

# Past Life Memories Research (Overview)

Children's descriptions of memories from a previous life have been the focus of scientific study over the past fifty years. Cases have been reported from cultures with a general belief in reincarnation, but also, particularly recently, from the West as well. Some of the children have talked about being strangers in other locations whom they seemingly could not have learned about by ordinary means, and their statements have been verified to be accurate. Along with the statements, the children frequently show behaviors that appear linked to the past life.

## Research

Reports of children with claimed memories of a past life appeared sporadically in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including small series of cases.<sup>[1]</sup> More systematic research began after Ian Stevenson, an American professor who was then Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, published a review of those cases in 1960.<sup>[2]</sup> The following year, he traveled to India and Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) to see if current cases could be found. He discovered that indeed they could be and studied about twenty-five of them.<sup>[3]</sup> He became intrigued by the cases and over time devoted more and more time to them, eventually stepping down as Chairman to focus on the research full-time. He published his first collection of case reports, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*,<sup>[4]</sup> in 1966. His long descriptions of the cases detailed his efforts to determine precisely what the child had said about a previous life, how well the statements corresponded to the life of a deceased individual, and whether the child could have obtained the information through ordinary means. Stevenson followed this with a series of books featuring cases from different areas.<sup>[5]</sup>

Over 2,500 cases have now been studied.<sup>[6]</sup> Along with Stevenson, others have contributed to the research, both in concert with Stevenson and independently. Notable researchers have included anthropologist Antonia Mills, psychologists Erlendur Haraldsson, Jürgen Keil, and Satwant Pasricha, and psychiatrist Jim Tucker. Recent work has included psychological assessments of the children, primarily by Haraldsson,<sup>[7]</sup> follow-up on adults who were subjects of cases when they were children,<sup>[8]</sup> and the use of a database in which each case is coded on two hundred variables.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Characteristics

An example is the case of Kumkum Verma in India. Born in a village, she began saying at age three and a half that she had lived in Darbhanga, a city of 200,000 people that was 25 miles away. She named not only the city but the section of the city as well, one peopled by artisans and craftsmen. She spoke of the life of a woman there, giving numerous details. Her aunt wrote down some of them, and Stevenson was able to get a copy of her notes on eighteen statements, including names of family members and specific personal details, such as memories of having a sword hanging near the cot where she slept and giving milk to a pet snake she owned. An employee of a friend of Kumkum's father was from the section of Darbhanga she had named. He investigated and found that her statements, including the names, corresponded to the life of a woman who had died five years before Kumkum was born.<sup>[10]</sup>

Children who claim to remember a past life typically start talking about it at a very early age, with the average being thirty-five months.<sup>[11]</sup> The memories often seem to occur spontaneously, though in other cases, a trigger in the environment appears to stimulate them, particularly when the children first begin talking about them at an older age.<sup>[12]</sup> Some report the memories in a matter-of-fact way, but many show intense emotion, crying about their last family or begging to be taken to them. Most of the children then stop talking about a past life, with the median age at the end being 72 months.<sup>[13]</sup>

When the children talk about a past life, it is typically a recent one, with a median interval between the death of the previous person and the birth of the child being only 16 months.<sup>[14]</sup> The children often focus on the end of the life, with seventy-five percent describing how they died.<sup>[15]</sup> The previous life frequently ended prematurely. The death was by unnatural means in 70 percent of the cases—murder, suicide, accident, or combat—and even in the natural death cases, the previous person tended to be young, with a quarter being 15 years old or less.<sup>[16]</sup> Otherwise, the previous lives were generally quite ordinary, typically in the same country and usually, though certainly not always, fairly close by.

Along with their talk about a past life, many of the children show behaviors that appear linked to their claims. In cases in which the previous person died by unnatural means, over 35 percent of the children show a phobia or intense fear toward the mode of death.<sup>[17]</sup> An example is a girl who disliked being in water so much that it took three adults to hold her down for her baths when she was an infant; once she could talk, she described the life of a girl in another village who had drowned. Another seemed terrified by airplanes and later described the life of a man who had died in a plane crash. The phobias even occur occasionally in natural death cases, such as one in which a child with a marked aversion to yogurt remembered the

life of a man who had died after eating a large amount of yogurt that was apparently contaminated.<sup>[18]</sup>

Many of the children also show themes in their play that appear connected with their talk about a past life. This most often involves specific play at the occupation the previous person had, such as being a biscuit shopkeeper, a nightclub owner, or the operator of a flour mill.<sup>[19]</sup> Some children give their dolls the names of the previous person's children.<sup>[20]</sup> Children who report a past life as a member of the opposite sex often engage in play and other behaviors more typical for the opposite sex, sometimes to such an extent to warrant consideration of a diagnosis of gender dysphoria.<sup>[21]</sup> Less commonly, other children reenact the death scene from the previous life.<sup>[22]</sup>

