

Reincarnation Cases with Sex Change

Reincarnation cases sometimes feature a change of sex, in which a woman or girl remembers having lived previously as a boy or man, or vice versa. People for whom this is true may exhibit dressing habits, preferences, manners and activities more typical of the other sex. This has led to suggestions that past-life influence may underlie at least some cases of gender identity conflicts.

Prevalence and Cultural Beliefs

The prevalence of sex-change cases in recorded [reincarnation](#) cases varies considerably across the world. There are none in the reincarnationist cultures of Lebanon (Druze) and Turkey (Alevi) or the Haida and Tlingit tribes of the Pacific Northwest, all cultures which do not believe that changing sex between lives is possible. Hindus and Buddhists believe it is, and accordingly we find a prevalence of 3% in India and 12% in Sri Lanka.^[1] At the other extreme, sex change applies to 33% of reincarnation cases documented in Myanmar^[2] and 44% in the Dene Tha' tribe of northern Alberta, Canada.^[3]

The numbers also vary depending on research methodology and how a case is defined. Reincarnation research pioneer [Ian Stevenson](#) found sex change in as many as six out of seven cases (86%) with verified past-life memories among the Kutchin tribe of northern North America,^[4] while Slobodin found only 22 out of 44 (50%) in an uninvestigated, largely historical sample.^[5]

Reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) observes that sex-change prevalence within a given culture strongly correlates with that culture's beliefs about whether sex change between lives is possible or permissible. What would account for this correlation? Detractors of reincarnation consider such patterns as evidence that rebirth narratives are an artifact of parental beliefs, which they maintain exert a biasing influence on the children's utterances. But researchers point out that psychosocial constructions of this kind conflict with the many recorded cases in which the child remembered accurate details concerning the life and characteristics of a recently deceased person unknown to the family.^[6]

Stevenson hypothesizes that culture influences the incidence of cases through self-suppression; for instance, a Druze child might suppress memories of having been a person of the other sex having learned that this is considered impossible, or in response to disbelief expressed by parents. The resulting lack of cases then reinforces the cultural belief.^[7] But he also offers a second hypothesis, that beliefs are carried from one life to the next and adhered to, influencing the circumstances of each life. In effect, belief creates fact in a feedback loop, gradually strengthening the belief over a series of lives; for example, a Tlingit man, having been born as such successive times, eventually becomes convinced that he can only ever reincarnate as a man, even though he may once have been born a woman.^[8] Indic religions have long held that beliefs can influence reincarnation, as expressed in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.^[9]

Why Do More Females Remember Male Lives Than Vice Versa?

Many more females recall lives as males than the obverse. Stevenson found a 70:30 split in this direction in 208 Burmese sex-change cases and an even greater skew in twin cases, where sixteen females remembered male lives and only two males remembered female lives.^[10] Across Stevenson's entire collection, Matlock found three times as many girls claiming to have been male previously than vice-versa; this also applies to fourteen out of fifteen American child cases. These proportions are especially noteworthy considering that more boys than girls remember a past life in most cultures.^[11] This imbalance has also been observed in adult cases described in internet forums.^[12]

Stevenson argues that it might almost be considered universal, at least within cultures where sex-change cases are reported. Only in one society, the Igbo tribe of Nigeria, is the spread found to be more or less even.^[13]

Stevenson's proposed explanations for the imbalance are based on his study of 75 sex-change cases in Myanmar. His first hypothesis is simply that Myanmar boys are more reticent to talk about having lived before as women than girls are to admit having lived as men. Another effect of the higher status of men over women in Myanmar culture, he considers, is that since a man reborn as a woman is considered to have suffered a 'serious demotion', it might cause an emotional shock that stimulates past-life memories. A third possibility is that men's lives, through 'greater variety and adventurousness of experiences', tend to be more memorable than women's, corresponding with a general skew of almost two to one in the number of male past lives remembered by subjects of both sexes. Stevenson does not draw a firm conclusion.^[14]

Physical Effects

Just as past-life wounds can carry over as [birthmarks or defects](#), other physical attributes such as facial features and skin colouration can be influenced by past lives.^[15] Stevenson observed that females who remember being males may be of relatively large stature, giving as an example the twin case of Ma Khin Ma Gyi and Ma Khin Ma Nge, the larger of whom recalled a male past life.^[16]

