Criticisms of Reincarnation Case Studies

Reincarnation research focuses mainly on claims by small children, and to a lesser extent some adults, to remember details of what they take to have been a former life. In scores of such cases, investigators have found that the memories match the life an identifiable deceased individual, thus appearing to support the concept of reincarnation.

This article describes criticisms of such case studies, mostly levied by sceptics of postmortem survival. Broadly, there are two types of sceptics, each holding different theoretical orientations. Materialist sceptics assume that consciousness is generated by the brain and have lodged various objections against reports of past-life memory. Parapsychological sceptics for the most part do not question research methodology or results, but hold that the cases may be explained as the acquisition of information about previous lives by extrasensory means.

Reincarnation Case Studies

Reincarnation research was pioneered by Ian Stevenson, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, USA. On his first research trip to Asia in 1961, Stevenson discovered that the cases consisted of more than memory claims. The children he met behaved in ways out of keeping with their families and many had something distinctive about their physical appearance too. In the more developed cases, children said enough about the lives they seemed to recall for their parents to trace the people they believed they had been and it was then apparent that the children's odd behaviour along with their birthmarks and other physical traits corresponded to the deceased people whose lives they recalled.

This evidence for reincarnation has not gone unchallenged by sceptical critics. Stevenson died in 2007 but the research has continued with the contributions of his colleagues and new generations of workers, some of whom, like Satwant Pasricha, Jim B Tucker and Jürgen Keil, have contributed cases that have been subjected to criticism. For the most part, critics have continued to focus on the older work of Stevenson, however. With rare exceptions, the criticisms have concerned case studies, so this review is centred on critiques of field research and case reports.

Critics and Criticisms

Many critics of reincarnation research are staunch sceptics of postmortem survival in general. They fall into two camps, each with its own theoretical perspectives.

Critics committed to a materialist philosophy believe that consciousness is generated by the brain. This rules out the possibility of survival and reincarnation at the outset; materialist critics assume that there must be another explanation for the data and are determined to find it, even if it means imputing fraud for no reason except that other answers elude them.

Another group of sceptical critics, largely confined to researchers and philosophers familiar with academic parapsychology, hold that all phenomena suggestive of survival, including reincarnation, may be explained through anomalous cognition or ESP, now generally termed 'psi' so as to include psychokinesis (mind over matter).

Parapsychological sceptics are not necessarily materialists. They hold their position notwithstanding the fact that the extreme living-agent superpsi required to explain the psychological, behavioural and physical features of reincarnation cases goes beyond what is attested in spontaneous cases or laboratory experiments. Moreover, these critics overlook the fact that in rejecting the physicalist assumptions of materialism, they have opened the door to the postmortem survival and reincarnation of consciousness; thus, their arguments are less philosophically coherent than are those of materialist critics, most of whom deny psi along with postmortem survival.

The next sections of this article identify the major critics of both camps. Because Stevenson's earliest critics were fellow parapsychologists and writers on 'paranormal' topics, they are listed first. These critics vary in the extent they view survival as possible; D Scott Rogo, for instance, was strongly critical of Stevenson's work and yet accepted his findings as requiring explanation and developed a theory to account for them.

After the introductory sketches of the critics, major or recurrent criticisms are described. These are organized thematically, beginning with logical objections, then concerns over psychosocial process such as social construction, then methodological critiques, and finally the superpsi proposal of parapsychological sceptics. Following this is a section listing cases that have come in for substantial or sustained criticism.

Throughout, published replies to the criticisms are noted. This is important, as sceptics tend to present their views without acknowledging counters to their charges. There has also been a tendency for sceptics to cite each other without referring to the original works, with the result that some criticisms have become distorted and over-generalized. Several charges have been treated as hypotheses and tested, with the results not what critics predicted.

This article concentrates on criticisms and responses that have appeared in print. Many other criticisms – especially sceptical criticisms – have been made online; however, for the most part, these follow the published critiques.

Parapsychological Critics

David Barker

David Barker is an anthropologist who worked with Stevenson for two years in the late 1970s. Barker is well known in sceptical circles for his social constructionist view of the case of Rakesh Gaur, which he investigated along with Satwant Pasricha. Barker was also involved in other controversies, which were publicized by

D Scott Rogo in *The Search for Yesterday*, from which they were picked up by Paul Edwards in his 1996 book *Reincarnation*.1

Stephen Braude

Stephen E Braude is emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He has written books that endorse the physical phenomena of mediumship as well as experimental work on ESP and psychokinesis.2 As regards postmortem survival, he takes the position that the evidence suggests 'with little assurance but with some justification' that 'some individuals' survive 'for a limited time'.3

Braude has been less clear about where he stands on reincarnation, although he has raised the prospect of superpsi on the part of reincarnation case subjects and their families as an explanatory paradigm.4 He believes that superpsi operates unconsciously like a 'magic wand' to achieve any desired outcome. This concept cannot be tested and is neither affirmable nor falsifiable, which are usually considered scientific imperatives. Braude defends it by saying that 'we frequently find ourselves weighing rival, but strictly unfalsifiable, hypotheses'.5

Braude believes insufficient attention has been given to the psychology of reincarnation case subjects, as illustrated in his treatment of Uttara Huddar / Sharada, and to social construction and other psychosocial processes in explaining reincarnation case phenomena.6 Recently, he has said that he has come to think these problems present more of a challenge to the reincarnation interpretation of the case phenomena than does the prospect of superpsi (see under Living-Agent Psi, below).7

CTK Chari

Indian philosopher CTK Chari (1909–1993), head of the department of philosophy at Madras Christian College from 1958 to 1969, was one of Stevenson's earliest and most vociferous critics. Chari argued in a series of journal papers and book chapters that reincarnation cases were essentially social constructs, influenced by memory distortions such as paramnesia and cryptomnesia, although he also allowed for ESP information acquisitions under some circumstances.8 Chari's critical arguments and his comments on Stevenson's case of Mallika Aroumougam have been cited by other critics, especially D Scott Rogo and materialist sceptics such as Paul Edwards. For a more detailed discussion of Chari's arguments, see here.

Gardner Murphy

Gardner Murphy (1895–1979) was a well-known American social and personality psychologist, elected to the presidency of the American Psychological Association in 1944-45. He had a keen interest in parapsychology and played an active role in the American Society for Psychical Research from 1941 to 1975. He served as President of the Society for Psychical Research in 1949.

Although not a fierce sceptic either of survival or of Stevenson's work, in 1973 Murphy authored an influential response to Stevenson's *Twenty Cases Suggestive of*

Reincarnation[9] in which he sought to explain the cases in terms of the 'psychon' system of WW Carington. According to Carington's theory, a person's psyche disintegrates at death, there no longer being a physical body to hold it together; postmortem psychon elements may interface with the living, as in mediumistic communications, but they disintegrate over time and do not constitute enduring personal survival. Murphy drew attention to features of Stevenson's cases that he thought were consistent with Carington's theory. He believed the cases demonstrated less than full persistence of personality and furnished little evidence of the carryover of desires and purposes, 'the characteristic "unfinished business" of life'.[10]

Stevenson countered that the cases he had studied included evidence for the carryover of emotional, behavioural and other personality traits that went beyond what Carington's model allowed. On his first Asian trip, he had not fully appreciated this and so had not emphasized these aspects in *Twenty Cases*, but he intended to remedy this deficiency in forthcoming writings.[11] The influence of Carington's psychon theory is apparent in the writings of D Scott Rogo and other critics.[12] Murphy's comments were picked up by materialist sceptic David Lester, though without reference either to Carington's survival theory or to Stevenson's reply to Murphy.[13]

