

Past-Life Memory and Amnesia

The quantity of evidence for reincarnation collected by researchers raises the question why, if reincarnation truly happens, most people remember no past lives. And if most people have had a past life and forgotten it, why do a few, especially young children, remember it?

Background

Sceptics of reincarnation point to the fact that people do not generally remember having lived a past life. The point was made as far back as the third century CE, when the Christian philosopher and [reincarnation](#) sceptic Tertullian made it part of his critique, and has subsequently been voiced repeatedly up to the present day.^[1] But it is complicated by evidence that some people do remember one or more past lives.

[Ian Stevenson](#) and others have collected over 2,500 cases of children who recall a previous life; of these, some 1,700 of are solved – meaning the child’s memory was sufficiently clear to enable the previous incarnations to be identified with reasonable certainty, to the exclusion of other possible identities. Research continues to find new cases. In addition, there are accounts from the twentieth century prior to Stevenson’s work and even [some from earlier centuries](#).

Reincarnation cases have been found to show certain [patterns](#) across cultures and across time, as one would expect in a natural phenomenon. An axiom in anthropology is that the more widespread a belief, the further back in time it dates.^[2] Reincarnation belief accompanied by awareness of its indications – which are similar and found worldwide – is very ancient, likely predating state-level societies. It can be argued that it first arose as early tribal peoples observed phenomena such as [childhood past-life memories](#), [birthmarks resembling past-life wounds](#), [behavioural similarities to a recently-deceased person](#) or [announcing dreams](#).^[3] Accordingly, while reincarnation cannot be explained away on the grounds of amnesia, explanations must be sought both for the past-life memory and for the forgetting of it.

Prevalence and Patterns of Past-Life Memory

No survey has yet measured the prevalence of claims of past-life memories globally. Clues are provided by surveys carried out in 1974, which reported incidences of 2% in Iceland and 8-9% in Charlottesville, Virginia; in a further survey in Iceland in 2007, the figure was 10%.^[4]

It should be noted that these are claims of remembering past lives, not verified memories. Strong, confirmed cases such as those published by Stevenson and others must be much rarer.

Ohkado Masayuki conducted an internet survey asking thousands of Japanese mothers whether their children remembered being born, or being in the womb, or the intermission between the present and past lives. Among mothers who knew of the existence of past-life memories, 4% reported that their children had spoken of them between ages three and twelve.^[5]

Stevenson found that young children who remember past lives typically stop talking about them between five and eight, with some outliers.^[6] Some children retain some aspect of their memories into adulthood; [Erlendur Haraldsson](#) found this was the case with 38% of 42 Sri Lankan children;^[7] he and Majd Abu-Izzeddin subsequently found this also among the majority of 28 Lebanese subjects (86%).^[8]

In other cases, people recall past lives [for the first time in adulthood](#), or regain memories forgotten

in childhood.

Hypotheses of Past-Life Amnesia

Rarity of Reincarnation

Some argue that an absence of past-life memories simply indicates that the person has never reincarnated.^[9] Against this, philosopher and reincarnation researcher [Titus Rivas](#) raises three points:

- Young children's past-life memories fade, suggesting that past lives are at least as subject to amnesia as any other experiences.
- Nature rarely makes exceptions, so reincarnation is unlikely to be uncommon.
- Past-life memories sometimes emerge in adulthood, indicating reincarnation despite the absence of memories of it during childhood.^[10]

[James Matlock](#) further points out the existence of convincing reincarnation cases that are based solely on physical and behavioural signs, in the complete absence of any memories.^[11]

Engagement with New Body

Matlock sees consciousness as independent of brain, citing the inability of medical science to physically locate memory storage, along with abundant evidence for reincarnation, [near-death experiences](#), [mediumistic communications](#), [apparitions](#), [announcing dreams](#) and [intermission memories](#). He envisions this brain-independent consciousness as comprised of two parts: supraliminal (the seat of regular waking awareness) and subliminal (or subconscious), and posits that past-life amnesia only affects the supraliminal mind. Meanwhile, the subliminal retains memories of experiences and facts, as well as skills, habits, preferences, emotions and even residues of physical injuries, which then manifest in the new body as [birthmarks](#) and [other physical signs](#).^[12]

