Behavioural Memories in Reincarnation Cases

In addition to recalling events from previous lives, subjects of reincarnation cases may act like the people whose lives they remember. These 'behavioural memories' may extend to skills, such as those displayed by child prodigies. Behavioural memories are especially difficult to explain as malobservation, coincidence, or the results of parental influence where there are differences of religion or ethnicity between the present and previous lives. When they appear in 'solved' cases (those in which the previous person has been identified), behavioural memories provide one of the strongest lines of evidence for reincarnation.

Introduction

Reincarnation researcher Ian Stevenson studied thousands of children with past-life memories. When he began his work in the 1960s, he assumed that he would be researching primarily talk about previous lives, and was surprised to hear about children who displayed the personalities of, and behaved like, the people they believed themselves to have been. He came to think that these behavioural memories were even more important than imaged memories as evidence of reincarnation.

Several kinds of behavioural memories figure in children's reincarnation cases. Not infrequently, the child subjects show the sorts of emotional attachments and reactions that one would expect from the person whose life they recall.^[1] Some enact that person's vocation, avocation, or death in their play.^[2] They may also display intense fears or phobias concerning people, places, or things related to the way the previous life ended.^[3] Erlendur Haraldsson, who conducted psychological tests of children with past-life memories, discovered that many who recalled dying violently displayed symptoms of what look like post-traumatic stress disorder, the sort of reactions one might expect from persons who had survived the experiences.^[4] However, this article focuses on behaviours that match habitual behaviours of the previous persons.

Children who recall dying as adults often act as if they are much older than they are. Many children show precocious interests in cigarettes, alcohol, or sex. Curiously, there may be behavioural differences between identical twins who grow up together, contrary to what many psychologists expect. Striking behavioural memories often appear when there is a difference in ethnicity, religion, or sex between lives. It is common to find children who have eating habits different from their families, but similar to the persons whose lives they recall. Cross-dressing and other gender-inappropriate behaviors are frequent when the previous person was of the opposite sex. When the previous person lived in another region or country, where a different dialect or language is spoken, a child may use words or even comprehend and speak the foreign language, even if he or she has had no exposure to it in his present life. The use of unlearned language is called xenoglossy.

Behavioural memories may appear spontaneously, or they may be triggered by being in a certain place or merely by seeing people or items from or reminiscent of the previous life. Upon meeting two men who had been employees of the person whose life he recalled, a two-year old Thai boy presented himself as a boss, standing with his hands clasped behind his back. He called the men by their nicknames and addressed them as inferiors (using a particular linguistic form) in their dialect, which he understood and spoke with them. ^[6] A child may behave as a parent toward the previous person's children and as a spouse toward that person's spouse, exhibiting either affection or distance, as appropriate. An Indian boy studied by Stevenson was friendly toward the previous person's sister but cool and indifferent toward his wife, with whom the previous person had not been on good terms. ^[7]

Children are sometimes observed performing actions suggestive of a past life, even if they don't make statements about it. In a reported case in England, a young girl mechanically bunched up a baby vest and used it to dust furniture; when she spied a boarded-up fireplace, she made as if to shovel out the hearth. [8]

Children's imaged memories of previous lives usually fade after a few years, often by the time they are eight or so. Behavioural memories may last longer. Most do fade eventually, although they may be carried into middle adulthood, at least. In discussing why behavioral memories last longer in some cases than in others, Stevenson observed that it sometimes relates to the age of the previous person at death. Generally, behaviours are stronger and more durable when death comes in the prime of life. Reactions of the families of the case subject or the previous person may also play a role. Not surprisingly, the responses of adults can either encourage the children's behaviours to persist or cause them to diminish.^[9]

The strongest behavioral memories appear in cases that develop early in life. When past-life memories surface in adulthood, they are less often accompanied by behaviours, although case subjects may recognize that they played in ways

consistent with their memories, or had related phobias, in childhood. [10] Several different behaviours or kinds of behaviours frequently are present in a single case. Stevenson termed these clusters of behaviours 'behavioural syndromes'. [11] Behavioural memories and syndromes rarely appear alone. Typically, they accompany talk about a previous life, and there may be physical features, such as birthmarks, as well. The following six cases provide examples of behavioural syndromes, along with other signs of reincarnation. After them are four examples of unlearned skills and child prodigies, whose inborn talents represent the most highly developed types of behavioral memories. [12]

