Patterns in Reincarnation Cases

A reincarnation case consists of episodic, semantic and emotional memories, behaviours, physical traits and other signs that associate the case subject with a deceased person. The systematic study of reincarnation cases began with Ian Stevenson in the 1960s and continues today. Enough cases have been studied now that universal, near-universal and culture-linked patterns can be discerned in the dataset as a whole.

Overview

Early in his field research, Ian Stevenson realized that he was learning about far too many cases to thoroughly investigate all. He chose to concentrate on a few cases and to collect basic data on as many others as possible in order to search for common patterns. In 1986, he compared features of cases from the Igbo of Nigeria to cases from nine other countries or tribal societies, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Lebanon, Turkey, the United States (nontribal cases), the Tlingit of Alaska and the Haida of Alaska and British Columbia.1 In 1994, Antonia Mills contributed data from three other first nations in British Columbia, the Gitxsan, Beaver and Witsuwit'en.2 That same year, Richard Slobodin supplied data for the Kutchin (Gwitchen) of the Canadian Northwest Territories.3 We also have figures on some variables for Brazil.4

In addition to these feature comparisons, studies have been made of the correlates of violent death in the previous life,5 memories of the intermission between lives,6 and of the age of the subject in relation to whether or not the initial past-life memories were cued.7 Jim B Tucker introduced a scale that assessed the strength of cases and validated it on a cross-cultural sample.8 Emily Cook et al compared cases in which the previous person was identified ('solved cases') to cases in which a satisfactory identification was impossible ('unsolved cases').9 James Matlock used samples of published cases to examine cases of reincarnation across national boundaries ('international cases') and cases in which the previous persons took their own lives ('suicide cases').10

This work builds on individual case studies and complements them. The patterns provide a context in which to assess the cases. Unfortunately, many of the pattern analyses are some years old. They rely on the collection compiled by Stevenson and his successors at the University of Virginia and were done in the 1980s and 1990s. The UVA collection presently includes 2,500 cases that are being entered into a computerized database. As of 2013, the database was still far from complete, and updated figures based on it are not yet available.11

Not only the UVA case collection but also the dataset of published cases is largely confined to children. Fewer past-life memories have been studied with adults and although the patterns in adult cases for the most part resemble those of child cases, there are not enough solved adult cases to make possible a statistical comparison

between them and child cases. We do not know how well the findings from children's cases represent reincarnation and past-life memory for everyone, so we should be cautious in generalizing from them. However, they provide a starting point for theorizing about reincarnation and past-life memory.[12]

Three Case Examples

The following examples illustrate the main features of the reincarnation cases that have been studied.

Purnima Ekanayake

A Sri Lankan maker and seller of incense sticks, Jinadasa Perera, was hit by a bus while riding his bicycle. The bus's wheels ran over the left side of his chest, crushing several ribs and causing massive internal injuries that killed him instantly. Purnima Ekanayake was born two years later in a different part of the island. She had a large birthmark running obliquely up the left side of her chest, which she said was the result of having died a traffic accident with a 'big vehicle'. She told her family that she had been a man who made incense sticks, named the brands and described the process of manufacture. She said she had been married to her sister's husband's sister, whose name she gave. She also remembered her mother's name, and added that she had two brothers. Purnima said that after her death she had floated in semi-darkness for a few days. She saw people mourning for her and witnessed her funeral, then saw some light, went toward it, and found herself in her present life.

When she was four, Purnima visited a Buddhist temple, which she recognized. She said she had lived across the river from the temple, but nothing was done to verify her memories at the time. Two years passed before one of her father's colleagues made inquiries and located a family of incense makers fitting Purnima's description. When she met Jinadasa's sister and brother-in law, Purnima recognized people and asked pertinent questions about the business, which the brother-in-law was continuing.[13]

Nathan

Nathan is a member of the Gitxsan first nation of British Columbia, Canada. He was identified at birth as the reincarnation of his great-grandfather, Mark Peters Sr, who had died of natural causes in his eighties, a few years before. In middle age, Mark had suffered a serious logging accident which had left a permanent scar on his chest. Nathan was born with a similar-looking mark in the same place. Before his birth, his grandfather, Mark Jr, dreamed that his father' spirit appeared to him and said, 'I'll stay with you guys by Karen'. Karen was Mark Jr's daughter and, as it turned out, Nathan's mother.