Normally, Matlock proposes, the supraliminal mind or 'stream of experience' undergoes a type of resetting when the reincarnating stream of consciousness joins a new body during the gestation period:

As I envision it, an experiential stream persists with its identity intact until its reincarnation. At that point, at the subliminal level the stream continues unimpeded, but at the supraliminal level there is a decisive break brought about by the engagement with the new body and brain. We begin each life with a tabula rasa, a blank slate, onto which the past impresses itself through involuntary memories and unconscious influence on our behavior.^[13]

Coherence

Memory researcher Martin Conway shows that memory not only is inextricably linked with the self, but is also goal-oriented – in other words, motivated. He draws on copious work from other scholars to show that memory can be altered, distorted or even fabricated to support the existing concept of oneself, a phenomenon that he refers to as 'coherence'.^[14] He writes:

Coherence is a strong force in human memory that acts at encoding, post-encoding remembering, and re-encoding, to shape both the accessibility of memories and the accessibility of their content. This is done in such a way as to make memory consistent with an individual's current goals, self-images, and self-beliefs. ... Thus, memory and central aspects of the self form a coherent system in which, in the healthy individual, beliefs about, and knowledge of, the self are confirmed and supported by memories of specific experiences.^[15]

At the same time, Conway notes, memory must be accurate to be useful. However, for every single moment of experience to be remembered presents impossible storage and retrieval demands. So memory must satisfy two potentially conflicting requirements:

One is to represent reality as experienced, but in cognitively efficient ways, and another is to retain knowledge in such way as to support a coherent and effective self. Conway, Meares et al. ... propose that this is achieved by what they term 'adaptive coherence'. That is to say, there is some optimum level of retention for any given experience that maximizes fitness and survival.

[16]

From this perspective we can see why past-life memory carrying a different sense of identity – in terms of name, relationships, occupation, nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, gender and outward appearance – might have to be abandoned for the sake of coherence.

Prevention of Maladjustment

Stevenson noted that some young children with past-life memories speak as if they are still living their past lives, using the present tense when describing them and appearing confused by the smallness of their bodies. Others are clear that the life was in the past, using expressions such as 'when I was big'.^[17] The continuing confusion of identity can cause problems in their relationships, careers and lives, he pointed out.

Trouble can arise when children who remember past lives unfavourably compare their current families and circumstances to those of their previous lives. A child's demand to see their 'real mother' or 'real family' can raise fear in their birth family of losing the child to their previous family. Subjects of Stevenson's cases who wanted to go back to their former homes include [Prakash Varshnay](#), [Gnanatilleka Baddewithana](#), [Jagdish Chandra](#), [Veer Singh](#), [Shamlimie Prema](#), [Gamani Jayasena](#), [Indika Guneratne](#), [Wijanam Kithsiri](#), [Suleyman Zeytun](#), [Rabih Elawar](#), [Ratana Wongsombat](#) and [Bongkuch Promsin](#). To this list may be added Ohkado's case of Tomo.^[18]

The Burmese woman [Ma Tin Aung Myo](#), who recalled having been a man in her previous life, dropped out of school rather than wear feminine attire. [Jasbir Lal Jat](#), a low-caste Indian boy who remembered a past life as a high-caste man, rejected the food served him, considering it 'polluted' – for which he was beaten by his older brother; he later had trouble finding employment which he considered appropriate for his past-life caste.^[19]

[Parmod Sharma](#) was so preoccupied with past-life play that he lost a year of school, apparently damaging his future career.^[20] Bir Sahai, also born into a low caste after a past life in a higher caste, refused ever to accept the low status; his previous parents accepted him as the reincarnation of their son and let him live with them, but no other families of their caste allowed their daughters to wed him, so he died unmarried.^[21] Some children suffer the pain of being rejected by the people they remember as their previous families, as in the case of [Dolon Champa Mitra](#).^[22]

Protection from Traumatic Memories

In his psychological studies of children with memories of past lives, Erlendur Haraldsson found they tend to test as more intelligent and to perform better in school than other children. But he also found them to be – despite their families' normality – more high-strung, argumentative, perfectionistic, nervous, prone to nightmares, hot-tempered, easily embarrassed, afflicted with specific fears and prone to dissociation, though not to a pathological degree. Haraldsson recognized these symptoms as typical of post-traumatic stress disorder, and since a high portion of these children recalled violent deaths, he hypothesized that children with such memories are often left

traumatized by them.^[23]