Behavioral Syndromes

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1969. He was eight months old when his mother chanced to mention the word 'lorry' in his presence and he quickly drank his milk, which she had been trying to get him to do. The word 'lorry' had the same effect on other occasions and was the only way she could get him to drink his milk when he resisted doing so. Later, when he was able to speak, he said that he had died after he was hit by a lorry whilst crossing a busy road. As a young child, he was very afraid of trucks and jeeps.

As he grew older, Sujith said many other things about the life he recalled, and these permitted the person he was talking about to be identified. He was Sammy Fernando, an illicit distiller and purveyor of arrack, and an alcoholic. On the day of his death, he had gone home roaring drunk and quarreled with his wife, who had taken off down the road, as she regularly did when he was in this state. He had started after her but had stopped in a shop for cigarettes and the accident with the lorry had occurred when he emerged, still quite inebriated.

Sammy had a strong personality, which Sujith mimicked perfectly. He would ask for arrack and when given carbonated water would sit with his legs drawn up in the posture assumed by Sammy when drinking and afterwards would belch, wipe his mouth, and wander about as if tipsy. He requested foods preferred by regular arrack drinkers. He offered 'arrack' to Sammy's drinking partners when they visited him. Sammy had been a good singer and dancer and Sujith enjoyed these activities. He also had something of Sammy's temper and was quick to violence. On one occasion he pummeled his mother with his fists, explaining that that is how the police conduct interrogations. Sammy had had many run-ins with the law and Sujith would hide whenever he saw policemen.

Sixteen of Sujith's statements about Sammy's life were recorded in writing before they were confirmed, making this an exceptionally strong reincarnation case. Moreover, Sujith was only three and half when Stevenson began his investigation and he was able to witness many of his peculiar behaviours for himself.^[13]

Gillian and Jennifer Pollock

Gillian and Jennifer Pollock were twins born in Hexham, Northumberland, England, in October, 1958. When they were young, they recalled the lives of their sisters Joanna and Jaqueline, who had been killed together by a crazed driver who ran them down as they were walking along a street. Joanna had been eleven and Jacqueline six at the time.

Despite the fact that blood tests showed them to be monozygotic (same-egg, identical) twins, Gillian and Jennifer had different physiques and very different behaviors, in line with their deceased sisters. Gillian was slender, as Joanna had been, whereas Jennifer was somewhat stocky, like Jacqueline. In addition, Jennifer had two birthmarks, but Gillian had none. One of Jennifer's birthmarks, above her right eye at the root of her nose, was at the site of an injury Jacqueline had sustained when she was three. Jennifer's other birthmark was a mole on her left waist, at exactly the place Jacqueline had had a mole.

Both twins had a phobia of motor vehicles, liked to comb their father's hair (as their deceased sisters had done), and looked to their maternal grandmother rather than mother for support (again like their sisters, who had grown up when their mother was working out of the home), but they differed in other respects. Gillian walked with a splay-footed gait, as had Joanna, whereas Jennifer and Jacqueline walked normally. Gillian was more mature and independent than Jennifer, corresponding to Joanna's relative advancement vis-à-vis Jacqueline. Gillian tended to mother Jennifer, as Joanna had Jacqueline, and Jennifer was more submissive, as Jacqueline had been. Gillian enjoyed dressing up in costumes and acting in plays, something Joanna had been fond of doing. When they learned to write, at about four and a half years, Gillian immediately wrote properly. Jennifer, however, held pencils in her fist, as Jacqueline had done. Jennifer was still doing this occasionally at 23, when Stevenson last received information concerning the practice, although she and Gillian had long since lost their childhood memories.^[14]

Bongkuch Promsin

Bongkuch Promsin, a Thai boy born in 1962, remembered the life of a Laotian youth who was murdered at eighteen. As a young child, Bongkuch was given to what Stevenson called 'attacks of adulthood'. He said he had been born in 1936, the year of the previous person's birth, and gave his age as eighteen. He asked to be shaved following a haircut, brushed his teeth like an adult (children of his family did not regularly brush their teeth), insisted on wearing a loincloth while bathing at the village well (as did adults), and sat with adults rather than playing with other children. He was sexually aggressive toward adolescent girls, whose breasts he tried to fondle. One female houseguest left abruptly after he visited her during the night.