Louisa Rhine

Louisa E Rhine (1891–1983), wife of experimental parapsychologist JB Rhine, was strongly sceptical of postmortem survival. In a review of *Twenty Cases*, she argued that because the reach of ESP was not yet determined, the possibility of survival was undecided and research on reincarnation was 'strictly speaking, premature'. Rhine accepted that Stevenson had ruled out fraud and cryptomnesia, but believed he had given insufficient attention to the possibility of parental guidance. She was not willing to set aside the involvement of clairvoyant ESP. She speculated that physical traits like birthmarks matching wounds in reincarnation cases might be acquired characteristics in the Lamarckian sense.[14]

Stevenson responded that parental guidance could not explain how parents obtained information to shape their children's behaviour, much of which was ongoing over a period of time. Nor could it be squared with attempts by some parents to suppress their children's memories. Clairvoyance would not account for the targeted selection of deceased individuals, nor for behavioural identifications, nor for physical signs. Moreover, physical characteristics could not be inherited in most cases because there was no genetic avenue for transmission of information between lives.[15]

D Scott Rogo

Douglas Scott Rogo (1950–1990) was a prolific writer on parapsychological topics. He tackled reincarnation in his 1985 book *The Search for Yesterday*, which contains a trove of complaints about Stevenson's research that critics have mined ever since, unaware of or willfully ignoring Stevenson's replies.[16]

Rogo drew attention to and amplified CTK Chari's commentary on the case of Mallika Aroumougam. He also aired an unpublished critical report by Champe Ransom and grievances by David Barker over a case report on Rakesh Gaur and other matters, which were introduced into mainstream scepticism by Paul Edwards. Rogo made original criticisms of a few cases; although he acknowledged these to be 'very trivial', they nevertheless have been cited by Edwards, Keith Augustine and other materialist sceptics. Despite his censures, in the end Rogo accepted Stevenson's data as requiring explanation and developed a theory of postmortem survival reminiscent of Carington's psychon theory to account for them.17

Michael Sudduth

Michael Sudduth has been a lecturer in philosophy at San Francisco State University since 2005. He takes the position that evidence for postmortem survival is not strong enough to override the possibility that it was acquired by 'living-agent psi' or superpsi. In his 2016 book, *A Philosophical Critique of Empirical Arguments for Post-Mortem Survival,* he extended this argument to include reincarnation. In 2021, he took on the well-known American case of James Leininger.18

Ian Wilson

Ian Wilson is the author of general-interest books on historical and religious themes. In his 1981 book, *Mind Out of Time? Reincarnation Investigated* (revised and republished in the United States in 1982 as *All in the Mind: Reincarnation, Hypnotic Regression, Stigmata, Multiple Personality, and Other Little-Understood Powers of the Mind*), he challenged the evidence for reincarnation. He suggested that Stevenson had been duped by his subjects and informants and that he was too quick to dismiss dissident witnesses. Stevenson encountered few dissident witnesses, however, and Wilson admitted that there are 'considerable numbers of his cases where such an interpretation cannot be justified',19 a concession rarely acknowledged by materialist sceptics such as Keith Augustine who cite Wilson on this point.

Wilson was troubled by the absence of rules governing the interval between lives and other matters, apparently believing that if reincarnation occurs, it must invariably follow the same course.20 In a charge that has gained particular traction among materialist sceptics, Wilson observed that in many of Stevenson's cases, children recalled previous lives in superior circumstances, which he attributed to longing for a better life (see Childhood Fantasy, below).

Wilson also undertook an investigation of the Pollock Twins and commented on Jenny Cockell's past-life memories of Mary Sutton. For more on Wilson's critique of Stevenson's research, see here.

Materialist Critics

Leonard Angel

Leonard J Angel (1945–2022) taught philosophy at Douglas College in New Westminster, British Coumbia, Canada. Although he was long regarded as the

foremost sceptical authority on Stevenson, he clearly was not well versed in Stevenson's work.

In a 1994 book, Angel wrote that Stevenson began his field research in the 1950s and concluded it in the 1970s; he was unaware that Stevenson produced anything after the second edition of *Twenty Cases* in 1974, when in fact Stevenson continued to travel through the 1990s and his main series of case reports was published in the later 1970s and early 1980s.21

Angel has criticized Stevenson at length for his handling of the case of Imad Elawar (see here for details and counter-arguments). Regarding Stevenson's research on physical anomalies in reincarnation cases, Angel accused Stevenson of using 'backwards reasoning' in relating a child's birthmarks to a previous person's wounds. However, this was a generalization from two cases in which Stevenson inferred the proximity of a gunshot from the size of birthmarks; when bullets are fired at close range, the entry wound will be larger than the exit wound, but in the cases at issue the entry-wound birthmark was larger than the exit-wound birthmark.22

Keith Augustine

Keith Augustine, who holds a Master's degree in philosophy, is executive director of an organization called Internet Infidels, which hosts a website called the Secular Web, 'dedicated to defending and promoting a naturalistic worldview in the Internet'.23 Augustine has written about reincarnation chiefly in a blog post and in *The Myth of an Afterlife*, a book he co-edited.24 In his writings, Augustine cites critical secondary works by CTK Chari, D Scott Rogo, Ian Wilson, Leonard Angel, and others without referencing Stevenson's replies to them. As is the case with most materialist sceptics, it is not clear that he is well acquainted with the original case reports.

Paul Edwards

In 1996, philosopher Paul Edwards (1923–2004) published a book, *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*, that sceptic Michael Shermer declared in 2018 to be 'still the best work on the topic'.25 Although Edwards's treatment of Stevenson's work forms only a portion of the book, it includes a comprehensive overview of the critical writings of CTK Chari and D Scott Rogo, among others. Edwards discusses in particular the cases of Jagdish Chandra and Rakesh Gaur.

When Edwards introduces his own criticisms, it is clear that he is assuming a concept of reincarnation drawn in large measure from Theosophy. Since these ideas are at odds with what Stevenson's case studies suggest, they amount to a straw man conception of reincarnation to assail (see below).26

David Lester

Psychologist David Lester devoted 53 pages (five chapters) of his 2005 book *Is There Life after Death?* to reincarnation. He cited sources not commonly referenced by

sceptics, revealing an unusually in-depth understanding of the issues. However, his analysis is far from flawless.

Lester repeatedly wondered why the period between lives is not recalled, apparently unaware that about twenty percent of reported cases include intermission memories.[27] He further stated that Stevenson documented 'many' reincarnation cases involving deception and self-deception.[28] In fact, Stevenson described only seven such cases out of approximately 1600 he then had in his files, less than 0.5% of his dataset.[29]

Lester acknowledged that 'regularities' in cases within and across cultures counted against fraud,[30] but ignored the fact that they also count against social construction, cryptomnesia, paramnesia and other possibilities alternative to reincarnation.[31] He conflated spontaneous reincarnation cases and regressions, using deficiencies of the latter to raise questions about the former. For instance, in his discussion of xenoglossy, he generalized from Sarah Thomason's comments on Gretchen Gottlieb to raise questions about unlearned language in spontaneous cases. Furthermore, he used the Bridey Murphy case as an example of an 'unsound investigation', repeating charges that have long been known to be unfounded.[32]

Champe Ransom

Champe Ransom was a research assistant to Stevenson from 1970 to 1973. While in Stevenson's employ, he prepared a critique of *Twenty Cases*, to which Stevenson penned a reply. Stevenson apparently thought enough of Ransom's critique that he gave it to a later research assistant for training purposes and when Ransom asked if he might share it, Stevenson gave his consent, asking only that his response be provided along with the report.[33]

