

Psychological Studies of Children Claiming Past-Life Memories

Do children with memories of past lives differ psychologically from children without such memories? Erlendur Haraldsson examined that possibility systematically, administering psychological tests to children and their mothers, and to teachers who knew them well, in Sri Lanka and Lebanon. Similar studies have been conducted in India and the United States. These studies have found that children with past-life memories do differ from their peers in several respects.

Introduction

Many young children round the world claim to remember having been other people in previous lives. These claims have been reported [for centuries](#), but the systematic study of them as evidence for [reincarnation](#) began only in the 1960s with the investigations of [Ian Stevenson](#).

Reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) has shown that past-life memory has many characteristics of present-life memory: Like present-life memories, past-life memories are often cued by things seen, heard, or smelled; past-life memories tend to cluster about the last years, months or days of the previous life, revealing a '[recency effect](#)'; and they may relate to the prime years of life, demonstrating a '[reminiscence bump](#)'. Past-life memories are not exclusively episodic, but also may be semantic, emotional, and [behavioural](#); not uncommonly, there are recognition memories as well.^[1]

Case data suggests that children who recall previous lives may be different from their peers in some respects – but how, exactly? The present article describes studies that have been done in Sri Lanka, India, and Lebanon – places which have contributed a substantial number of cases to the reincarnation database – as well as in the United States, comparing children with past-life memories to their peers without past-life memories. Also considered here are studies of past-life memory retention from childhood into adulthood and of the long-term effects of the childhood recollections.^[2] More general issues concerning [past-life remembering and amnesia](#) are treated in a separate article in the *Psi Encyclopedia*.

Are Children with Past-Life Memories Different?

Studies in Sri Lanka, India, Lebanon and the USA

[Erlendur Haraldsson](#) was the first researcher to compare children with past-life memories and their peers, in Sri Lanka^[3] and in Lebanon.^[4] [Antonia Mills](#) conducted a study in India^[5] and [Jim B Tucker](#), along with F. Don Nidiffer, one in the United States.^[6]

Although there are important methodological differences across the studies, Haraldsson, Mills and Tucker all submitted standard psychological tests to their subjects and their parents. Haraldsson's studies included the children's teachers as well. Mills's was part of a broader study of Indian subjects who had memories of being of a different religion, either Hinduism or Sunni Islam. Haraldsson and Mills compared their subjects with past-life memories (target group) to peers without such memories (control group), but Tucker compared the children's scores to statistical norms instead.

One of the basic instruments was the [Child Behavior Checklist](#), a standardized list of problems that children can have, and of characteristics or traits that sometimes lead to difficulties for children and their families. Haraldsson and Tucker both employed the Child Behaviour Checklist. Other

tests included the [Tellegen Absorption Scale](#), the [Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test](#), [Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrixes](#), the [Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale](#), the [Children's Apperception Test](#), the [Child Dissociative Checklist](#), and the [Family Questionnaire](#).

In his initial Sri Lanka study, Haraldsson compared thirty children whose cases had been studied previously either by himself or by Stevenson to children who had not claimed past-life memories, matched by sex, age and neighbourhood. The subjects (twelve pairs of boys and eighteen pairs of girls) were aged seven to thirteen years with a mean age of nine years and five months.^[7] Haraldsson's second Sri Lanka study included 27 pairs of children (fourteen pairs of boys and thirteen pairs of girls) aged five to ten years, with a mean age of seven years and ten months.^[8]

In his Lebanon study, Haraldsson included thirty pairs of [Druze](#) children (nineteen pairs of boys and eleven pairs of girls) aged six to fourteen years (having a mean age of ten years and seven months).^[9] Mills had 31 pairs of young adults in her Indian study, among them 25 males and six females.^[10] Tucker and F. Don Nidiffer examined fifteen American pre-schoolers (eight boys and seven girls), aged three to six years, who had spoken or were speaking about previous lives at the time.^[11]

All studies included both subjects whose past-life memories had been verified ('solved' cases) and subjects for whom no person matching the memories had been found ('unsolved' cases). Previous studies had shown that solved and unsolved cases were closely similar,^[12] so they were combined for these psychological studies. The subjects were mostly unrelated to the previous persons in the Sri Lankan, Lebanese and Indian samples, but in the American study, there were family relationships in all four of the solved cases.^[13]

Behavioural Differences

Haraldsson found that children with past-life memories in both Sri Lanka and Lebanon were reported to have more psychological and social problems than children in the control groups did. Children with past-life memories:

- were argumentative and more likely to quarrel
- were perfectionistic; everything had to be exact and correct, and they wanted to discuss matters thoroughly
- were neurotic, having more mood swings and being more prone to nightmares
- liked to be alone, and did not get as involved with others as much as children generally do
- sometimes seemed confused
- tended to be overly concerned with neatness and cleanliness
- tended to talk a lot
- were more fearful and anxious than other children, and would often get teased
- tended to be stubborn, sometimes refused to talk, and had generally stronger tempers than children in the comparison groups

Haraldsson noted that many of these characteristics are signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is generally only found in children who have been badly treated or neglected. He saw no indication of such bad treatment. However, most of the children recalled having suffered a violent death in the previous life, such as by accident, in war, or being murdered: this applied to 76% of his combined Sri Lanka samples and to 77% of his Lebanon sample. The children were preoccupied with their memories, talked a lot about them and seemed to rehearse them over and over in their minds. Haraldsson concluded that the stress symptoms were connected to memories of violent deaths.^[14]

This was an important finding. Ian Stevenson had noticed symptoms of this kind in his large collection of cases and had written a review paper about [phobias related to past life memories](#),^[15] but he had not made a systematic study of his subjects in contrast to their peers. Many of the target

children in Haraldsson's samples were reported to have phobias but there was no sign with any of his samples that children with past-life memories were more suggestible than children in general, nor that they lived in social isolation or that their families were conflictual.

On the contrary, Haraldsson's studies found that children with past-life memories were reported to be better adjusted socially than their age-matched peers, especially by their teachers. Children typically cease speaking about their memories round the time they begin going to school, so some of the difference in the evaluation of parents and teachers on the Child Behavior Checklist could be attributable to the age of the child when evaluated. In one study,^[16] teachers were interviewed almost eighteen months after families. It could be that although some children with past-life memories present behavioural challenges, these recede as their memories fade or become better managed, leaving longer-term benefits.^[17]

In America, the PTSD-like symptoms were not as pronounced, perhaps because the incidence of violent death in American cases was much lower than in the Sri Lankan or Lebanese cases. Violent deaths have been reported in a fair number of Indian reincarnation cases, but the appropriate factors were not investigated in India. However, Mills found that Indian target subjects scored significantly ($p < .05$) higher than control subjects on the Tellegen Absorption Scale,^[18] indicating a greater capacity to immerse themselves in their mental imagery, similar to Haraldsson's findings from Sri Lanka and Lebanon.^[19]

Haraldsson's first Sri Lanka study contained no good measure of dissociation. In his second Sri Lanka study, he found that children who asserted past-life memories had greater dissociative tendencies (eg rapid changes in personality and frequent daydreams) than their peers did, but they scored no higher on social isolation, suggestibility or attention-seeking.^[20] In the United States, on the other hand, all but two of Tucker and Nidiffer's children obtained low scores on the Child Dissociative Checklist, meaning that they revealed no tendencies toward dissociation.^[21]

Cognitive Differences

Are children with past life memories more gifted than other children? This proved to be true of target children in Sri Lanka, who possessed a larger vocabulary than other children, were better pupils, worked harder for school and achieved substantially higher grades. The children were particularly good in their native language, in religion and in mathematics. Some of them were at the top of their classes academically.^[22]

American children with past-life memories also scored higher than their peers on cognitive variables and did better in school.^[23] However, this was not true in Lebanon^[24] or India.^[25] Some of Mills's subjects told her that they felt that their past-life memories had interfered with their education. The relatively poor school performance captured in her study thus may be due to the influence of the past-life memories.^[26]

How Long Do Past-Life Memories Last?

Stevenson observed that children who speak of previous lives nearly always begin to do so at two to five years. Children vary in how much they say about the past life and how persistently they talk about their memories, but most stop speaking about them between ages five and eight. Stevenson related this apparent fading to the start of school, when the child moved outside the home environment for the first time and was confronted with many new concerns and impressions.^[27]

Haraldsson re-interviewed Sri Lankan and Lebanese Druze subjects whose cases either he or Stevenson had studied previously to see how much of their memories, if any, they had retained. In

Sri Lanka, he interviewed 42 subjects, aged 19 to 49 years. Thirty had been interviewed by Stevenson in the late 1960s and 1970s and twelve by Haraldsson between 1988 and 1990. Although well over half no longer remembered anything of what they had said before, 38% affirmed that they still retained some memories, though not all; on average, they retained about 20% of their original memories. The retained memories tended to centre about people known in the previous lives and the circumstances that had led to deaths.^[28]

In Lebanon, Haraldsson and his colleague Majd Abu-Izzeddin re-interviewed 28 subjects aged 28 to 56 years whose cases had been studied by Stevenson and his associates in the 1970s and 1980s. Only four of the 28 said that their memories had faded entirely; 24, or 86%, believed that they still had some past-life memories. Half of them felt that their memories were still as clear as they had been when they were younger. The same subjects remembered little of their present childhoods; their past-past life memories were clearer than their present-life childhood memories. A few reported new memories that the investigators had not recorded earlier.^[29]

Haraldsson's findings regarding past-life memory retention in Sri Lanka and Lebanon were concordant with Mills's findings in India. Of her 28 subjects, sixteen (57%) recalled some of what they had spoken about in childhood; ten said they still remembered the previous life vividly, and six said they remembered it with some fading.^[30]

Are Past-Life Memories Beneficial?