Bongkuch also exhibited Laotian behavioural traits that were out of place in his family. He washed his hands by immersion in a bowl rather than running water over them and ate with his hands rather than with a spoon. He craved Laotian foods and disliked dishes served by his mother. He referred to certain fruits and vegetables with words his mother did not use but came to find out were Laotian. He spoke Laotian with the previous person's family and friends, although his ability to converse was never tested formally and may have been limited. [15]

Sandika Tharanga

Sandika Tharanga was born into a Roman Catholic family in Sri Lanka in 1979 with a small dark mark on his chest, just left of the midline. As a young child, he was very afraid of firecrackers and sudden noises. When he heard explosions, he impulsively placed his hand on the left side of his chest, covering his birthmark. When he was three, he began to say he had lived before as a monk in a monastery. One day he had been on his way to an almsgiving with some fellow monk when there was a big noise, shot, or explosion, the last thing the remembered from that life. His parents speculated that this occurred during a period of insurgency in Sri Lanka in 1971, when several monks were killed, but it was not possible to trace anyone who fit Sandika's memories.

Sandika's behavioural identification with the monk is the most striking aspect of his case, all the more so because he was born into a Christian family. He asked often to be taken to his monastery (although he could not say where that was). He wanted a Buddha image and a shelf installed in his house as an altar. He would pick flowers to place on a bed or chair before worshipping there. He would chant stanzas in Pali, the Buddhist ritual language. He asked his parents to invite monks for almsgiving. He was unusually clean and was a very pious, gentle, and obedient boy, but he refused to eat meat. He did not want his hair cut, he said, because his hair had been cut often in his previous life, and he did not want that now. As he grew older, Sandika's memories began to fade, although he continued to be deeply interested in Buddhism. A good student, he attended university and became an engineer. [16]

BB Saxena

BB Saxena was born in 1918 in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India. His case was investigated first by a lawyer, KKN Sahay, in the 1920s, and then reinvestigated by Stevenson beginning in the 1960s. At birth, he had a pink, virtually white, complexion, and blond hair, more like a European than an Indian. A birthmark on his neck and a bald spot on his head looked like they might commemorate the entry and exit wounds of a gunshot. He said he had been a British cavalry officer posted to India, but unfortunately, neither Sahay nor Stevenson were able to associate his memories with a specific person. The most noteworthy features of his case are again physical and behavioural.

At about the same time he began speaking about the previous life, when he was three, BB would march around, saying words the English words 'left,' 'right,' and 'march.' He pretended that a stick was a gun and asked to have a real gun. BB also liked to play leapfrog and hopscotch, games unknown to Indian children. He wanted to wear shirts and short pants, along with shoes, typical attire for a British man in India, and disliked the Indian clothing his parents obliged him to wear. Rather than eating food with his hands, as was the practice in his family, he asked for knives, forks, and spoons. His family were vegetarians, but he requested meat, and rather than unleavened Indian bread, wanted white bread and butter. He disliked going to Indian temples and objected to his family's worship of Krishna, telling them that their rituals were 'useless'.

BB displayed all of this behaviour between ages three and twelve years. As he reached puberty, he told his family that he would not accept a bride chosen for him, and rejected two or three that were proposed. He stayed single until he was 30, then married a woman of his choice. When Stevenson first met him, he was 43. He had lost none of his childhood memories, he said, but during his youth he had turned anti-British and became a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He was staunchly Indian in many ways, but preserved some traits that seemed to Stevenson more British than Indian. He continued to dislike the hot Indian climate. He preferred to eat bread rather than rice, avoided chilies, and in general liked

European food better than Indian food. He ate with utensils rather than with his hands. He was more assertive and outspoken than were most Indians and unflappable in situations of stress. He was fond of horses and dogs, and kept a dog as a pet, which most Indians at the time did not do.^[17]