Rogo learned about Ransom's critique and although he never saw it, spoke with someone (presumably Stevenson's research assistant) who described it to him. This conversation led to Rogo's remarks in *The Search for Yesterday*, to which Stevenson responded in print.[34] Rogo's comments were noticed by Paul Edwards, who obtained a copy of Ransom's report and summarized it in *Reincarnation*, without mentioning Stevenson's responses.[35] Ransom has since reiterated thirteen of his original sixteen points in a publication of his own, again without indicating Stevenson's responses.[36]

From Ransom's recent publication, it is clear that his critique relates to the first edition of *Twenty Cases*, published in 1966. Many of his points refer to the manner in which Stevenson wrote up his cases, although he also comments on deficiencies in investigative methods. Some criticisms turn on hypotheticals, for instance, the allegation that leading questions 'may have been used'. Other criticisms are more weighty, including the possibility of subtle distortions of memory over time, the dangers of reliance on interpreters, and problems attendant with spending only brief periods with witnesses; however, as Stevenson addressed all of these potential pitfalls in the opening chapter of his book, it cannot be said that he was unaware of them before Ransom brought them to his attention. In short, there is reason to consider the sceptical reception of the Ransom Report as somewhat exaggerated.[37]

Michael Shermer

Michael Shermer is on the faculty of Chapman University in Orange, California, where he teaches Skepticism 101. He is the founding editor and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and has promoted his views in a series of books, blogs and podcasts. In his 2018 book *Heavens on Earth,* he maintains that 'one need not read deep in the literature' to see that the identification of a previous person in a reincarnation case is due to '*patternicity*—the tendency to find meaningful patterns in both meaningful and random noise' (his italics).38.

However, it seems clear that Shermer has reached this conclusion precisely because he has not read deeply in the literature. For instance, he asserts that 'if reincarnation is real, it means that souls in search of new bodies are migrating primarily in our around the Indian subcontinent';39 in fact, many cases have been reported from other parts of the world.40 Shermer's comments on the American case of James Leininger reveal a similar ignorance of the research data.41

Sarah Thomason

Sarah Grey Thomason is an American linguist whose critiques of Stevenson's studies of responsive xenoglossy, the command of language unlearnt in the present life, are a staple of the sceptical reaction to Stevenson's work.

In addition to the regression cases of Gretchen Gottlieb and Jensen Jacoby, Thompson has analysed the linguistic evidence in the adult spontaneous case of Uttara Huddar or Sharada.42 Her charges were addressed by Robert F Almeder, who argued that Thomason had missed the main point regarding Gretchen and Jensen: The issue was not whether or not Gretchen and Jensen were fluent – patently they were not; rather, it was why they should display any degree of comprehension and ability to converse in their respective languages.43

Logical Objections

The Physicalist Objection

The starting point for materialist scepticism about reincarnation is the assumption that consciousness is generated by the brain. If that is so, there can be no survival of death, much less reincarnation, unless one postulates a 'soul' that is independent of consciousness. Such soul concepts move away from science into religion; they have no empirical basis and become matters of faith. For this reason, sceptics insist that reincarnation is a religious concept and hold firmly to their conviction that any evidence for it must have a mundane explanation. Paul Edwards devoted a twenty-page chapter to this topic.44

The idea that consciousness arises from brain states has never been established, however. William James, who was much engaged in late Victorian psychical research, proposed that the brain acted as a 'filter' for consciousness rather than being its generator, and in recent years this view has been embraced by thinkers and workers in various fields.45 Keith Augustine and Yonatan Fishman argue there is a great deal of data supporting the physicalist assumption, which therefore ought

to be given the presumption of truth. However, they fail to consider many lines of evidence to the contrary, which when taken into account cause the balance to shift dramatically and raise questions about the legitimacy of the materialist view.46

Population Growth

The apparent difficulty in reconciling reincarnation with population growth is often given as reason for doubt about reincarnation.

Population growth would be a problem if there were a fixed number of 'souls' in circulation and if the length of time between lives were constant. But we do not know that the former assumption holds true and the latter definitely does not: the length of the intermission between lives varies widely in cases with verified past-life memories47 and shorter intermissions mean quicker returns to the flesh. David Bishai demonstrated mathematically how a simple 'circular migration model' could account for population fluctuations and growth sufficient to cover current trends.48 Furthermore, new 'souls' theoretically might enter the system in a variety of ways – they might be created as required, they might once have been nonhuman animals, et cetera.49

Previous Lives Not Recalled

Paul Edwards asserts that if reincarnation were a fact, previous lives would be recalled, and that since people do not remember previous lives, reincarnation cannot be true. Strictly speaking, this argument is predicated upon a fallacious assumption, because a considerable number of people actually have reported past-life memories. However, in *Reincarnation,* Edwards dismissed all such claims as 'spurious' and considered 'bodily continuity and memory' to be 'the two major constituents of personal identity'.50 Even this is not a compelling reason to dismiss the possibility of reincarnation, however: JME McTaggart and other philosophers have pointed out that there is no reason reincarnation might not occur in the absence of past-life memory.51

Researcher James Matlock suggests that the reason more of us do not recall previous lives is a subconscious resistance to allowing the memories to surface in our conscious awareness, in order to protect us psychologically and allow us to get on with our present lives.52 Matlock points out that reincarnation does not need to entail the return of the entirety of personal identity; in fact, cases of past-life memory suggest that what is involved is merely the influence of previous personalities on present personalities.53

Cultural Variation

Although reincarnation cases have been reported from Europe and the Americas,54 there are many fewer cases in Western than in Asian countries. This is problematical for Paul Edwards, who termed it 'the problem of Western children'. Edwards's explanation is that, 'In the West, we do not have a host of witnesses with an ardent belief in reincarnation who will manufacture the necessary "proofs"', and he ridiculed Stevenson for suggesting that Western accounts had been suppressed.55

Other sceptics have pointed out that not only the number of cases, but many of their features vary from culture to culture, even within Asia. Ian Wilson is troubled by 'inconsistencies' in intermission length, which do not allow him to determine whether or not there is a 'waiting period' between lives.56 Wilson evidently presumes that if reincarnation occurs, the process must be the same for everyone. However, as Matlock observes, there is a lack of uniformity in every department of life; he wonders why one should expect reincarnation to be otherwise.

Keith Augustine and David Lester also are concerned with variations in reincarnation case patterns, which they suggest are related to beliefs in a given culture (see Social Construction).57 However, cultural variations are not as tightly related to beliefs as they imagine. The Druze people believe that reincarnation occurs instantaneously at death, the 'soul' passing immediately into the body of a child being born, but the intermission period reported in Druze cases is six to eight months.58

There is a tighter association between beliefs in the possibility of changing sex between lives and claims of sex change than on other variables: In cultures with a belief that this is impossible, no such cases have been reported. But there are also universal and near-universal patterns in the cases that sceptics ignore: Everywhere children who speak about previous lives begin to do so in early childhood and the memories of many subjects fade by middle childhood. Boys outnumber girls two-to-one cross-culturally.59

Stevenson speculated that many of the case patterns related to beliefs may arise because beliefs held in life are carried over into death, then influence behaviour during the intermission period. If one is convinced it is impossible to change sex between lives, one will avoid having this happen. If one believes one ought to return to a relative in the maternal or paternal line, as in tribal cultures with unilineal social structures, one will act to bring that about.60 Although sceptics are unlikely to be convinced by this idea, it furnishes an explanation for the loose association between beliefs and key case features.