Past-life memories are troubling to many children, who commonly suffer from PTSD-like symptoms and phobias related to the way they recall having died. In some cases, the memories interfere with school performance, but there are also indications that the memories can have a positive effect as subjects grow older. Haraldsson investigated these effects in his memory retention studies in Sri Lanka and Lebanon and Mills addressed them in India.^[31]

Haraldsson found that about a third of his Sri Lankan subjects continued to be troubled by phobias that had afflicted them in childhood. However, for the most part they felt that their past-life memories had had a positive impact on their lives. The great majority were happy with how their lives had developed. Their educational level was higher than that of others of their generation, as one-fourth had received some university education: they included a mathematician, an engineer and a computer scientist. Only two were unemployed, which was low for Sri Lanka.^[32]

In Lebanon, fifteen (53%) of Haraldsson's 28 subjects evaluated their memories as beneficial, although only four said they would wish their children to have past-life memories of their own.^[33] Most of Mills's Indian subjects felt that their memories had been 'helpful' and eighteen (64%) of the 28 said that they would like their children to remember a previous life. Nonetheless, some of Mills's subjects felt that their memories had interfered not only with their education, but with the establishment of romantic relationships due to the emotional connections they continued to experience with people from the earlier lives.^[34]

Conclusions

Psychological studies with control groups in four countries have found that children with past-life memories differ from their peers in important ways. When their past-life memories include recollections of violent deaths, children may appear to be traumatized, expressing the sorts of reactions one would expect from the persons whose lives they remember, had they lived rather than died. Occasionally the memories (or psychological carry-overs) have a lasting negative impact that interferes with education or with romantic relationships.

On the other hand, many subjects experience positive benefits from their memories, especially as they grow older. Children with past-life memories typically are reported to be precocious and better-adjusted socially than their peers. Many excel at school and follow-up studies in adulthood have shown that most suffered no lasting consequences from childhood traumas. The majority assess their past-life memories to have been beneficial, although they would not necessarily wish their children to go through what they went through.

An interesting aspect of these findings is the lack of support they provide for sceptical conjectures regarding past-life memory claims. According to the standard sceptical view, children with past-life memories have disturbed relationships with their parents, live in social isolation from their siblings and peers, are highly suggestible and attention-seeking, and lead rich fantasy lives,^[35] none of which assumptions are borne out by the studies of Haraldsson, Mills and Tucker.

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Matlock (2019).
- 2.^ Past-life memories may also arise for the first time in adulthood, as discussed [in this article](#).
- 3.^ Haraldsson (1995, 1997); Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai (2000).
- 4.^ Haraldsson (2003).
- 5.^ Mills (2008).
- 6.^ Tucker & Nidiffer (2014).
- 7.^ Haraldsson (1993, 1995).
- 8.^ Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai (2000).
- 9.^ Haraldsson (2003).
- 10.^ Mills (2008).
- 11.^ Tucker & Nidiffer (2014).
- 12.^ Cook et al. (1983a, 1983b).
- 13.^ Tucker & Nidiffer (2014).
- 14.^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016); Haraldsson (2021).
- 15.^ Stevenson (1990).
- 16.^ Haraldsson (1995).
- 17.^ Matlock (2019), 193.
- 18.^ Mills (2008).
- 19.^ Haraldsson, 1995, 1997, 2003; Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai (2000).
- 20.^ Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai (2000).
- 21.^ Tucker & Nidiffer (2014).
- 22.^ Haraldsson (1995, 1997); Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai (2000).
- 23.^ Tucker & Nidiffer (2014).
- 24.^ Haraldsson (2003)
- 25.^ Mills (2008).
- 26.^ Matlock (2019), 196.
- 27.^ Stevenson (2001), 105-10.
- 28.^ Haraldsson (2008).
- 29.^ Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin (2012).
- 30.^ Mills (2008), 143-44.
- 31.^ See Matlock (2019), 189-200 and *passim*, for more extensive discussion of these issues.
- 32.^ Haraldsson (2008).
- 33.^ Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin (2012).
- 34.^ Mills (2004), 632; (2008), 144-46.
- 35.^ Matlock (2019), 190.