Ma Tin Aung Myo

Ma Tin Aung Myo, born in 1953, was one of several Burmese children who claimed to have been Japanese soldiers killed in Burma during World War II. Ma Tin Aung Myo and others of this group spoke a strange language, presumably Japanese, when they were young, but because there were no Japanese speakers in their area when they grew up, there was no one there to identify it. The same children were slow to learn Burmese, a phenomenon Stevenson dubbed glossophobia. [18]

Ma Tin Aung Myo's is a sex-change as well as interethnic case, although like the cases of Sandika Tharanga and BB Saxena, it is unsolved. She had a phobia of airplanes, fearing that she would be shot by them. On cloudy days she would become depressed and cry, saying that she was pining for Japan. She disliked the hot climate of Burma and its spicy food but fancied sweet foods and fish, especially semi-raw fish, which the Burmese do not eat. She played with boys rather than with girls, and particularly enjoyed playing at being a soldier. She refused to wear girls' clothes and when her school insisted that she dress as a girl, she dropped out. Although she modified some of this behaviour in her later teens and came to accept life in Burma, she never adjusted to her gender role and in her twenties began to live openly with another woman. [19]

Specialized Skills and Child Prodigies

Paulo Lorenz

Paulo Lorenz of Brazil was the thirteenth and last child of his parents. He identified himself with and gave evidence of having been an elder sister, Emilia. Emilia was unhappy for most of her life, partly because the Brazilian culture of her day made it difficult for her to travel, as men could do freely. She told several of her siblings that if there were such a thing as reincarnation, she would return as a boy. She tried several times to kill herself and finally succeeded after ingesting cyanide, when she was nineteen years old.

Paulo was born in February, 1923, about eighteen months after Emilia's death. Like Emilia, he had the habit of breaking corners of new loaves of bread, something no one else in their family did. When he was young, he identified himself as a girl, and refused to wear boys' clothes. He wore girls' clothing or went without. He played with girls and with dolls. When he was four or five, a pair of trousers was made for him out of one of Emilia's skirts. This appealed to him, and after that he gradually began to dress as a boy. As he matured, Paulo's sexual orientation became more masculine, but he continued to be noticeably effeminate and never married. He loved to travel and often did. When he was 43, he became depressed over political affairs, and took his own life by setting himself on fire.

Paulo's behavioural identification with Emilia was of the varied, syndrome sort typical of reincarnation cases, but Paulo was unusual in also demonstrating a special skill. Emilia had been the only member of the family who owned a sewing machine and had been an unusually adept seamstress. When he was under two years of age, Paulo pushed aside a servant who was clumsily trying to operate Emilia's sewing machine, showed her how to work it, and fashioned a small sack with it. When he was four, he showed one of his sisters how to thread the machine. He liked to sew and once finished some embroidery another sister had left incomplete. He did all these things without being taught how to sew, and in fact, resisted lessons, saying that he already knew how.^[20]

Corliss Chotkin, Jr.

Another child who demonstrated a skill beyond the normal scale of behavioural memories was a half-Tlingit Alaskan boy named Corliss Chotkin, Jr. Corliss's mother was a full-blooded Tlingit Indian and Corliss was believed to be the reincarnation of her uncle, Victor Vincent. Victor had told Corliss's mother that he would come back as her next child and that she would know him by birthmarks representing two scars, which he point out to her. One was a small mark near the base of his right nostril, but the other was larger and more unusual. It was the scar of a healed surgical incision on his back, rectangular, with stitch marks on the longer sides.

When Corliss was born in December, 1947, his mother looked for and found these two marks, but as he grew older, it became evident that he also acted like Vincent. Both Vincent and Corliss were left-handed and stuttered when they spoke. Corliss combed his hair like Vincent and like Vincent was a devout Christian. At thirteen months, Corliss identified himself by Victor's Tlingit name. He recognized several people Victor had known and spoke about two events in Victor's

life that his mother considered unlikely he could have known about normally. One was the recognition of a house in which Vincent used to live and the room that had been his, even though the building was no longer used as a residence at the time of his visit. The other memory was of a time when Victor's boat had broken down and he had changed into the uniform of the Salvation Army, in which he was a Major, to attract the attention of a passing ship.