As he grew older, Nathan behaved in many ways like Mark Sr. He recognized places and articles with which Mark Sr was familiar. He knew where to find the oldest and best fishing sites, and, without being taught, knew how to hang and salt fish and how to pick berries properly. When he saw Mark Sr's smokehouse, he recognized it, but was sad that it had been neglected after his death. He recognized Mark Sr's

fishing boots in the smokehouse. When a helicopter flew overhead, he said he had ridden in one, which he had not done, but Mark Sr had.[14]

Marta Lorenz

Maria Januaria de Oliveiro, known familiarly as Sinhá, was the daughter of a prosperous rancher in southern Brazil. Her father twice forbad her to marry men to whom she had become engaged. The second of these suitors killed himself in response and Sinhá decided to take her own life. On a visit to carnival in a nearby city, she allowed herself to become sick by exhausting herself and going out without adequate clothing. Shortly before she died of tuberculosis, at age 28, she told her good friend Ida Lorenz that she would be reborn as her daughter. She promised Ida that she would identify herself by telling her many things about Sinhá.

Ten months later, Ida Lorenz gave birth to a daughter whom she named Marta. While still an infant, Marta appeared to recognize Sinhá's father when he visited the Lorenz house and when she was two and a half years old, she began to speak about Sinhá. Over the next several years, she made more than 120 statements about her. She shared many personality traits with Sinhá as well. Like Sinhá, Marta enjoyed dancing, was afraid of rain and was fond of cats. She was said to resemble Sinhá physically and she suffered from chronic upper respiratory infections. She was 54 when Stevenson last saw her, but she told him that she sometimes still thought about Sinhá, especially at night, when she was praying or going to sleep.[15]

Universal and Near-Universal Patterns

Some features of reincarnation cases appear so regularly, they may be regarded as universal or near-universal. Some of these universal and near-universal features relate to the case subject, whereas others concern the deceased person whose life the child remembers.

Patterns Related to the Case Subject

Case subjects are predominantly male. Boys outnumbered girls as subjects in Stevenson's collection by a two-to-one margin (63% to 37%) in 1986. The highest incidence was found among the Igbo, where 77%, or 44, of 57 subjects were boys. Girls outnumbered boys in Sri Lanka, but by a slim margin: 51%, or 60, of 117 subjects were girls.[16]

One of the strongest universal patterns is the young age at which children speak about previous lives. The majority of children in every culture begin between the ages of two and five,[17] although the first reference to the previous life may be made as early as eighteen months.[18] The younger the child when first speaking of the previous life, the stronger the memories tend to be overall,[19] and the less likely they are to be cued by something seen or heard.[20]

Most children stop speaking about their memories after a few years and the memories seem to have faded from their conscious awareness. The fading of the memories, which generally occurs between ages five and eight, was once assumed to be a near-universal feature of the cases.[21] However, in follow-up studies in Sri

Lanka[22] and Lebanon,[23] Erlendur Haraldsson found that as many as a third of children retained some memories past that age, at least into young adulthood, when they were tested. Fading of past-life memories by middle childhood is common, but it is by no means as universal as it was once thought to be. Marta Lorenz is an example of someone who retained memories well into adulthood.

In addition to relating episodic memories of previous lives, many children (about 20% in both the UVA collection[24] and in published cases[25]) talk about events they say occurred between their deaths and births, as Purnima Ekanayake did. Intermission memories, as they are called, sometimes include perceptions of the material world that can be verified.[26] Child subjects also typically behave in ways similar to the persons whose lives they recall. These behaviours may be highly developed skills, including language skills.[27] The children may also have birthmarks, birth defects and other physical abnormalities related to the previous persons, or they may resemble the previous persons in stature, facial structure and so forth.[28] Birthmarks and birth defects are often related to the way a person died, but they need not be. Other common case features include announcing dreams[29] (Nathan's grandfather's dream is an example) and cravings during pregnancy.[30]

