in another location. If they give enough details, such as the name of that location, then people have often gone there and identified a deceased individual, the *previous personality*, whose life appears to match the statements the child made.

Over 2,500 cases have been investigated worldwide. They are easiest to find in cultures with a belief in reincarnation, and the places that have produced the most cases include India, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Lebanon, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar). Cases have been found wherever anyone has looked for them, including all continents except Antarctica. Stevenson published a book of European cases,¹⁰ and numerous cases have been found in the United States as well.^{11,12} Several of these will be reviewed in a later section. Cases in the West seem to be less common, but this may be because they are harder to find, as some parents are reluctant to disclose, even to close friends and family at times, what their children have said.

When cases are investigated, history is obtained from as many people as possible. This includes the subjects, if the children are willing and able to tell investigators about the purported memories, as well as their parents and others who have heard the children describing past-life memories. The other side of the case is then investigated; the previous family is interviewed to determine how accurate the child's state-

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ments are for the life of the previous personality. Attempts are made to obtain autopsies or medical records of the previous personality if they are relevant. If the two families have not yet met, tests can also be conducted to see if the subject can recognize people from the previous life.

BIRTHMARKS AND BIRTH DEFECTS

In addition to the purported memories, a number of the children have had birthmarks or birth defects that appeared to match wounds, usually fatal ones, suffered by the previous personalities. Stevenson published a 2,200-page work that documented over 200 such cases,¹³ as well as a shorter synopsis.¹⁴ Examples include a girl, born with markedly malformed fingers, who seemed to remember being a man whose fingers were cut off, and a boy, born with stubs for fingers on his right hand, who seemed to remember the life of a boy in another village who lost the fingers of his right hand in a fodder-chopping machine.

Another example is Chanai Choomalaiwong, a boy from Thailand. When he was three years old, he began saying that he had been a teacher named Bua Kai who had been shot and killed one day as he rode his bicycle to school. He begged to be taken to his parents, that is, Bua Kai's parents, and he named the village where he said they lived. Eventually, he and his grandmother took a bus that stopped in a town near that village. His grandmother reported that after they got off the bus, Chanai led her to a house where an older couple lived. Chanai appeared to recognize the couple, who were the parents of Bua Kai Lawnak, a teacher who had been shot and killed on the way to school five years before Chanai was born.

No autopsy report was available for Bua Kai Lawnak, so Stevenson interviewed witnesses who saw the body. His widow reported that the doctor involved in the case said that her husband had been shot from behind, because the small, round wound on the back of his head was a typical entry wound, whereas the larger, more irregularly shaped wound on his forehead was typical of an exit wound.

Chanai was born with two birthmarks, a small, round birthmark on the back of his head, and a larger, more irregularly shaped one toward the front.

PAST-LIFE STATEMENTS

The average age when subjects begin reporting a past life is 35 months. Some make their statements with detachment, but many show strong emotional involvement in their claims. Some cry and beg to be taken to what they say is their previous family. Others show intense anger, particularly toward killers in cases in which the previous personality was murdered. In general, the stronger the evidence for a connection to the previous life, the more emotion the child shows when talking about that life.¹⁵ Even when the children do show strong emotion, many of them show great intensity one moment, followed by ordinary play a few minutes later. Many seem to need to be in a certain frame of mind to access the memories, and although some are able to recall them on demand, others are not.

The subjects usually stop making their past-life statements by the age of six to seven, and most seem to lose the purported

memories. This is the age when children start school and begin having more experiences in the current life, as well as when they tend to lose their early childhood memories. The purported past-life memories often last longer in cases in which the previous personality has been identified, as contact between the two families appears to keep them going longer.

An example of a case with prominent statements is one Stevenson studied in India, that of Kumkum Verma.¹⁶ She lived in a village, but when she was 3.5 years old, she began saying that she had lived in Darbhanga, a city of 200,000 people that was 25 miles away. She named the district of the city where she said she had lived. It was one of artisans and craftsmen, and her family did not know anyone from there. An aunt recorded a number of her statements before anyone attempted to verify them, and though some of her notes were lost, Stevenson was able to get a copy of 18 statements that Kumkum had made. They included her son's name in the life she was describing and the fact that he worked with a hammer, her grandson's name, the town where her father had lived, and personal details such as having an iron safe at home, a sword hanging near the cot where she slept, and a pet snake to which she fed milk.

An employee of a friend of Kumkum's father was from the district in Darbhanga that Kumkum had named, and he went there to search for the previous personality. He found that a woman had died five years before Kumkum was born and whose life matched all of the details listed above. Kumkum's father, a landowner and homeopathic physician, visited the family in Darbhanga once but never allowed Kumkum to go, apparently in part because he was not proud that his daughter seemed to remember the life of a blacksmith's wife.