Lack of Theory

Sceptics sometimes complain that proponents of reincarnation do not have a theory about how it works. Matlock notes that the problem is not that there is no theory of reincarnation (several proposals have been advanced), but that there is no generally accepted account of the process.61

This lack of theoretical consensus permits sceptics to introduce straw man conceptions that they find easy to refute. According to Edwards, reincarnation carries with it 'a host of collateral assumptions', including the idea that 'pure mind' might migrate to Earth from other planets. After varying lengths of time, minds enter a mother's womb at 'the conception of a new embryo'. Edwards maintains that if Stevenson's reports are evidence of reincarnation, 'they must be evidence for' these sorts of assumptions.62

Edwards does not explain why Stevenson's reports 'must' conform to his concept of reincarnation, which is derived from Theosophy.63 In fact, Stevenson's research

provides a very different picture of the process. In *Signs of Reincarnation*, Matlock followed the case data in developing his theory of reincarnation. The cases provide no evidence for migration to Earth from other planets and in many of them, reincarnation occurred during the gestation period. The cases suggest that what reincarnates is a stream of consciousness continuous with embodied life. Matlock understands reincarnation to be the possession of a new body by a discarnate consciousness stream, which might take place at any time from conception onward.64

Edwards makes a great deal of what he calls reincarnation's 'modus operandi problem'.65 Here he is concerned with the 'transmission' of physical traits from one life to another, as reflected in the appearance of birthmarks and birth defects linked to wounds and scars on a deceased person's body, as in the case of Corliss Chotkin Jr. In Edwards's estimation, there is 'no conceivable way' in which this might happen. He critiques Stevenson's conception of a subtle body or 'psychophore', which would convey physical impressions across lives. Matlock proposes that physical carryovers are psychogenic, produced by the reincarnating mind influencing its new body.66 No matter what Edwards might think of these proposals, clearly he overstates the situation in claiming that there is 'no conceivable way' for physical traits to carry over.

Another issue involved in reincarnation theory is karma. Edwards and fellow sceptic Michael Shermer portray karma as going hand in glove with reincarnation. Despite variations in 'details about what, exactly, reincarnates, when, where, and why', reincarnation implies a cycle 'that involves an ethical/justice component of karma … based on cumulative virtues and vices', Shermer says.67 By linking reincarnation with karma, Shermer assumes that when he questions karma, he is questioning reincarnation. However, there are belief systems throughout the world which posit reincarnation without mentioning karma. These non-Indic ideas are consistent with Stevenson's reincarnation cases, which furnish no evidence for traditional ideas of karma as a moral law of cause and effect.68

Anomalous Cases

'Anomalous cases' are cases that vary in fundamental ways from standard reincarnation cases and challenge a simple concept of reincarnation. For Edwards and for BN Moore, who analysed the case of Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne, cases with intermissions of less than nine months are anomalous cases. Sujith was born only about one month after the person whose life he recalled died, which Edwards and Moore consider fatal to his case.

However, if reincarnation is merely the possession of a body by a spirit, as Matlock suggests, reincarnation might occur at any point during the gestation period. Edwards approvingly cites Moore's remark that 'proof of reincarnation would require disproof of orthodox biology'.69 However, Matlock's theory does not entail rejection of accepted knowledge of how babies come to be; it only adds a dimension to the process.

For Keith Augustine, 'reincarnation cannot make sense of claims to be the incarnation of a deceased person who died after the current personality was

born'.[70] Stevenson was uncertain whether to classify this kind of case as reincarnation or possession. Matlock conceives of reincarnation as possession by its nature, meaning that in principle it might occur after birth as well as before birth. When it occurs after birth, reincarnation requires the displacement of the consciousness stream with which the person was born, so Matlock terms this phenomenon replacement reincarnation. In replacement reincarnation, the possession lasts until the end of the person's physical life, in contrast to cases of temporary or transient possession, in which the original personality remains in control of the body.[71]

These types of anomalous case seem to German sceptic Heiner Schwenke to suggest 'overlapping lives', because there are two physical bodies in existence simultaneously.[72] In cases with intermissions of less than nine months, gestation began before the previous person died, and with replacement reincarnation, a person was living before the previous person died. However, as Matlock points out in reply to Schwenke, 'from a spiritual point of view there is no overlap, only a sequential possession of a given body'.[73]

Another type of anomalous case is represented by reports of one person reincarnating in multiple people at the same time. These reports come from Tibet, West Africa, and the first nations of western Canada, but in none are there claims by more than one person to recall the same previous life. The identifications are made on the basis of dreams, perceived similarities in behavioural and physical traits and in personality. In the absence of memory claims, it is impossible to know how seriously to take these reports, which may be no more than social construction.[74] The reincarnation cases studied by Stevenson include past-life memories, and to to include with them reports of identifications not based on memories – in order to cast doubts on reincarnation, as Keith Augustine does[75] – may not be justified.

Augustine also credits claims of two distinct personalities reincarnating in one body at the same time.[76] The example he gives of this phenomenon is taken from D Scott Rogo[77] and is based on a misreading of Stevenson's case of Imad Elawar. What Rogo assumes to be an indication of merger of personalities may be nothing more exotic than two people independently recalling the same event.[78]

Psychosocial Arguments

Patternicity

Psychosocial – also called 'sociocultural' – arguments are those that ascribe reincarnation cases to the intersection of psychology and social processes.

A common sceptical charge is that apparent correspondences between past and present lives in reincarnation cases come about by chance but are perceived as consequential due to what Michael Shermer calls 'patternicity'[79] and Leonard Angel, the 'subjective illusion of significance'.[80]

In illustrating the concept, Shermer writes about 'misperceiving the natural clustering of randomness as more significant than it is', but cites no case

examples.81

Angel similarly argues that reincarnation researchers have not presented evidence of correspondences beyond chance. He tries to demonstrate this by comparing himself to Stevenson, but the supposed congruities are greatly overstated. Angel asserts that he and Stevenson both have a brother and a sister, whereas Stevenson had two brothers and a sister. Angel says both wrote four books, whereas Stevenson authored fifteen books.82

In a book review of Stevenson's *Reincarnation and Biology,* which deals with birthmarks and other congenital physical anomalies,83 Angel argues that Stevenson is exaggerating the closeness in the location of birthmarks in comparison to wounds.84 But he makes too much of this, 'because the wounds were inflicted on one body and the birthmarks appear on another body of much smaller size.... The correspondence can only be approximate, in relation to anatomical landmarks, and by this standard, the resemblance between wounds and birthmarks typically is quite remarkable'.85

There is no doubt that patternicity is a real psychological phenomenon; there is a strong tendency to perceive meaning in random collections of data. However, reincarnation researchers see in the writings of sceptics an altogether different psychological tendency, that is, failure to attend to and appropriately interpret data, due to preconceptions and biases.

Paramnesia and Cryptomnesia

A major part of the sceptical critique concerns potential memory errors and distortions on the part of witnesses, which they think investigators have missed. CTK Chari makes much of this, emphasizing the possibility of paramnesia, a term used loosely to indicate any distortion and inaccuracy in memory, and cryptomnesia (source amnesia), which concerns things to which a person has been exposed but has consciously forgotten. Chari links paramnesia and cryptomnesia to cultural variation and social construction.

David Lester counts cryptomnesia as a possible explanation for apparent past-life memory, although he acknowledges that 'when the two families are widely separated and not known to each other, this seems unlikely'.86 The potential for memory errors through cryptomnesia and paramnesia are further reduced in cases with records made before memory claims were verified.

For more on paramnesia and cryptomnesia in relation to reincarnation cases, see here.

Social Construction

Social construction refers to the way witnesses allegedly shape a case's development in line with their beliefs.