The social statuses of the previous person and case subject have not been compared systematically, but usually subjects are of the same ethnic, religious and social group as the previous person. In India, two thirds of subjects lived in poorer socioeconomic circumstances than they had in the previous life.[31] There are other examples of social changes, for example, the studies by Antonia Mills of Hindu/Moslem cases in India.[32] However, there is no noticeable cultural variation in the frequency of such changes across the dataset as a whole.[33]

Most children remember having died close to where they were born. Long-distance cases (with distances greater than fifty kilometers, or 31 miles, from the place of death) occur in larger countries such as India and the United States, but cases that cross international boundaries are unusual and solved international cases are rare.[34]

Most children who recall previous lives do so in the waking state, with no apparent alteration of consciousness. Sometimes memories come in dreams or nightmares, but there are usually waking memories as well. With older subjects, dreams and other altered states become more important in connection to past-life memories.[35]

Patterns Related to the Previous Person

Stevenson counted stated intentions to be reborn to certain people as a recurrent or universal feature of the cases, notwithstanding the fact that such 'planned reincarnation' is unusual, except in tribal societies and among the Tibetans.[36] Sinhá told Ida Lorenz that she would be reborn to her, but this is not typical of Western cases.

One of the most important universal factors on the side of the previous person is the manner in which that person died. Violent deaths – by accident, murder, or suicide, during war, etc – figured in 51% of solved cases and were claimed in 61% of unsolved cases in 1983.[37] These figures are far higher than the incidence of violent

death in the general populations during the same periods in any of the countries or tribal societies in which cases have been studied.[38] Violent deaths are associated with significantly shorter intermissions between lives, and children who recall having died violently begin to speak about the previous life at a significantly younger age than when deaths are natural, by illness or in old age.[39]

With natural deaths, age at death is important: The younger a person is when he dies a natural death, the more likely his life is to be recalled later.[40] This does not necessarily mean that those who die young are more likely to reincarnate quickly. Premature deaths – by violence or illness – are lives cut short and might produce the sense of things left undone, an effect Stevenson termed 'unfinished' or 'continuing business'. He noted some sort of continuing business in the great majority of his cases.[41]

Another factor that has turned out to be an important correlate (or predictor) of past-life memory is the previous person's mental qualities. Previous persons were practiced meditators in several cases.[42] Many who died natural deaths at an advanced age were devoutly religious or had practiced meditation regularly.[43]

Matlock found indications that the expectedness or unexpectedness of a death affects mental quality after death as well. In each of fourteen solved international cases, deaths were expected due to prolonged illness, during war, et cetera, and there was some identifiable motive for reincarnating abroad. Similarly, of ten solved suicide cases, all involved reincarnation either in the same family or among friends. This may be because an expected death would give the psyche time to prepare and that could result in a greater degree of mental control after death. By contrast, sudden, unexpected deaths are more often associated with reincarnation among strangers, which suggests less say over who the new parents will be.[44]

Culture-Linked Patterns

Several case features, although not exactly culture-bound, have been found to be closely culture-linked. These features include how often cases occur and are solved; the rate of sex change between lives; the relationship between the subject and the previous person; and the length of the period between the lives.

Incidence and Solvability

Researchers do not yet have a good understanding of how common reincarnation cases are. To date there has been only one systematic survey, conducted in a rural development block in northern India and reported in 1979. The survey takers estimated that there were about two cases per 1000 people in that region, one of the areas of the world from which a large number of cases have been reported.[45] There may be a greater incidence among the Druze of Lebanon, but since no surveys have been conducted there, we cannot be sure.[46]

Other areas in which a considerable number of cases can be found are other parts of South-East Asia, West Africa, and north-western North America.[47] However, the incidence of cases is not uniform within these areas. Very few cases have been reported from South India;[48] in Lebanon, except among the Druze; in Turkey,

except among the Alevi; or in North America, except among the indigenous peoples. Stevenson's collection includes cases from every continent, but only a few cases have been reported from most areas.49