Some children show likes and dislikes that match those of the previous personality. This can even include addictive substances, as children reporting lives of individuals who smoked or drank may ask for cigarettes or alcohol.<sup>[23]</sup> Stevenson and Keil studied 24 cases of Burmese children who said they had been Japanese soldiers killed in Burma during World War II. Some of them complained about the spicy Burmese food and asked for raw or partially cooked fish instead.<sup>[24]</sup>

Along with their statements and behaviors, a number of the children have had birthmarks or birth defects that matched wounds, usually fatal wounds, on the body of the previous personality. In 1997, Stevenson published *Reincarnation and Biology*, a collection of over two hundred such cases.<sup>[25]</sup> He obtained medical records or autopsy reports whenever possible to confirm the claim that the child's lesion matched the previous wound; when records were not available, he interviewed eyewitnesses who had seen the body after the previous person died. Many of the children had impressive marks or defects, including 18 cases Stevenson noted in which the child was born with double birthmarks, ones that corresponded to the both the entrance wound and the exit wound on the body of a gunshot victim. A weakness of the collection is that the child's family knew, or at least knew about, the deceased in a large majority of the cases, raising the concern that parents projected the identity of the previous person onto the child after seeing the birthmark or birth defect. Nonetheless, some cases cannot be explained by this scenario. An example is the case of Purnima investigated by Haraldsson, in which a girl who gave specific details about an incense maker who lived some 140 miles away, including the names of the brands he made, was found to have birthmarks over her chest and ribs that corresponded to injuries the previous person suffered when he was run over by a bus as he sold his incense sticks on his bicycle.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Cases in the West

As Stevenson focused his efforts in places where cases could be most easily found, countries with a general belief in reincarnation, the question arose whether cultural factors were wholly responsible for their creation. Edwards asked why the kind of case that seemed to occur frequently in India and other countries in which reincarnation was a part of the accepted religion did not also occur in the West.<sup>[27]</sup> He suspected that Stevenson had not published Western cases because higher critical standards in the West precluded the presence of the host of witnesses necessary to manufacture the evidence of reincarnation present in the cases. He also wrote that Stevenson's statement that cases are likely to occur in the West would come as a total surprise to child psychologists and teachers here.

Nonetheless, numerous Western cases have now been reported. Stevenson first published an overview of 79 American cases.<sup>[28]</sup> He noted that, unlike children in India, few of the American children had made verifiable statements about a past life, except for ones talking about the lives of deceased members of their own families. He also reported that many of the parents had not believed in reincarnation, and their children's statements about a past life were often puzzling or even alarming to them.

Stevenson then published a book of European cases in 2003.<sup>[29]</sup> Among others, it included 21 child cases he had studied, nine from the UK and the rest from various countries on the continent. Though the cases tended to be weak from an evidentiary standpoint, they did demonstrate that the phenomenon occurs in cultures without a general belief in reincarnation.

Tucker has now reported additional American cases.<sup>[30]</sup> Such cases have also gained more attention in the popular media. Bowman has written two books about them,<sup>[31]</sup> and a recent American cable television show<sup>[32]</sup> has featured cases. Though the popular presentations are uncritical, they do help make the general public more aware of the phenomenon. One case that has gained significant media attention<sup>[33]</sup> has also been studied critically. James Leininger is a boy in Louisiana who began having repeated nightmares of a plane crash at age two. He then talked about a past life as an American pilot shot down by the Japanese during World War II. His parents spent several years investigating his statements before eventually identifying the pilot whose life he seemed to be remembering.<sup>[34]</sup> Tucker reported that records that were made before the pilot was identified document that James gave the name of the aircraft carrier (Natoma), the name of a friend on the ship (Jack Larsen), and a number of details about the crash that proved to be accurate for the identified pilot.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Reactions and Criticisms

Stevenson's previous accomplishments in mainstream psychiatry no doubt contributed to the notice his case reports received when he began publishing them. A review of his first book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, appeared in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, with the reviewer noting there were 'cases recorded in such full detail as to persuade the open mind that reincarnation is a tenable hypothesis to explain them.'<sup>[36]</sup> Regarding his second book,<sup>[37]</sup> the Book Review Editor of *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* wrote 'In regard to reincarnation he has painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases from India, cases in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds.'<sup>[38]</sup> The *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* devoted most of one issue to Stevenson's work. In one commentary, Harold Lief, a respected figure in the field of psychiatry, described Stevenson as 'a methodical, careful, even cautious, investigator, whose personality is on the obsessive side.'<sup>[39]</sup>