Sceptics have often used the case of Rakesh Gaur as an example of social construction, but the evidence is less than clear-cut. Satwant Pasricha and David Barker investigated this case together and reached different conclusions. Barker

thought that the identification of the previous person was made by chance, and once made, the memories of informants changed to support this identification. Pasricha pointed out that all informants agreed on three things Rakesh said before contact was made with the previous family – that he was from a certain town, had been a carpenter, and had been electrocuted – and these were sufficient to identify the previous person, even without a name. Sceptics routinely cite Barker on this case, ignoring Pasricha's alternative point of view.87

CTK Chari wrote a good deal about how beliefs might influence cases. He tried to show that information about some cases could have dispersed widely, thereby acting as models for other cases.88 However, Pasricha discovered that Indians unfamiliar with actual past-life memory cases held erroneous ideas about their characteristics.89

In an on-the-ground survey, Barker and Pasricha found that information about cases normally spreads over very short distances, with cases in one village usually not known to the inhabitants of the next. Cases that were more widely known had unusually dramatic features and were not typical of the average case. Furthermore, many cases had unique characteristics that could not be explained on the diffusion hypothesis, and people unfamiliar with cases did not have a realistic idea of what they involved.90

For more on social construction in relation to reincarnation cases, see here.

Parental Guidance

American psychiatrist Eugene Brody argued that a child's past-life memory claims reflected early childhood problems. Frequent crying and 'feeding difficulties' signalled 'partially repressed impulses, wishes or ideas' on a child's part. Attempting to come to terms with her perceived inadequacies in parenting, a mother turned to her culture's reincarnation beliefs for support. Her convictions shaped the way she treated her child and he adopted her views, so that he grew up imagining that he had lived before.91

The notion that parents shape their children's past-life memory claims is common among sceptics. Keith Augustine, citing Leonard Angel and CTK Chari, states that 'reincarnationist families' often 'speculate on which deceased person is reincarnated in which child', unwittingly encouraging 'suggestible children to mold normal childhood fantasies into "memories" of past lives'.92

In fact, Stevenson discovered parents who were convinced their children were Mahatma Gandhi and John F. Kennedy and brought them up to believe that they had been these men.93 Augustine appears to have these cases in mind when he declares that some cases are 'undeniably' 'artificially created'94 but the sources he cites do not uniformly show this.95

Some sceptics have stated that children were 'coached' by their parents. Ian Wilson points to cases in which coaching was alleged by dissident witnesses. This allegations may or may not have foundation, however, and Wilson concedes that there are in any event 'considerable numbers of [Stevenson's] cases where such an

interpretation cannot be justified'.96 Nonetheless, Augustine cites Wilson in support of his contention that 'the most obvious' explanation for the cases was that 'parents living in a society where reincarnation is widely accepted have coached their children to tell tales of remembering the former life'.97

For more on parental guidance, see here.

Childhood Fantasy

Wilson observed that in many of Stevenson's cases, children spoke about previous lives in superior socioeconomic circumstances. Wilson thought the children might be imagining better lives for themselves or 'poor families may have tried to pass off their offspring as reincarnations of dead offspring of the rich'.98

This argument has strongly resonated with the sceptical community. Edwards says of cases with great socioeconomic disparities, 'Wilson not implausibly suggests that in such cases the "memories" are produced by a wish for better living conditions'.99 Augustine, also echoing Wilson, suggests that parents coached their children to tell tales of past lives 'often of a higher caste, in order to obtain better living conditions' for them100.

There is a problem with Wilson's analysis, however – a rather profound problem, given the sceptical emphasis on social construction as a theory for the cases. The cases with the greatest socioeconomic disparities are from India and Sri Lanka, where according to Hindu and Buddhist doctrine, a previous life in better circumstances would imply a karmic demotion into the present life. This is not something a child's parents would likely encourage or promote for personal gain, even if their child were to assert it. This sceptical interpretation derives from a projection of Western values onto Asian cultures.101

CTK Chari suggested that children's past-life memories in India might serve the same purpose as imaginary playmates in Western countries. Anthropologist and reincarnation researcher Antonia Mills looked into this possibility, but found no overlap among these experiences. In addition to being phenomenologically distinct, they appear to serve very different psychological functions.102

Problems with Psychosocial Arguments

A basic problem with all psychosocial arguments is that in many cases, investigation has shown the children's memories to be accurate, even when the previous family was unknown to the subject's family. However we account for such cases, they cannot rightly be called fantasies.103 Parental imposition of identity cannot explain how the parents obtained the information to shape their children's memory claims and behaviour. Nor can it cannot account for children's strong and persistent identification with their claimed past-life identities. Finally, it cannot not be reconciled with concerted attempts by some parents to suppress their children's memories.104

This last factor in particular has been overlooked by sceptics. Asian parents have various reasons for wanting to suppress their children's memories – among them a

myth that such children are fated to die young and fears that the previous families will try to take them away.[105] Pasricha examined the attitudes of mothers in a large sample of Indian cases and found that they shifted when the child's memories were confirmed: at that point, more mothers began to suppress their children's talk, out of fear of losing them to the previous families, a dramatically different response than imagined by sceptics.[106]

Methodological Critiques

'Anecdotal' Research

Sceptics routinely dismiss the case studies of Stevenson and other researchers as 'anecdotal', as if investigators were merely collecting folk tales. In a long article on Stevenson in the online *Skeptic's Dictionary*, Robert Todd Carroll repeatedly refers to Stevenson's cases as 'stories'. He says, 'Ian Stevenson was a psychiatrist who gave up scientific medicine to collect past-life experience stories (PLEs) that he thought provided evidence for reincarnation.' 'Stevenson collected stories not only from India and Sri Lanka, but from the tribal peoples of northwest North America, Lebanon, Brazil, Turkey, Thailand, Burma, and West Africa'.[107]

Later in his article, Carroll criticizes various aspects of Stevenson's investigative approach, implicitly recognising that Stevenson's cases are not, after all, simply 'stories', but rather, are closely investigated memory claims and related experiences. For Stevenson this research was a complex activity. He interviewed multiple witnesses on both the present and previous life sides of a case, documented behavioural and physical traits, and sought out supporting written records such as police and medical reports.

James Matlock distinguishes between anecdotal 'accounts', a term used for uninvestigated memory claims about which one must reserve judgement, and the investigated reports of Stevenson and his colleagues, which he terms 'cases'. 'Labelling an investigated case "anecdotal" is a rhetorical effort to minimize the threat to materialist orthodoxy', Matlock argues.[108]

Use of Interpreters

One of the most common complaints about Stevenson's field research is his reliance on interpreters, 'whose own biases, inadequacies, and needs might influence the direction or accuracy of the testimony obtained'.[109] Critics appear to assume that Stevenson relied on tourist interpreters; in fact, the majority were academic colleagues, who understood the scientific need for accuracy.[110] Another reason to think the sceptical concern with interpreters may be exaggerated is that the first people to investigate cases usually were native to the cultures in question. Although cases with records made before the verification of memory claims are rare, among 32 published cases with prior written records, only two required interpreters in making those records.[111]

Brevity of Interviews

Another common criticism of Stevenson is that he spent only a few days interviewing witnesses on a given case.[112] Matlock points out that these few days do not constitute the entirety of Stevenson's involvement with a case. Stevenson worked with local colleagues, who gathered information before and after his visits, and he returned to cases repeatedly over periods of years to check on witnesses' memory reliability and monitor the subjects' development before writing up his reports.[113]

Leading Questions

Stevenson is sometimes accused of asking leading questions of witnesses, although there is little direct evidence of this.

In his critique of the first edition of *Twenty Cases*, Champe Ransom phrases the charge in hypothetical terms – 'leading questions may have been used, cues may have been given' – whereas in summarizing his critique for Paul Edwards' *Reincarnation*, he drops the cautionary language and states, 'leading questions were asked'.[114] Keith Augustine picked up the latter source, citing it as support for a generalization about 'investigators' use of leading questions when interviewing witnesses'[115].