Cases vary not only in how regularly they are reported, but in how strong they are, as measured by number of statements, behaviors and physical signs they include. Tribal cases tend to have weaker phenomena than Asian cases and past-life identifications are frequently made on very slender evidence (Nathan's case is one of the most developed tribal cases on record).50 In Western countries, not only are fewer cases reported, those which come to light are for the most part relatively weak.51 The weakness of the phenomena naturally has a bearing on how easy it is to identify the previous person and is reflected in the ratios of solved to unsolved cases cross-culturally. In Stevenson's collection as it stood in 1983, 80% of Burmese, 79% of Lebanese, and 77% of Indian cases were solved, in contrast to only 20% of American nontribal cases.52

There may be cultural reasons for some of these variations. In Western and other countries whose cultures oppose reincarnation, it is likely that many cases do not come to the attention of investigators. This explanation appears unlikely in India, however. A genetic component in past-life memory retrieval would explain why more cases develop in some populations more readily than in others and cannot be ruled out.53

Sex Change

The case feature with the most pronounced cultural linkage is sex change between lives. In countries and tribal societies in which this is believed possible, such cases are found, whereas in countries and tribal societies where it is believed impossible, no such cases have been reported. As of 1986 in the United States, 15% of sixty nontribal cases involved a change of sex. In Burma, 33% of 230 cases did. In Sri Lanka, the figure was 10%.54 The Kutchin traditionally held that all persons changed sex between lives. Only 22 (50%) of 44 of cases Slobodin heard about between the 1930s and 1960s featured changes of sex,55 but on a brief visit in 1977, Stevenson discovered that six (86%) of seven of Kutchin cases did.56 The Druze of Lebanon, the Alevi of Turkey and the Haida of Alaska and British Columbia believe that one cannot change sex between lives and no sex-change cases have been found among them.57

When there is a change of sex, boys and girls do not remember being of the opposite sex equally often. Three times as many girls claim to have been boys or men than boys claim to have been girls or women in Stevenson's collection as a whole. In the United States, fourteen of fifteen children who remembered the life of a person of the opposite sex was a girl.58 Only among the Igbo did an equal number of boys and girls say they were of the opposite sex in their previous lives.59 Interestingly, a similar imbalance was found by Karl Müller with a sample of mostly Western cases, drawn from published sources.60 Müller's finding is especially striking, given the disproportionate number of male subjects in most cultures.

Relationship Status

There is cultural variation also in how the subject is related to the previous person: as a relative, as an acquaintance or as a stranger. In tribal societies the great majority of cases fall in family lines. As reported by Stevenson in 1986, 96% of Tlingit cases, 94% of Haida cases and 92% of Igbo cases had family relationships.[61] Mills found family relationships in 100% of the Gitxsan, Witsuwit'en and Beaver cases she studied.[62] Even more strikingly, the case patterns follow the kinship structure of the society. The Tlingit, Haida, Gitxsan and Witsuwit'en are all matrilineal, and their cases fall on the mother's side. The Igbo are patrilineal, and their cases fall on the father's side.[63] The Beaver reckon kinship bilaterally, through both parents equally, and their cases show a preference for neither side.[64] The same is true of the Kutchin, who have an usual number of reincarnations of outsiders as well.[65]

The patterns are very different in other societies. In India, only 16% had family relationships, 41% had acquaintance relationships and 43% were strangers. In Sri Lanka, 19% of cases had family relationships, 29% had acquaintance relationships and 52% were strangers.[66] These figures relate to Stevenson's case collection, which includes many unpublished cases. The figures are very different for Western cases, reports of which have been published. Of 32 solved European cases, 60% have family relationships, 10% have acquaintance relationships and 30% have stranger relationships.[67] Of 27 solved published cases from the Americas (including Canada and Cuba along with the United States), 56% have family relationships, 11% have acquaintance relationships and 33% have stranger relationships.[68]

Intermission Length

Stevenson found the median intermission length (death to birth) in 616 solved cases to be fifteen months, based on the 1986 figures.[69] There was a great deal of cultural variation, however. The median intermission was four months among the Haida and eight months among the Druze, but longer than nine months in most other places. It was twelve months in India, sixteen months in Sri Lanka, 21 months in Burma, and 34 months among the Igbo. In nontribal American cases, it was 141 months (almost twelve years).[70] If cases that have come to light since 1986 are included, the median for American cases is much longer.[71] Muller claimed an average intermission of seventy years in his sample of largely Western cases, but this apparently included estimates regarding unsolved cases along with the known lengths of solved cases.[72]