Matlock sums up: 'It may be that our psyches act to keep memories of previous lives from entering our conscious awareness in order to protect us emotionally and to allow us to adapt more easily to our present circumstances'.^[24]

Social Factors at Ages Five to Eight

Stevenson and others have found that young children who remember past lives often forget them between the ages of five and eight.^[25] He suggests that social factors are causal here:

The usual age of forgetting seems to coincide with the increased activity of a child outside the physical and social environment of his immediate family. ... I believe this adjustment brings new experiences, the memories of which cover and seem to obliterate those of the previous life.
^[26]

But he also posits a developmental aspect, likening past-life amnesia to general childhood amnesia:

The onset of the amnesia coincides with the rapid development of verbal language and the associated loss of visual imagery in the child. Memories of previous lives appear to occur primarily (in the child's mind) in the form of visual images. ... However, the development of language leads in most persons to a layering over of visual images, which gradually become less and less accessible. Even the ability to have visual images becomes greatly impaired in most persons as they leave early childhood.^[27]

Parental Suppression

Stevenson observes that parental suppression of children's memories is more common in Western homes than in reincarnationist cultures, a result of parental disbelief. But he further notes that parents in reincarnationist cultures also suppress their children's past life memories, influenced by various beliefs. In Cambodia and other Buddhist countries, people consider past-life memory suitable for people approaching spiritual enlightenment via meditation, but problematic in young children.^[28] Many people in India and Burma believe past-life memories in children to be harmful and even possibly fatal; others find the child's recountings unpleasant or insulting, or, as mentioned, fear losing their child to the previous family.^[29] [Satwant Pasricha](#) found that in India suppression tends to increase after the previous incarnation is identified and the two families have met. In her estimation this is due to many factors, including those mentioned in the section 'Prevention of Maladjustment' above.^[30]

Parents often resort to beatings and emotional abuse to try to suppress a child's past-life memories.^[31] Other methods include turning the child on a potter's wheel to cause dizziness, washing out the mouth with dirty water, putting partly chewed food in the mouth, putting a broom on the head twice a week, slapping the head gently with the sole of a shoe, and applying amulets to the body. Reminiscent of the mythical Greek river Lethe whose water caused amnesia in those who drank it, Cambodian parents might have the child eat unfertilized birds' eggs to cause them to forget; in southern China, carp soup is used.^[32]

However, Stevenson found that suppression seems not to work as well as the parents might like. In an analysis of Indian cases, the children in 29 out of 69 cases in which suppression had been attempted (41%) continued to talk about their past lives for just as long as the others.

Past-life Amnesia as Dysfunction

Titus Rivas argues that past-life amnesia is not adaptive but rather a flaw in human mentality, whatever the cause. By forgetting, he contends, we become alienated from ourselves and also suffer greater fear of death, lacking experiential proof of reincarnation. He writes:

If we knew more about who and what we have been in the past, we would know better who and what we really are now, and where we stand. It might also enhance our interest in life, our passion for it in the positive sense of this word, our love for ourselves, our dignity, and our love and respect for all of our fellow-beings.^[33]

Hypotheses of Past-Life Memory

The hardship that seems inherent in remembering past lives raises the question, what motivates people to remember them?

Incompleteness or Unfinished Business

Analysing what sorts of lives are most likely to be remembered, Stevenson identified a theme of incompleteness. Among 725 cases from six different cultures, he found 61% recalled previous lives that ended in violent death, a proportion vastly greater than the actual incidence of violent deaths in those cultures.^[34] But he was able to divide natural-death cases into four groups that appear similarly disproportionate:

- sudden deaths (apparent wellness to death in 24 hours or less, for instance by heart attack)
- death for any reason under the age of twelve
- death leaving unfinished business (for instance, mothers with young children needing care, people with debts left to pay)
- deaths that interrupted continuing business (for instance, an entrepreneur interrupted by death while engrossed in building a business)^[35]