In the same place, Augustine references Leonard Angel's analysis of the Imad Elawar case, in which Stevenson was able to record witnesses' statements before attempting to verify them, also a criticism made by D Scott Rogo of the way Stevenson handled an interview in the case of Mounzer Haïdar.[116]

Stephen Braude alleges that 'many' of a case subject's statements were 'elicited from the subjects through direct questions—for example, of the form "Do you know who this is?" or "What was the name of [the previous personality's] uncle?"'[117] But questions of this sort were not asked by Stevenson or his colleagues. Rather, they were asked by onlookers when the subjects met members of the previous family, putative recognitions that Stevenson discounted as evidence because he too regarded them as leading.[118]

General Incompetence

Rogo charged malfeasance not only in the case of Mounzer Haïdar but also in the cases of Mallika Aroumougam, Imad Elawar and Uttara Huddar (Sharada), covered below. However, he admitted that these criticisms were all 'very trivial'.[119]

Ransom's litany of faults with *Twenty Cases* includes issues such as 'Sometimes statements are presented as facts rather than as testimony. For example, "They did not see any room but the living room" is stated instead of "*According to B*, they did not see any room but the living room"'. (Stevenson gives the names of witnesses in a separate column in his list of statements.) Another is, 'Fairly often the case reports present the conclusions of a witness rather than the specific observational data that led to the witness's conclusion'.[120]

Problems of this nature relate to the way Stevenson wrote up his cases, not to his investigatory methods, yet sceptics routinely cite Ransom's report as an exposé of

Stevenson's allegedly lax research standards. The last of Ransom's thirteen points concerns witness's suggestibility and bias, but since these concerns were addressed by Stevenson himself in the first chapter of his monograph,[121] he cannot be said to have overlooked them before they were brought to his attention.[122]

Stephen Braude draws attention to what he calls 'the Problem of Investigative Intricacy'. He considers that investigating reincarnation cases is 'typically a complicated and messy business' and that 'it typically requires considerable detective and interpretive work merely to identify the previous personality'.[123] But this is not so. In many Asian cases, children specify precise details, including the names of people and places, that permit their parents to trace the previous persons rather easily. Even in Western cases, the identification is not always difficult. It took the mother of Rylann O'Bannion no more than five minutes searching online to identify Jennifer Schultz once Rylann remembered dying in a plane crash, given that she had previously said she might have lived in Louisiana.[124]

In an essay written for a Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies (BICS) competition, Michael Nahm emphasizes the evidentiary value of cases with documentation of a subject's statements before confirmation (see here for a review), which render moot questions about the reliability of witness memory of the events in question.[125] Nonetheless, Keith Augustine asserts[126] without support, that 'this would be impressive only if normal/conventional sources of information' were absent in these cases, but 'we already know' that this is not so.[127]

For more on supposed researcher ineptitude, see here.

Researcher Fraud

Augustine says, 'investigators themselves have sometimes misrepresented their cases in order to bolster a reincarnationist interpretation of them, misleadingly representing suppositions as facts so as to construct a coherent story about a past life … and obscuring or omitting evidence that contradicts such stories'.[128] In support of the first part of this contention, Augustine cites Angel's claim that Stevenson is misleading in the way he tabulates data in *Reincarnation and Biology*[129] and Ransom's charge that some aspects of Stevenson's reporting could have been better handled.[130] In support of the second part, Augustine cites Angel on Imad Elawar and Rogo on Mallika Aroumougam.

Although Stevenson was never accused of fraud, others have been. Paul Edwards embraced Fraser Nicol's suggestion of fraud on the part of Indian lawyer KKN Sahay, who published his son Jagdish Chandra's past-life memories before he set about verifying them,[131] on no evident basis other than Nicol's inability to think of a better explanation for Jagdish's accurate memories. A Sri Lankan sceptic suggested investigators had collaborated on fraud in the case of Gnanatilleka Baddewithana. Michael Sudduth accused Bruce and Andrea Leininger of having distorted the timeline of events in *Soul Survivor* to support their favoured narrative in the case of their son James Leininger.[132]

Matlock observes that the unsubstantiated charge of fraud 'has nothing going for it except that it does not require us to take reincarnation seriously as a possibility'.133

Living-Agent Psi

In order to explain the veridical knowledge some children possess about deceased people and past events, critics within parapsychology and parapsychologically-attuned philosophers have turned to extrasensory perception (ESP) or psi. CTK Chari, Louisa Rhine and D Scott Rogo all thought that ESP might account for at least some of children's apparent past-life memories134. Stephen Braude and Michael Sudduth broadened ESP into a theoretically unlimited living-agent psi or superpsi.135

However, the evidence for psi-mediated acquisition of information about previous lives is not very strong. Only a few children have demonstrated ESP abilities in other contexts.136 Moreover, children with veridical past-life memories not only recall things about past lives, they identify with deceased persons, display personalities similar to them, exhibit emotions appropriate to them, act like them, and recognize people and places related to them – none of which are characteristic of psi either in spontaneous experience or laboratory experiment.137

Recently, Braude has changed his mind about the importance of superpsi as a challenge to the reincarnation interpretation of the case data and now thinks more attention should be given to the possibility of witnesses' memory errors and other such difficulties, owing to the 'Problem of Investigative Intricacy' (see under General Incompetence).138

Stevenson reached the same conclusion years ago. In *Twenty Cases* (1966), he considered at length the possibility of what he termed 'ESP plus personation' as an interpretation of the case phenomena, but by the third volume of his Cases of the Reincarnation Type series (1980), he had come to believe that the only realistic alternative to reincarnation was some 'normal' channel of communication between the previous and present families. Nonetheless, he had found no good evidence of fraud, cryptomnesia or paramnesia and still concluded that reincarnation was the most statisfactory explanation for the cases he had studied.139

Criticisms by Case

Edward Ryall

Edward Ryall's childhood memories of a previous life persisted into adulthood, although he did not write them down until he was in his seventies, first in a newspaper competition and later in a book. Stevenson contributed an introduction and an appendix to Ryall's book.140 In the appendix, he listed verifications of several items Ryall claimed to recall. As Stevenson continued to research the case, he came to a different view of it, however. He was unable to verify the existence of any of the regular people Ryall wrote about, and in his final report, he noted several anachronisms and other errors. He concluded that Ryall's story contained a mixture

of past-life memory and fantasy and that his book was better considered as historical novel than a past-life memoir.141

After Ryall's book was published in 1974 it was immediately subjected to close scrutiny by psychical researcher Renee Haynes,142 architectural historian Michael Green, and Ian Wilson,143 who exposed the problems with the narrative well before Stevenson acknowledged them. Paul Edwards remarks that 'Stevenson evidently invested so much emotion and time in this case that he cannot let go of it'.144 Stevenson's premature endorsement of Ryall's apparent past-life memories greatly damaged his reputation.145

Gnanatilleka Baddewithana

This Sri Lankan case was first investigated by a team led by HSS Nissanka, who made written records of the girl's memory claims before verifying them and conducted one of the few controlled recognitions of people from the previous life that researchers have been able to arrange.146 Stevenson reinvestigated the case and included his report in *Twenty Cases*.147

This was the first well-publicized Sri Lankan case and objections to Nissanka's work were raised by a variety of interests. Buddhists proclaimed that reincarnation did not need to be proven. Marxists objected that resources would be better directed to tackling starvation. Christians demanded Nissanka's book be removed from school libraries. A local sceptic speculated that parental coaching and investigator fraud might account for the memory claims.