Along with the praise has come criticism. Wilson<sup>[40]</sup> noted inconsistent tendencies in the cases, especially across cultures, and he also criticized Stevenson for working with associates who had strong beliefs in reincarnation. He observed a pattern in Stevenson's cases in which many of the children claimed to remember a past life in a higher station, being in a family that was either more prosperous or from a higher caste, which he thought suggested the possibility of fraud. Stevenson, however, has reported a number of cases of the reverse—a child recalling a life from a lower station—such as Swaran Lata, an Indian girl in a Brahmin family who claimed a past life as a sweepress, a woman who sweeps streets and cleans latrines, and spent time cleaning up the feces of younger children.<sup>[41]</sup> He reported that among the children in India who described past lives in socioeconomic conditions substantially different from their own, two thirds claimed living in better conditions before, but the other third described worse ones in their previous life.<sup>[42]</sup>

Rogo largely dismissed Wilson's criticisms of Stevenson's work but then produced some of his own.<sup>[43]</sup> He discussed four cases that included details he felt Stevenson had either glossed over or portrayed inaccurately. He acknowledged that the examples he gave might be very trivial but thought they indicated a systematic bias that might pervade all of Stevenson's work. (Stevenson later offered a forceful rebuttal on each point.<sup>[44]</sup>) Rogo then discussed two associates who had worked with Stevenson in the 1970s and were dissatisfied with their experiences, attorney Champe Ransom and anthropologist David Read Barker. He stated that Ransom had once written a critique for Stevenson that detailed his objections about the work. Rogo said had not seen the report himself but had talked to someone who had. He then described what he thought was in it, an analysis concluding that witnesses tended to be confused about the details of the child's knowledge of the previous life. Rogo also noted a letter Barker published in which he stated that he thought the most authentic and evidential of the 59 cases he had investigated in India with Satwant Pasricha was the result of Indian social psychology rather than parapsychology.<sup>[45]</sup> Despite all of this, Rogo concluded that some of Stevenson's best cases tended to hold up well and were very compelling.

Angel<sup>[46]</sup> analyzed one of Stevenson's early cases from *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, that of Imad Elawar, a complicated one with 'baffling complexities' by Stevenson's own reckoning. It had the advantage of Stevenson's documentation of the child's statements before the previous person was identified but the disadvantage of his conclusion that the boy's statements about an automobile accident referred not to the previous person as Imad's parents had thought, but to the death of a relative of the identified previous person instead. Angel criticized Stevenson on a number of grounds, for both his investigation and his report of the case. Stevenson was given limited space to respond, but pointed out that Angel had stated that the verification of the data hinged very largely on one witness Angel judged to be unreliable. Angel had written that the man was the verifier of 28 items but failed to mention that Stevenson made a second trip to Lebanon to interview additional informants, and in the end only five items depended solely on the first informant's testimony.<sup>[47]</sup> An analysis of Angel's full critique of the case and Stevenson's full response is available online.<sup>[48]</sup>

Edwards devoted a chapter to Stevenson's work in a book critical of reincarnation.<sup>[49]</sup> The chapter's credibility is hampered by its first page, where Edwards misquotes one reference and misstates the journal name for another, and by Edwards's occasional tendency for name-calling, saying for example that 'Stevenson evidently lives in a cloud-cuckoo land.' Nonetheless, parts of the chapter are more reasonable, and though some of his criticisms, such as his complaints about the dearth of Western cases, are no longer valid, he also raises legitimate questions about methodology.

In particular, Edwards obtained a summary from Ransom of the critique he wrote for Stevenson that Rogo had mentioned. Ransom discussed what he judged to be methodological flaws in Stevenson's research: asking leading questions, periods of questioning that were too brief, and intervals between the events of the case and their investigation that were too long. He noted a lack of concern about the children's story-telling inclinations and a lack of investigation of what the playmates of the children knew about the events in question. He thought Stevenson neglected potential distortions of memory among the witnesses who related the events of the cases. He also criticized Stevenson's reporting of cases, such as

presenting the conclusions of witnesses rather than the observations that led to their conclusions. He stated that in only eleven cases out of approximately a thousand had there been no contact between the two families before the cases were investigated.