The people in these groups can be said to have had reasonable expectation of a longer life, perhaps having made forward plans. The sense of incompleteness caused by life being cut short, Stevenson posits, might have made these previous lives more memorable.^[36]

Memory Ability and Spiritual Practice

Stevenson notes Haraldsson's finding that children who remembered past lives appeared to have better recall than their peers, although this cannot be the only factor in the ability to remember past lives. He also identifies mental clarity achieved through spiritual practice as being conducive to past-life memory, not only in this life but also in the next.^[37] This observation is supported by reincarnation researcher Iris Giesler's search of the published record for cases in which subjects recalled dying naturally, of old age; in six of the ten cases she found, the previous incarnations had been devout Buddhists and dedicated meditators.^[38]

Cuing and Triggers

James Matlock notes that, as in the present life, a past-life memory can be triggered by chance encounters with people, places, sounds, smells, emotions and so forth. [James Leininger](#)'s visit to a World War II aircraft museum, for example, seems to have triggered his memories of having been an American fighter pilot shot down near Japan.^[39] While children seem more able to remember spontaneously in the regular waking state, adults' memories more often arise as a result of cues, or in altered states such as meditation or dreaming.^[40]

Healing

Matlock reasons that past-life memories remembered at any age likely express a need of some sort, writing, 'With adults, this may be a need for resolution of emotional conflicts carried forward from the past, a kind of unfinished business of the psyche.'^[41] James Leininger's experience suggests that this may not only be true for adult remembers but children too: his feelings about his violent past-life death became more peaceful and positive following a memorial ritual at the place where it happened.^[42]

Matlock notes that that at a subliminal level we may all feel the effects of our past lives acting on our personalities and behaviours. Even if we remember nothing of them, he writes:

The influences nevertheless help us adapt to the conditions of our new lives when we return in the same ethnic, social, and linguistic groups.^[43] They provide the basis for psychological and perhaps spiritual growth. Past-life recall is not required to receive these benefits and may even interfere with them so, when it occurs, it likely has for some psychological purpose best known to the individual psyche.^[44]

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 261.
- 2.^ Matlock (2019), 62.
- 3.^ Matlock (2019) 62.
- 4.^ Haraldsson (2011), 80, Table 2.
- 5.^ Ohkado (2015), 6, Table 4.
- 6.^ Stevenson (2001), 108.
- 7.^ Haraldsson (2008).
- 8.^ Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin (2012). Matlock attributes the discrepancy to cultural factors: see Matlock (2019), 195.
- 9.^ For example, see Griffin (1997), 197.
- 10.^ Rivas (2012).
- 11.^ Matlock (2019), 251.
- 12.^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 262.
- 13.^ Matlock (2019), 255.
- 14.^ Conway (2005), 595.
- 15.^ Conway (2005), 595.
- 16.^ Conway (2005), 596.
- 17.^ Stevenson (2001), 107.
- 18.^ Ohkado (2013).
- 19.^ Stevenson (2001), 124.
- 20.^ Stevenson (2001), 124.
- 21.^ Stevenson (2001), 126.
- 22.^ Matlock (2019), 197.
- 23.^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 113-18
- 24.^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 263.
- 25.^ Stevenson (2001), 108.
- 26.^ Stevenson (2001), 109.
- 27.^ Stevenson (2001), 109.
- 28.^ Matlock (2019), 196.
- 29.^ Stevenson (2001), 95-96. See also Pasricha (2011).
- 30.^ Pasricha (2011).
- 31.^ Stevenson (2001), 96 n2.
- 32.^ Matlock (2019), 196-97.

- 33.^ Rivas (2012).
- 34.^ Stevenson (2001), 165.
- 35.^ Stevenson (2001), 211-12.
- 36.^ Stevenson (2001), 212.
- 37.^ Stevenson (2001), 213.
- 38.^ Cited in Matlock (2019), 208.
- 39.^ Matlock (2019), 124-25.
- 40.^ Matlock (2019), 201-2, 205-6.
- 41.^ Matlock (2019), 209.
- 42.^ The ritual and the result are shown visually [in this TV clip](#).
- 43.^ Which we do, usually: see Haraldsson & Matlock (2015), 229-35.
- 44.^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 266.