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Imad Elawar

Imad Elawar was a Lebanese Druze boy Stevenson encountered before his past-life memories had been investigated and the life he recalled was known. Stevenson verified Imad's memory claims, but not without difficulty, because his parents first presented their interpretation of what Imad had said rather than what he had actually said.148 Leonard Angel argued that Stevenson was selective in what he chose to believe and that the identification therefore was contrived. In a similar vein, D Scott Rogo charged that Stevenson had misrepresented some of Imad's statements to make them seem more applicable to the previous person than they were in fact.149

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Jagdish Chandra

Jagdish Chandra was the son of Indian lawyer KKN Sahay, who investigated this case and published his report of it in the 1920s.150 Stevenson later wrote about it in the first volume of his Cases of Reincarnation Type series in 1975.151 In a review of Stevenson's book, J Fraser Nicol speculated that the young Jagdish could have learned about the previous life from his parents or from a family servant and accused Sahay of contriving the case (see Researcher Fraud).152

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

James Leininger

James Leininger's past-life memories were first investigated by his father and described by his parents in *Soul Survivor*.153 They were then followed up by Jim Tucker.154 This is one of the richest and evidentially strongest American reincarnation cases.

Sceptical push-back began even before the publication of the Leiningers' book, following their first media appearances to discuss it. Michael Sudduth charged that the Leiningers distorted the timeline of events to make the case appear solved, when it was not. Sudduth also criticized Tucker's investigation and reports about the case.155

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Jenny Cockell

Jenny Cockell self-reported her past-life memories of Mary Sutton and her search for her former children in *Yesterday's Children*.156 Details of her report were later confirmed by Mary Rose Barrington. The veridical nature of Cockell's memories notwithstanding, American sceptic Joe Nickell argued that they were best explained as the fantasies of a child trying to escape reality. Ian Wilson appeared to be more impressed, but thought that haunting or possession had not been ruled as explanations.

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Kemal Atasoy

This Turkish case was investigated and reported by Jürgen Keil, who made written notes of Kemal's memories before identifying the person to whom they referred.157 Vitor Visoni took issue with some of Keil's methods, such as having chosen not to use a tape recorder when interviewing Kemal. However, he conceded that the case is nevertheless a strong one.158

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Mallika Aroumougam

This rare South Indian case was studied by Stevenson in the early 1960s and reported in *Twenty Cases*.159 Mallika made only a few statements and recognitions pertaining to the previous life, all in response to articles, places, and people with which she came into contact.

CTK Chari expressed doubts about the case, partly because it was unusual in its region and because Mallika's father and grandfather, who had not witnessed any of her statements and behaviours, did not credit it.160 D Scott Rogo embraced Chari's criticisms and faulted Stevenson for having used one witness as interpreter for another, without having made clear he had done this.161

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Mounzer Haïdar

This Lebanese Druze case162 is one of four in which D Scott Rogo thought he detected carelessness in Stevenson's methods.163 Mounzer remembered having been shot and killed during the 1958 Lebanese civil war. He had a birthmark on his abdomen, 'to the right of the umbilicus and slightly above it', which Stevenson sketched. When he later spoke to the mother of the person Mounzer recalled having been, he asked her where her son had been shot, and she pointed to the right side of her abdomen. Stevenson then showed her his sketch and she confirmed that was where he had been wounded.

Rogo argued that Stevenson should have asked the woman to draw the place the bullet had entered her son's body before showing her his sketch. He considered Stevenson's failure to do so to be evidence that Stevenson sometimes led his witnesses.

Pollock Twins

This is one of the best-known British reincarnation cases. It was investigated by both Stevenson and Ian Wilson, who reached different conclusions regarding its interpretation. The Pollock twins recalled the lives of sisters who had died together when a crazed driver ran them down as they walked along a road.

Wilson expressed doubts about the case, mainly because the girls appear to have returned to the same family and so the twins would have had opportunity to learn about their sisters by normal means.

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Rakesh Gaur

This case was investigated and reported by Satwant Pasricha and David Barker, who came to different conclusions regarding it164 (see under Social Construction). Barker's constructionist interpretation has often been cited by sceptics.

David Lester states that 'Pasricha too could not accept a reincarnation hypothesis … preferring instead to suggest that the boy had extremely well-developed ESP'.165 This, however, was not Pasricha's conclusion. Although she acknowledged ESP as a possibility, in a later paper she made clear her preference for a reincarnation interpretation of the case.166

D Scott Rogo opines that the problems faced by Barker and Pasricha in their investigation gives 'an idea of the confusion that may have existed in many of Dr. Stevenson's cases'.167

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Shanti Devi

This case from the middle twentieth century was widely reported in Western countries as well as in India. Shanti Devi's memory claims were investigated by a government committee, which accompanied the girl on her first trip to the place she claimed to have lived before. This was a controversial case in India at the time, although no serious attempt was made to debunk it. One sceptic declared it worthless after interviewing Shanti, but without having tried to verify her memory claims.

Full details can be found here.

Sujith Lakmal Jayaratne

Stevenson investigated this case and reported it in the second volume of his Cases of the Reincarnation Type series.168 Sixteen statements about the previous life were recorded in writing before they were verified.

However, philosopher Brook Noel Moore, building on a set of hypothetical assumptions, tried to show how social construction could account for Sujith's memories. Moore considered the fact that Sujith was born only about a month after the person whose life he recalled died to be a fatal flaw in the case169 (see under Anomalous Cases). His arguments were endorsed by Paul Edwards.170

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

Uttara Huddar (Sharada)

Uttara Huddar was 32 when she began to experience episodes during which she would lose awareness of her present life and claim to be a woman named Sharada, living in Bengal a century and a half earlier. Sharada acted the part and spoke an archaic regional dialect of Bengali, rather than Uttara's native Marathi. This case was studied independently by Stevenson and VV Akolkar.171

Sceptics have focused on Sharada's Bengali, raising questions about whether Uttara could have learnt the language sufficiently well to portray Sharada. D Scott Rogo cited Akolkar's then-unpublished report as providing 'considerable evidence' that Uttara had learnt Bengali well enough to read a school primer (Stevenson had stated that she could read only a few words). As it turned out, this evidence consisted solely of a statement from a former classmate that he and she had once studied the language together; Akolkar could find no evidence that Uttara had taken formal classes in Bengali.

Additionally, Stephen Braude has proposed that the case may be explained by a combination of dissociation, superpsi and a latent linguistic ability akin to abilities that emerge in dissociative states.

Details and counter-arguments can be found here.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. These controversies are reviewed by Matlock (in prepration) in book that deals with Stevenson's work and reactions to it.
- 2. Braude (1979, 1986).
- 3. Braude (2003), 306.
- 4. See Braude (2017).
- 5. See Braude (2016).
- 6. Braude (2021b), 32-33.
- 7. Braude (2022b, 31-32.
- 8. Chari (1962a, 1962b, 1967, 1978).
- 9. Stevenson (1966).
- 10. Murphy (1973), 261.
- 11. Stevenson (1973).
- 12. Matlock (1990), 253.
- 13. Lester (2005), 152.
- 14. Rhine (1966).
- 15. Matlock (in prep.), citing Stevenson (1967).
- 16. Stevenson (1986) responded to Rogo's charges, to which Rogo (1986) replied and Stevenson (1986b) once again responded (Matlock, 1990, 248-50).
- 17. Matlock (1990), 253. For a brief description of Carington's theory, see the entry on Gardner Murphy, above.
- 18. Sudduth levelled his charges in a series of blog posts as well as a journal article (2021). He was countered by Tucker (2002) and Matlock (2002).
- 19. Wilson (1982, 23, cited in Matlock (1990), 248.
- 20. Matlock (1990), 247.
- 21. Angel (1994), 273-74.
- 22. Angel (2002); Matlock (2019), 105. For an extended discussion of Angel's criticisms of Stevenson's work, see Matlock (2019), 103-6.
- 23. https://infidels.org/contact-us/about-us/
- 24. Augustine (2015), 23-27; Augustine (n.d.).
- 25. Shermer (2018), 102.