Differences in gait can also be observed, for instance in the cases of Ampan Petcherat and Ma Myint Zaw, in which these female subjects were observed to walk in an unusually masculine manner as measured by cultural norms.^[17]

Delayed menstruation is another common feature of male to female sex-change cases. Stevenson found the average age of menarche in seven such cases in Burma was 15.2 years, two years older than the average age of menarche in all Burmese girls. He cautiously notes, however, that delay of menarche cannot be definitely attributed to past-life influence *per se*, as belief has been demonstrated to cause it, and many of the subjects strongly feel themselves to be male.^[18]

Opposite-Sex Behaviours

Stevenson notes that sex-change cases often feature behaviours by the subject that are more typical of the sex of the previous incarnation than the sex of the subject in the subject's culture and era. Confirmation of this is offered by a 2018 study by researchers at the [Division of Perceptual Studies](#) at the University of Virginia, formerly directed by Stevenson.^[19] Gender non-conforming behaviours include dress, speech, play, gender identification and some other behaviours^[20] and persist in life to varying degrees in different subjects. Stevenson offers no firm theory as to why, but suggests based on observation that it seems to be related to the age at which the previous incarnation died: if death occurred during the prime of life – when people are most sexually and reproductively active and therefore most strongly expressing their gender identities – cross-gender behaviour in the subsequent life is more likely. All the subjects with cross-gender behaviours that he had investigated had died during the sexually-active years in their previous lives.^[21] Discussing two female subjects whose masculine behaviours disappeared during their teens, he hypothesized this happened because they had died young in their male past lives, having not had time to develop hardened attitudes of masculinity.^[22]

In his paper on the explanatory value of reincarnation, Stevenson suggested ways in which reincarnation as a theory could help answer long-standing questions. One he lists is the cause of gender-identity confusion and gender dysphoria, that is, distress resulting from the feeling of being in a body of the wrong sex. He notes that in reincarnationist cultures where sex change across lives is acceptable, if children or adults behave in a way appropriate to the other sex, it is simply assumed that they were of that sex in a past life. 'This explanation promotes acceptance of the condition on the part of the subject and the members of his family', he writes, 'with the result that one rarely finds in such cultures the extreme anxiety or dysphoria that occurs in the West in related cases'.^[23] Matlock adds that a similar belief is held by animistic reincarnationist cultures, and is also found among members of the present Western LGBTQ community who believe in reincarnation.^[24]

KM Wehrstein investigated the cases of Will, who is a biological woman but masculine in every other respect, and who claims to remember multiple past lives all as male, and Elise, also a biological woman with memories of multiple lives, a majority as men but some as women. Elise is somewhat masculine in appearance and behaviour, but less than Will. While Will stands five feet and ten inches tall, above average for an American woman, while Elise is about five feet and seven inches, closer to the average. Wehrstein notes that this comparison suggests – very tentatively due to a miniscule sample size – that the number of past lives lived as a man or a woman might influence the strength of gender-related behaviours and physical characteristics manifesting in the current one.^[25]

Choice or Karma?

In the cases of Maung Aung Cho Thein, Paulo Lorenz and Gnanatilleka Baddewithana (see below), the previous incarnations were all heard to express a wish to reincarnate in a body of the other sex. That they all succeeded suggests free choice on their part and that such choice is possible at least in some cases.

However, the subjects in other cases believed their change of sex was the result of karma. Rani Saxena felt that 'God had put her in the body of a woman' because in her previous life as a male lawyer she had 'selfishly exploited women'.^[26] Ma Tin Aung Myo (see below) offered three different theories at different times. As an adult in 1975, she thought the Japanese soldier she remembered being might have sexually molested girls, and this was his punishment; a year earlier she had theorized that it had been his choice to come back as a woman – both typical Burmese beliefs. The third notion she gave as a young child: her sex change was a result of dying after being shot in the genitalia.^[27]

However, a belief in a karmic cause does not necessarily indicate a karmic cause. Matlock asks whether the spirit itself is responsible for producing the sex change due to beliefs acquired in life,^[28] as other [patterns in reincarnation cases](#) suggest this.