Corliss's most striking behavioural memory of Vincent's life was his aptitude with boat engines. Vincent had lived on the water and loved it. He was known to very skillful with boat engines. Corliss had a similar fondness for the water and talked about living on a boat. He taught himself how to run boat engines without lessons and easily repaired a motor that his father was unable to fix.^[21]

Hunter

In an early twenty-first century case, Hunter, an American boy, was given a set of plastic golf clubs for his second birthday. He loved the clubs and played with them nonstop. A few months after his birthday, he was watching television with his parents when his father skipped through the cable channels, passing the Golf Channel. Neither of Hunter's parents played golf, and his father had not even known the Golf Channel was included in their cable subscription. Once Hunter saw it, though, he asked his father to return there. From then on, it is the only programming he wanted to watch. His parents had to limit him to 30 minutes in the morning and evening, else he would have sat and watched it all day long.

One day, when he was still two, Hunter saw a piece about 1920s American golfing superstar Bobby Jones, and told his parents that he had been Bobby Jones when he 'was big'. He repeated this often, and when someone asked his name, he would say 'Bobby Jones'. He began to insist on being called 'Bobby' and would correct people who called him Hunter. His father decided to test him by showing him a set of six pictures of golfers from the 1920s. Hunter correctly picked out Bobby Jones, saying 'This is me'. He identified other golfers by name. Hunter's father then printed pictures of houses off the Internet, including Bobby Jones' house, and Hunter recognized that, also.

Hunter carried his plastic golf clubs everywhere he went. When he practiced at the beach, he called it the 'sand trap'. For Christmas that year, his parents gave him a set of real golf clubs, and enrolled him in lessons at a golf club. The usual starting age for children was five, but when the staff saw his swing, they accepted him before he had turned three. His instructor called him a golf prodigy. Older golfers said that his front leg move reminded them of Bobby Jones' swing.

Hunter said only a few things about Jones' life, but he was obsessed with golf. When he was three, he used his blankets to design play golf courses. His favorite real course was at the Augusta National Golf Club, which Jones had founded and helped design. When Hunter was three and a half, he started taking lessons from a professional golfer. As he became older, he entered junior golf tournaments. By the time he was seven, he had won 41 out of 50 tournaments, 21 in a row. He competed in the six-to-nine year division of a local tournament and won it by ten strokes. [22]

Christian Haupt

Christian Haupt is another American boy who has been called a prodigy, this time for his prowess in baseball. Christian was born in California in 2009. He was exposed to the game in his first year, through observing his older sister's tee-ball games. When he first saw a Little League game, he was mesmerized by it. He studied the players closely, then spent countless hours copying their moves. As a toddler, he insisted upon wearing baseball pants, a baseball jersey, and baseball cleats on a daily basis. Everywhere he went, he carried a small wooden bat. He wanted to pitch and hit balls all the time, wherever he was. His obsession with the sport made him see baseball in everything. A white line in the sky reminded him of a baseline; a tortilla chip, a home plate; a white napkin lying on the bathroom floor, a pitcher's mound.

Although he was right handed in most other activities, Christian batted and pitched with his left hand, in excellent form. He would shake and nod his head as professional players did, 'shaking off the sign' from pitcher to batter. A woman who saw him do this suggested that perhaps the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team would have him throw out the first pitch of the season, and this inspired his mother to make a video of him playing and post it to YouTube. The video came to the attention of a talent scout working for the Adam Sandler film, *That's My Boy*, and Christian, who was still in his second year, was cast in a brief rôle. His mother taped his rehearsals and posted this video to YouTube as well. Eventually, after throwing first pitches for high school and university seasons, on his first day of preschool at age four, Christian was tapped to throw out the first pitch for the new Dodgers season.