THEMES OF THE PAST-LIFE STATEMENTS

When the subjects talk about a previous life, they tend to discuss events at the end of the life. Almost 75% give details of the death, and even more if the death was violent.¹⁷ They are also more likely to talk about people from the end of that life than from earlier, so a child who describes dying as an adult is more likely to talk about a spouse or children than about parents.

In addition, 20% of the subjects report memories of events between lives.¹² Some say they stayed near to where the previous personality lived or died, and they may describe a funeral or other events involving the family. One subject in Thailand, Ratana Wongsombat, complained that "her" ashes had been scattered rather than buried. In fact, the previous personality had requested that her ashes be buried under the Bo tree at her temple. Her daughter found the tree's root system so extensive that she was unable to bury the remains, so she scattered them instead.¹⁸ Another subject, Bongkuch Promsin, said he spent seven years over a bamboo tree near where the previous personality's body had been dumped after he was killed, before following his future father home in the rain. Bongkuch's father had, in fact, attended a meeting in that area on a rainy day during the month when Bongkuch was conceived.¹⁸ Other children have talked of going to other realms and seeing other entities there, but those reports are unverifiable.

PAST-LIFE BEHAVIORS

Many subjects display behaviors that appear connected to the lives they describe. Some show emotions toward various members of the previous family that are appropriate for the relationships that the previous personality had with them, so the children may be deferential toward the previous parents or husband but bossy toward younger siblings of the previous personality, even though they are much older than the subject. These emotions usually dissipate as the children grow older, but there are exceptions. In at least one case, Maung Aye Kyaw of Burma, the child grew up to marry the widow of the previous personality.¹³

Another common behavioral feature is a phobia toward the mode of death of the previous personality. Over 35% of subjects show such phobias in cases involving deaths by unnatural means. These are particularly prevalent in drowning cases, with 31 of 53 showing a fear of being in water.¹²

Some subjects display likes and dislikes that are similar to those of the previous personality. For example, Stevenson and Keil studied 24 cases of Burmese children who claimed they were Japanese soldiers killed in Burma during World War II, and some of them complained about the spicy Burmese food and asked for raw fish instead.¹⁹ Some subjects also show an unfortunate interest in addictive substances such as alcohol and tobacco if the previous personality consumed them, including one, Sujith Jayaratne, whose neighbor obliged the young boy's requests for alcohol until his grandmother intervened.²⁰

Children often engage in play that appears connected to their past-life reports, particularly play that involves the occupation of the previous personality.²¹ One boy, Parmod Sharma, became preoccupied with his play as a biscuit shopkeeper and neglected his schoolwork so much that his academic performance never seemed to recover.³ Occasionally, children also reenact the death scene of the previous personality, appearing to show post-traumatic play.

In cases in which children report past lives as members of the opposite sex, the subjects often show behaviors appropriate for that sex. At times, they are extreme enough to warrant a diagnosis of gender identity disorder.²² The cross-gender behavior may continue even into adulthood, but overall, most of the subjects go on to lead perfectly normal lives.

RECENT AMERICAN CASES

After the Division of Perceptual Studies set up its Web site at the University of Virginia, dozens of American parents have sent in reports about their children, usually by e-mail. Most of the cases have not been investigated, and very limited information is available on some of them. Nonetheless, they provide a view of what American cases of this type involve.

The subjects have been boys in 57% of the cases, compared with 54% of American cases reported previously¹¹ and 61% of cases worldwide. Eight-six percent of the subjects were four years of age or younger when they began describing a previous life. Of those who have described a mode of death, 90% reported unnatural deaths. A previous personality has been identified in only 16 cases, and in 14 of those he or she was a deceased family member. In cases in which the parents' views about reincarnation are known, only 42% believed in it before their children

began talking about past-life experiences. Below are three cases that serve as examples of the phenomenon in the United States.

The Case of P.M.

P.M. is a boy born with three birthmarks that appeared to match lesions on his half brother, who had died with neuroblastoma 12 years before the birth of P.M. The illness was diagnosed after the half brother began limping; he then suffered a pathological fracture of his left tibia. He underwent a biopsy of a nodule on his scalp above his right ear and received chemotherapy through a central line in his right external jugular vein. At the time of his death at two years of age, he was blind in his left eye.