Mechanism of Choice

If discarnates about to be reborn choose their sex, how is this achieved? Stevenson opines that most have few options and are obliged to enter whichever body is available. But he does not discount evidence suggesting choice: He cites several cases of people who declared before death that they planned to be reborn to a certain set of parents, and then were, and argues that the wide cultural variance in the incidence of sex change is evidence of choice.^[29]

Nor is it necessarily just a matter of picking a certain embryo, Stevenson argues; the discarnate may also influence the process of conception. He notes that pregnant women have been reported to exhibit cravings and other behaviours reminiscent of their unborn children's past lives, possibly indicating that the new soul can exert influence through biochemical means. The majority of conceptions fail very early, he points out: perhaps a discarnate attempting rebirth can intentionally cause this to occur until a conception of the correct sex is achieved. Or perhaps it can direct a spermatozoa with either a Y or X chromosome to combine with the ovum by psychically changing the viscosity of the fluids through which the sperm swim (since Y sperm have greater motility).^[30]

Illustrative Case Studies

Ma Tin Aung Myo

As a child [Ma Tin Aung Myo](#), a Myanmarese biological woman born in 1953, recalled having been a Japanese soldier and army cook who was killed in 1945, close to her birthplace. She^[31] exhibited many behaviours appropriate to this life, including traits defined as masculine in Myanmarese culture at the time that remained while the others faded. Ma Tin Aung Myo:

- insisted on wearing boys' and then men's clothes, saying girls' clothes irritated her skin or gave her headaches.
- dropped out of school at age twelve rather than wear the required uniform for girls.

- wore her *longyi*, a traditional ankle-length Myanmar garment, in a male style.
- wore her hair cut short, as Myanmar men do.
- played with boys rather than girls as a child, liked guns and playing at soldiers, and said she wanted to be a soldier when she grew up.
- participated in boys' sports.
- did not begin menstruating until two years later than the average in Myanmar.
- hated her periods and had severe dysmenorrhea for three days per cycle.
- preferred the male name prefix 'Maung' over 'Ma'.
- added 'Myo' to her full name to make it sound more masculine, and would become annoyed at her sisters if they called her just 'Tin Aung'.
- had steady girlfriends by age nineteen, and wanted to marry a woman rather than a man.^[32]
- when Stevenson asked about her continuing insistence that she was truly a man, told him to his shock that he could kill her any way he chose so long as it was guaranteed she would be reborn as a boy.

This insistence, and the accompanying masculine behaviours, lasted as long as Stevenson remained in contact with Ma Tin Aung Myo, well into adulthood.^[33]

Maung Aung Cho Thein

Burmese twins Maung Aung Cho Thein and Maung Aung Ko Thein, born in 1970, said almost nothing about previous lives, but other signs led to their identification as having formerly been Daw Hla May, a female mill owner, and Sunder Ram, an Indian male rice farmer. Their mother had two [announcing dreams](#): in the first, Ram walked into her house, and in the second, Hla May slid into bed with her and her husband. Aung Ko Thein had birthmarks on the helices of his ears, where Ram had likely had piercings according to Indian custom. Both twins exhibited behavioural and physical similarities to the respective previous incarnations.

Hla May, who never married, expressed the wish to reincarnate as a man while she was dying, and evidently succeeded, coming back as Aung Cho Thein. In early childhood he tended to dress as a girl (as defined by cultural norms of the time) and wished for earrings and bangles but was dressing as a boy by the age of eight.^[34]

Paulo Lorenz

This tragic same-family case concerns a Brazilian boy who recalled the life of his deceased sister, Emilia. Emilia was born in 1902 and named after the first child of the family, Emilio, who had died in infancy. Emilia felt constrained as a girl and told her brothers and sisters that if there was such a thing as reincarnation, she would come back as a man. She rejected all marriage proposals and made several suicide attempts, eventually succeeding in 1921 by taking cyanide.

On three separate occasions, a spirit claiming to be Emilia communicated with her mother, saying, 'Mama, take me as your son. I will come as your son.' Her mother already had twelve children and did not expect to become pregnant again, but nevertheless gave birth to Paulo in 1923.

Paulo made some remarks claiming to have been Emilia and said that he was a girl, and showed behaviours culturally expected of girls. Until age four or five, he refused to wear boys' clothes, and played with girls and dolls. He also showed an unusual skill for sewing, at which Emilia had excelled. Between age six and his teen years he gradually became more masculine in his behaviours, but never married and did not associate with women other than his sisters. A drawing test he took at age 39, administered by Stevenson, showed a more feminine orientation than most men his age. At the age of 43, he committed suicide.^[35]

Erin Jackson

Erin Jackson was born in a town in Indiana, USA, in 1969. She talked about past-life memories for about a year, ending at age four. She said that her name had been John and that she had had a brother named James and a kind stepmother. She mentioned no place names or other details sufficient to solve the case. However, John evidently had been American, as Erin complained frequently about how ugly America had become from billboards, telephone poles and an overabundance of cars. She would say, 'It was lots better when there were horses. These cars are awful. They've just ruined everything.' Based on such statements, Stevenson placed the life as ending before 1930.