Christian not only was extremely talented at baseball, he believed he had been a professional baseball player in an earlier life. At two he told his mother, 'When I was big, I didn't wear seat belts, and I drank alcohol'. When he was 'big like Daddy,' he had played for the New York Yankees, travelling to games on trains and staying in hotels, he said. He talked about his

memories night after night as he prepared to sleep. He picked out a picture of Lou Gehrig as himself and expressed a strong dislike for Babe Ruth, who had played with Gehrig on the Yankees team. Christian's mother confirmed through research on the Internet that although Gehrig and Ruth and Gehrig had started out as friends, they had had a falling out and hadn't spoken for years leading up to Gehrig's death. During the period they had played for the Yankees, in the 1920s, players had travelled between cities on trains and had stayed in hotels for away-games. Gehrig had been left-handed, as Christian was when playing baseball, and both had asymmetrical dimples. Christian has no signs of the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) from which Gehrig died, but from a young age he suffered from asthma, and upper respiratory issues often accompany ALS. Christian's mother could find nothing inconsistent with his having been Gehrig.^[23]

Understanding Behavioural Memories in Reincarnation Cases

Hunter and Christian Gehrig are the only child prodigies with past-life memories to have come to the attention of reincarnation researchers, but their apparently inborn skills are no more than unusually well-developed examples of the sorts of behavioural memories that appear in most reincarnation cases. Both practiced endlessly, quite as professional athletes do. Their behavioural memories and others may be surprising, but Stevenson noted that most psychologists and psychiatrists recognize that behaviours learned in childhood may be carried into adulthood without conscious awareness of when and how they were acquired. In presenting the behavioural memories as past-life related, he was only adding the suggestion that behavioural memories, and not just imaged and verbal memories, might be carried over from a previous life. [24]

However, many critics are not satisfied that these behavioural memories are what they seem to be. In a review of one of Stevenson's collections of case reports, psychiatrist Eugene Brody suggested that they might the results of 'culturally influenced unconscious parental selection'. That is, the parents might be unwittingly encouraging the development of the behaviours, in line with their pre-conceived ideas about reincarnation. [25] If parents and peers can cause the behaviours to persist or disappear, could they not shape their development in the first place? When the behaviours appear in the context of veridical episodic memories, and match the personality and actions of an identified previous person, this would presume that the behaviours and memories were coincidentally aligned, the parents knew about the previous person, or that the parents learned about the previous person through extra-sensory perception. [26]

Philosopher Stephen Braude explores the possibility that the children themselves might have learned of the previous life through extreme ESP or super-psi. [27] Another philosopher, David Ray Griffin, does not believe that ESP or psi alone could account for the behaviours, and proposes a retrocognitive reaching back and absorption of a previous personality in an activity he calls 'retroprehensive inclusion'. [28] Psychologist and reincarnation researcher Jürgen Keil has put forward a variation of Griffin's idea in his notion of 'thought bundles' which survive death and are absorbed by young children who come into contact with them. [29]

All of these skeptical proposals encounter difficulties when brought to bear on the case material. Satwant Pasricha examined the possibility of parental guidance in reference to nineteen Indian cases she uncovered in a survey but found it untenable partly because the details of the previous lives were unknown to many of the parents.^[30] Antonia Mills studied 26 Indian cases with differences of religion (Hinduism and Sunni Islam) between the child and the previous person and asked why religious parents would impose a different religious identity on their children.^[31] Coming at the issue from a different angle, Stevenson and Narender Chadha addressed the techniques many Asian parents use to keep their children from speaking about the previous life and asked why, if the cases are responses to parental guidance, parents attempt to suppress them once they have brought them into being.^[32]

In the end, Braude and Griffin doubt that super-psi and retroprehensive inclusion could account for the reported phenomena. Keil's idea cannot account for the many cases in which children came nowhere near the place the previous person died. No satisfactory 'normal' explanation has been found for behavioural memories in reincarnation cases and no 'paranormal' explanation short of reincarnation and past-life memory has been discovered either.^[33]

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Footnotes

- 1. Stevenson (2001), p. 115.
- 2. Stevenson (2001) pp. 117-118; Stevenson (2000).
- 3. Stevenson (1990).
- 4. Haraldsson (2003).
- 5. Matlock (2017), Lecture 5: The child's behavioral identification with the previous person, pp. 5.6-5.7.
- 6. Keil (1991), pp. 45-46.
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