Almeder wrote a lengthy response to Edwards's book.<sup>[50]</sup> Regarding Stevenson, he argued that none of his richer verified cases included the sort of methodological problems that Ransom cited. Some of Ransom's concerns have also been answered by subsequent work. The children's tendency for story-telling, or at least their suggestibility, has been assessed by Haraldsson, who found that the children in these cases from two different cultures did not confabulate more than their peers on a test of suggestibility.<sup>[51]</sup> In addition, more cases have been studied that include documentation of the children's statements that was made before the previous person was identified, eliminating the possibility that poor questioning, story-telling tendencies, or faulty memories made those cases appear stronger than they actually were. Thirty-three such cases had been studied by 2005.<sup>[52]</sup>

## Possible Explanations

Both normal and paranormal explanations for the cases warrant consideration. The first normal one to consider is fraud. In some of the cases, the child's family has asked for or received gifts from the more affluent previous family. Stevenson, Pasricha, and Samararatne also published a small set of cases involving deception or self-deception.<sup>[53]</sup> Nonetheless, fraud seems unlikely to be a significant cause for the phenomenon. Along with a lack of motive in most cases, the large number of witnesses of a small child's statements and behaviors involved in many of them makes a hoax appear unfeasible.

The possibility that the child acquired knowledge of the previous person through normal means also needs to be considered. In cases in which a child claims to remember the life of a deceased family member or neighbor, it can never be ruled out. In certain cases, it cannot be ruled out even though the previous person lived some distance away, if people around the child knew of that person. In one of the self-deception cases mentioned above, a man in Turkey was convinced his son was John Kennedy reborn. The man, a great admirer of the president, had named his son Kenedi in honor of him, and even though the boy never knew more than the most basic facts about Kennedy, both the man and his son became convinced he was in fact the president reincarnated.<sup>[54]</sup> In other cases, however, a child has given accurate details about the life of someone a significant distance away who was completely unknown to anyone around him. In the American case of James Leininger, it seems extremely unlikely that the little boy had any opportunity to learn about the life of a pilot from over a thousand miles away who had died fifty years before he was born.

A more likely cause involves sociocognitive variables.<sup>[55]</sup> Children from cultures with a belief in reincarnation may fantasize about another life. Their parents then convey that recalling a past life makes a child special, leading the children to give more details about their imagined lives. Deceased individuals whose lives matched the children's statements to some degree, perhaps due simply to coincidence, are then found, and after the families share information, they eventually credit the children with more knowledge about the previous individuals than they actually possessed. Methodological flaws on the part of researchers in failing to accurately discern what the child knew when would contribute to make the cases appear stronger than they really were.

Several parts of this scenario are problematic, however. Cultural factors would not explain cases in the West or the U.S., where most parents have not believed in reincarnation before their children began talking about a past life.<sup>[56]</sup> There is also a tendency among many parents, even in cultures with a general belief in reincarnation, to discourage their children's past-life talk rather than encourage it. In one set of cases in India, 41% of the parents had attempted to suppress their children's statements.<sup>[57]</sup> Most important, though cultural factors might lead a child to imagine a past life, they do not explain how that fantasy could correspond so precisely to the life of one particular deceased individual. As discussed earlier, some of the cases include written documentation of the child's statements that was recorded before the previous person was identified. An analysis of cases with such records compared to cases without them found that while the percentage of correct statements was the same in the two groups, the cases with the written documentation actually had more statements than the others.<sup>[58]</sup> This is the opposite of what would be predicted if the families credit the children with knowledge they did not actually possess before meeting the previous family.

Among the paranormal explanations, extrasensory perception or 'super-psi' needs to be considered.<sup>[59]</sup> In this scenario, the children come to acquire knowledge about the deceased individuals through telepathy or clairvoyance. They misinterpret this information to be memories of experiences they had in a previous life. Most of the children, however, show no other psychic abilities,<sup>[60]</sup> and the cases with significant behaviors and birthmarks would be difficult to explain by a psi process.

Possession may also be considered, in which a discarnate spirit takes over the body of an individual. There have been cases in which, by appearances, the personality of a deceased individual did seem to take over an adult's body,<sup>[61]</sup> but for the child cases, possession appears to offer no advantages over reincarnation as an explanation. The children may show some behavioral or emotional features that are similar to those of the previous person, but they also maintain a consistent personality of their own. Possession would presumably not explain the birthmark and birth defect cases, and as Stevenson pointed out, the stimulation of memories during the child's visits to the previous family or community seems better explained by mental associations than by possession.<sup>[62]</sup>

Finally, reincarnation warrants consideration. The children say that they remember experiencing various events from the past, and they have associated emotions that are appropriate for the deceased individual in whose life those events occurred. Taken at face value, these cases indicate that some children remember lives they experienced in a previous incarnation. Fifty years of research has produced significant evidence that supports this.

Jim Tucker

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