P.M. was born with a swelling 1 cm in diameter above his right ear and a dark, slanting mark on the lower right anterior surface of his neck. He also had a corneal leukoma that caused him to be virtually blind in his left eye. In addition, he limped when he learned to walk, as if sparing his left leg. At around the age of 4.5 years, P.M. talked to his mother about wanting to return to the family's previous home, which he described accurately, and he also told of the scalp surgery that his half brother had undergone.⁹

The Case of Sam Taylor

Sam Taylor was born 18 months after his paternal grandfather died. When he was 1.5 years old, he looked up as his father was changing his diaper and said, "When I was your age, I used to change your diapers." He began talking more about having been his grandfather. He eventually told details of his grandfather's life that his parents felt certain he could not have learned through normal means, such as the fact that his grandfather's sister had been murdered and that his grandmother had used a food processor to make milkshakes for his grandfather every day at the end of his life.

When Sam was 4.5 years old, his grandmother died, and his father went out to take care of her estate and then returned home with a group of family pictures. Sam's mother had them spread out one evening when Sam began pointing at pictures of his grandfather and saying, "That's me!" To test him, his mother showed him a class picture that included 16 boys, and Sam was able to pick his grandfather out of the group.¹²

The Case of Kendra Carter

Kendra Carter began swimming lessons when she was 4.5 years old and seemed to attach immediately to her coach. She began saying that the coach's baby had died and that the coach had been sick and pushed her baby out. Kendra's mother had always been with her at the lessons, and when she asked Kendra how she knew these things, Kendra replied, "I'm the baby that was in her tummy." She went on to describe an abortion, and her mother found out later that the coach had had an abortion nine years before Kendra was born.

Kendra became happy and bubbly when she was with the coach but quiet otherwise, and her mother let her spend more and more time with the coach until she was staying with her three nights a week. Eventually, the coach had a falling out with Kendra's mother and cut off contact with the family. Kendra then went into a depression and did not speak for 4.5

months. The coach reestablished more limited contact at that point, and Kendra slowly began talking again and participating in activities.¹²

The American cases demonstrate that children's reports of past-life memories are not purely a cultural phenomenon. They occur in a culture without a general belief in reincarnation and often in families without a belief. Kendra Carter's mother, a conservative Christian, was appalled by the idea of reincarnation and felt she was committing a sin to even buy a book on the topic.

The American cases have features in common with those from other countries. The age of speaking and the content of the statements about the previous life, such as a focus on the end of that life, are the same, and the cases can include birthmarks or birth defects and the emotional and behavioral features that the others do. One difference is that even though American subjects make as many statements, on average, about the life they report as do subjects from other countries, they tend to give few names from it. This is the likely cause for the fact that a previous personality has rarely been identified in the American cases, except when the children have claimed to have been deceased relatives. Overall, however, the American cases appear to be examples of the same phenomenon as those from other parts of the world.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CASES

Some have challenged this work and suggested that the children's purported memories are simply fantasies that their parents misinterpret, something particularly likely to occur in regions of the world with a general belief in reincarnation. This possibility warrants serious consideration in cases in which a previous personality was not found, either because the child's statements were not specific enough to produce an identification or because they did not seem to fit the life of any actual person who had died.

The cases in which a previous personality has been identified require other explanations. Brody²³ suggested a scenario in which children from cultures with a belief in reincarnation have fantasies of previous lives that are encouraged by their parents, who then find families with a deceased member of the same general description, exchange information with the families, and end up crediting the children with more specific and more accurate information about the previous personality than the children actually possessed. Such a process would not explain the birthmarks and birth defects some subjects have, cases in which written records were made of the children's statements before the families met, or the strong emotional ties to the previous families that many of the children evince before those families have been found. In addition, two studies that addressed this possibility did not find evidence to support it.^{24,25}

Other questions exist. Since the purported past-life memories often involve recent, unnatural deaths, those features appear to be associated either with the carryover of memories from previous lives through unknown mechanisms or with the process whereby children develop a delusion about having had a previous life. If the memories are genuine, the cases suggest that unnatural deaths increase the likelihood of a rapid return with intact memories. They say little, however, about the possibilities for individuals who do not have such memories. The character-

istics seen in the cases, such as the short interval between lives, may not generalize to other people. In fact, the possible past-life memories in these cases do not indicate whether other individuals reincarnate at all, even though they do contribute to the body of evidence for the survival of consciousness after death—in at least some instances.

CONCLUSION

Stevenson wrote that he had become persuaded that "reincarnation is the best—even though not the only—explanation for the stronger cases we have investigated."^{17(p254)} Reincarnation is a word that has various associations connected to it, but regardless of the terminology used, the cases do seem to provide evidence that memories, emotions, and even physical traumas can, at least under certain circumstances, carry over from one life to another. The processes that would be involved in such a transfer of consciousness are completely unknown, and they await further elucidation.

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