When Erin was old enough to realize that boys and girls dressed differently in America in the 1960s, she insisted on wearing boys' clothes, for instance only the bottom piece of two-piece swimsuits. She appeared to feel humiliated when her mother insisted she wear a dress rather than pants. Even at the age of ten, she wore dresses only very rarely, and never any decorated with lace or ruffles. She asked to have her hair kept short until age nine. She preferred play culturally expected of American boys; for example, liked to build with toy blocks rather than play with dolls, and her favourite outdoor activities were climbing trees and fishing. She wanted to learn to play baseball and was angry when she found out she could not become a Cub Scout. She would sometimes say, 'I wish I were a boy. Why couldn't I have been a boy?' At age eleven, when Stevenson met her, she seemed to be developing more behaviours considered feminine in America.^[36]

Gnanatilleka Baddewithana

[Gnanatilleka Baddewithana](#) was born in Sri Lanka in 1956 and began talking about another mother and father at the age of one. Other statements and recognitions indicated that she had lived as Gallage Turin Tillekeratne, a boy from a nearby town who had died shortly before his fourteenth birthday following an accident.

Gnanatilleka told her parents simply, 'I was a boy. Now I am a girl.' She told Stevenson that when she had been a boy, she had wished to be a girl. This is borne out by observations made of Tillekeratne, who had developed some tendencies culturally considered feminine by the time of his death, possibly, in Stevenson's opinion, due to a lack of male role models. He preferred to socialize with girls, liked sewing and silk shirts, and even on occasion painted his nails. He once asked his favourite teacher whether it was possible to change sex from one life to another, bearing out Gnanatilleka's memory of having wanted to become a girl.

According to her parents, Gnanatilleka showed some tendencies considered masculine, but the principal of her school did not notice this, so they cannot have been marked. When asked if she was happier as a boy or a girl, she said as a girl.^[37]

KM Wehrstein

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 226.
2. ^ Stevenson (1986), Table 3, 211
3. ^ Goulet (1994).
4. ^ Stevenson (1983), 218 n13.
5. ^ Slobodin (1994).
6. ^ See, e.g., Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 226.
7. ^ Stevenson (2001), 179.
8. ^ Stevenson (2001), 180.
9. ^ Evans-Wentz (1957).
10. ^ Stevenson (1997), 1935.
11. ^ Matlock (2019), 178.
12. ^ Wehrstein (2019).
13. ^ Stevenson (2001), 178.
14. ^ Stevenson (2001), 256, n15.
15. ^ See Stevenson (1997), 1757-1846, 1913-15; Ohkado (2014).
16. ^ Stevenson (1997), 1873.
17. ^ Stevenson (1997), 1894.
18. ^ Stevenson (1997), 1663-64.
19. ^ Pehlivanova, Janke, Lee & Tucker (2018).
20. ^ Stevenson (2001), 120.
21. ^ Stevenson (1997), 1911.
22. ^ Stevenson (2001), 125.
23. ^ Stevenson (1977), 318.
24. ^ Matlock (2019), 195.
25. ^ Wehrstein (in preparation).

26. ^ Stevenson (2001), 186.
27. ^ Stevenson (1977b), 256.
28. ^ Matlock (2019), 160.
29. ^ Stevenson (1997), 2080-81.
30. ^ Stevenson (1997), 2081-82.
31. ^ In this section, the masculine and feminine pronouns have been left the same as rendered in the sources, despite what the subjects, especially Ma Tin Aung Myo, might prefer. This is for ease of comprehension.
32. ^ Though this could indicate lesbianism rather than a gender-related preference; Stevenson did not make the distinction.
33. ^ Stevenson (1977b; 1983, 229-41). All material in this section is drawn from these two sources.
34. ^ Stevenson (1997), 2034-41.
35. ^ Stevenson (1974), 203-15.
36. ^ Stevenson (2001), 87-89.
37. ^ Stevenson (1974), 131-49. See also Nissanka (2001) for an independent investigator's account of this case.