- 26. Almeder (1997); Matlock (2019), 110. See Matlock (2023, 83-86) for a more extended examination of Edward's critique of Stevenson's work.
- 27. Matlock (2019), 167.
- 28. Lester (2005), 108.
- 29. Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988).
- 30. Lester (2005), 108-9.
- 31. Matlock (forthcoming).
- 32. Lester (2005), 129. For a discussion of debunking attempts of the Bridey Murphy case, see here.
- 33. Stevenson (1986); Matlock (in prep.).
- 34. Rogo (1985), 79; Stevenson (1986).
- 35. Edwards (1996), 275-77.
- 36. Ransom (2015), 571-74.
- 37. Matlock (2019), 106-7.
- 38. Shermer (2018), 100.
- 39. Shermer (2018), 98, 100.
- 40. Matlock (2019), 103, 110.
- 41. Matlock (2019), 103, 108, 134-35; (2022a), 101.
- 42. Thomason (1987, 1996).
- 43. Almeder (1988).
- 44. Edwards (1996), 279-99.
- 45. See, for instance, books edited by Edward Kelly and colleagues (Kelly, Crabtree & Marshall (2015); Kelly & Marshall (2021).
- 46. Augustine & Fishman (2015); Matlock (2019), 246.
- 47. Matlock (2019), 180-81.
- 48. Bishai (2000).
- 49. Matlock (2019), 111.
- 50. Edwards (1996), 233-37.
- 51. McTaggart (1906).
- 52. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 261-63; Matlock (2019), 251.
- 53. Matlock (2019), 251-52.
- 54. For a review of European cases, see here, and for American cases, see here. Stevenson (2003) published a book about European cases.
- 55. Edwards (1996), 268.
- 56. Wilson (1981).
- 57. Augustine (2015), 26-27; Lester (2005), 151.
- 58. Matlock (2019), 187.
- 59. Matlock (2019), 182-83.
- 60. Stevenson (2001), 180.
- 61. Matlock (2019), 44.
- 62. Edwards (1996), 255.
- 63. Matlock (2019), 110.
- 64. Matlock (2019). See Matlock (forthcoming) for a fuller response to Edwards on this issue.
- 65. Edwards (1996), 139-40.
- 66. Matlock (2019), 158-59.
- 67. Shermer (2018), 98.
- 68. Matlock (2019), 159-61.

- 69. Edwards (1996, 259), citing Moore (1981), 178.
- 70. Augustine (2015), 27.
- 71. Matlock (2019), 174-77.
- 72. Schwenke (2021), 381-83.
- 73. Matlock (2021), 401.
- 74. Matlock (2019), 265-67.
- 75. Augustine (2015), 27.
- 76. Augustine (2015), 27.
- 77. Rogo (1985), 62-64.
- 78. See here.
- 79. Shermer (2018), 100.
- 80. Angel (2015).
- 81. Shermer (2018), 100.
- 82. Angel (2015), 576-77; Matlock (2019), 103.
- 83. Stevenson (1997).
- 84. Angel (2002, 2015). See also Shermer (2018, 101).
- 85. Matlock (2019), 149.
- 86. Lester (2005), 129.
- 87. Pasricha & Barker (1981).
- 88. Chari (1962b).
- 89. Pasricha (1990).
- 90. Barker & Pasricha (1979); Pasricha (1990, 1992).
- 91. Brody (1979), 78-79.
- 92. Augustine (2015), 25.
- 93. Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988).
- 94. Augustine (2022), 380.
- 95. Augustine cites Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988, 22-26) on the Kennedy imposition but also Chari (1978, 317-19) and Cook et al. (1983. 133-34) describing unsolved cases which may have some fantasy elements, but which do not suggest any sort of parental guidance.
- 96. Wilson (1981), 60; (1982), 23.
- 97. Augustine (2015), 25.
- 98. Wilson (1982), 21. This sentence is omitted from the 1981 edition of the book, page 58.
- 99. Edwards (1996), 260.
- 100. Augustine (2015), 25.
- 101. Stevenson (2001), 251-53; Matlock (2019), 184.
- 102. Mills (2003).
- 103. Matlock (2019), 46.
- 104. Stevenson (2001), 95-96; Matlock (2019), 196-97.
- 105. Stevenson & Chadha (1990).
- 106. Pasricha (2011).
- 107. Carroll (2013).
- 108. Matlock (2019), 46, 91.
- 109. Braude (2021b), 726-77.
- 110. Matlock (2019), 99.
- 111. See here.

- 112. Augustine (2015, 24) says this, quoting from Edwards (1996, 276), in which place Ransom notes that Stevenson typically spent only one and a half to four days on a visit.
- 113. Matlock (2019), 107.
- 114. Ransom (2015), 573; Edwards (1996), 276.
- 115. Augustine (2015), 24.
- 116. Stevenson (1980).
- 117. Braude (2021a), 30.
- 118. Stevenson (2001), 113.
- 119. Rogo (1985), 77.
- 120. Ransom (2015), 572.
- 121. Stevenson (1974), 1-14,
- 122. Matlock (2019), 107.
- 123. Braude (2021b), 31-32.
- 124. Matlock (2022b), citing Matlock (2019, 6).
- 125. Nahm (2011), 40.
- 126. Augustine (2022, 380),
- 127. In a footnote, Augustine (2022, 392) moves away from this unsupported assertion to evoke Sudduth's (2021, 999-1000, 1006) 'law of near enough' to explain how 'supposed specific correspondences between one's life and that of a (supposedly reincarnated) person can be manufactured from whole cloth'. Sudduth introduces this 'law' in relation to the James Leininger case, but Matlock (2022a, 2022b) has shown Sudduth's analysis to be flawed.
- 128. Augustine (2015), 24-25.
- 129. Angel (2002), 87.
- 130. Edwards (1996), 276.
- 131. Edwards (1996, 256-58), citing Nicol (1976) in reference to Sahay (1927).
- 132. Sudduth (2021, 987-90), in relation to Leininger, Leininger, & Gross (2009).
- 133. Matlock (2022b).
- 134. Chari (1962b); Rhine (1966); Rogo (1985).
- 135. Braude (2003, 2016); Sudduth (2016).
- 136. Matlock (2019), 135.
- 137. Stevenson (2001); Matlock (2019).
- 138. Braude (2021b), 31-32.
- 139. Stevenson (1974), 343-73; (1980), 343-50.
- 140. Ryall (1974).
- 141. Stevenson (2003).
- 142. Haynes (1976), 184-87.
- 143. Wilson (1981), 187-95; (1982), 168-75).
- 144. Edwards (1996), 105.
- 145. Matlock (1990), 251.
- 146. Nissanka (2001).
- 147. Stevenson (1966, 1974).
- 148. Stevenson (1966, 1974).
- 149. Rogo (1985), 75-76.
- 150. Sahay (1927).
- 151. Stevenson (1975).

- 152. Nicol (1976).
- 153. Leininger & Leininger, with Gross (2009).
- 154. Tucker (2013, 2016).
- 155. Sudduth (2021), with responses from Tucker (2022) and Matlock (2022).
- 156. Cockell (1993).
- 157. Keil & Tucker (2005).
- 158. Visoni (2010).
- 159. Stevenson (1966, 1974).
- 160. Chari (1967).
- 161. Rogo (1985), 73-75.
- 162. Stevenson (1980), 17-51.
- 163. Rogo (1985), 56, 73.
- 164. Pasricha & Barker (1981).
- 165. Lester (2005), 148.
- 166. Pasricha (1983).
- 167. Rogo (1985), 83.
- 168. Stevenson (1977).
- 169. Moore (1981).
- 170. Edwards (1996), 258-59.
- 171. Stevenson (1984); Akolkar (1992).