In the 22 published cases from the Americas with reliable information in intermission length, the median intermission is 8.5 years.[73]In the 32 solved European cases, it is 33 months, just under three years.[74] However, with American and European cases, there is a marked difference between the median intermission with family and acquaintance relationships versus stranger relationships. In the American cases, the median intermission in family and acquaintance cases is three years, whereas in stranger cases it is forty years.[75] Of the European cases, the median intermission for family and acquaintance cases is eighteen months, whereas in stranger cases it is ten years (120 months).[76] This pattern is not as evident in Asian cases, perhaps because the intermission in all of them is

comparatively brief and there are fewer cases with family and acquaintance connections.

Interpretations of the Patterns

Sceptics of a reincarnation interpretation of the cases point to the association between beliefs about the reincarnation process and case features such as the presence or absence of sex change and argue that this is proof that people are imagining or constructing the cases in accordance with their culturally-mandated ideas.77 This proposition has been called the sociopsychological or psychosocial theory of past-life memory claims.78

Ian Wilson found variations in intermission length and other variables suspicious, because they did not allow him to discern the 'rules' by which reincarnation is governed. He could not make out whether there is a 'waiting period' between lives or whether we reincarnate internationally or close to home.79 Wilson evidently expected reincarnation to work the same way for everyone, everywhere, but as Matlock points out, human experience varies tremendously. There is no reason to expect uniformity in reincarnation, when it is not seen in any other department of life.80

Wilson analyzed seventeen published cases from India, looking for changes of caste and socioeconomic circumstance. He found that in all but one case the previous life was in better circumstances than the precent life, which suggested to him that the case subjects were fantasizing better past lives for themselves.81 In Stevenson's collection as a whole, only two thirds of Indian cases had previous persons in better circumstances, a rather different ratio. Moreover, Wilson's rationale for the change in circumstances is culturally insensitive. In India, a past life in better circumstances would imply a karmic demotion into the present life, something unlikely to be imagined by most children.82

Sceptics have not commented on the patterns on the side of the previous person, which are not easy to explain on the psychosocial theory. Stevenson83 and Matlock,84 however, have proposed an explanation for the cultural variations that takes the previous person into account: Perhaps the beliefs and convictions we hold in life continue with us into death and help to determine what we do next. If we do not expect to change sex, we will avoid doing so. If we expect the reincarnate in either our father's or our mother's line, we will strive to make that happen. This proposal supposes that we can exercise some control over our destinies when we are discarnate, a notion supported by Matlock's findings regarding motive in international and suicide cases.85

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. Stevenson (1986).
- 2. Mills (1994), 242-46.
- 3. Sobodin (1994), 141, 147.
- 4. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), chap. 26; Matlock (2019), 180-83. See also Brazilian Children Who Recall Previous Lives.
- 5. Chadha & Stevenson (1988).
- 6. Sharma & Tucker (2004); Matlock & Giesler-Petersen (2016).
- 7. Matlock (1989).
- 8. Tucker (2000).
- 9. Cook et al. (1983).
- 10. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), chap. 27, chap. 29.
- 11. Mills & Tucker (2013), 322.
- 12. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 273.
- 13. Haraldsson (2000); Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), chap. 1.
- 14. Mills (2010); Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 183-85.
- 15. Stevenson (1974), 183-203.
- 16. Stevenson (1986), 210.
- 17. Stevenson (2001), 105-6.
- 18. Matlock (2019), 126.
- 19. Tucker (2000), 578.
- 20. Matlock (1989).
- 21. Stevenson (2001), 108, 123; Matlock (1990), 199.
- 22. Haraldsson (2008).
- 23. Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin (2012).
- 24. Sharma & Tucker (2004).
- 25. Matlock & Giesler-Petersen (2016).
- 26. Matlock & Giesler-Petersen (2016).
- 27. Stevenson (2001), 115-20; Matlock (2019), 141-43.
- 28. Stevenson (2001),101-5; Matlock (2019), 156.
- 29. Stevenson (2001), 99-101; Matlock (2019),164-65.
- 30. Stevenson (2001), 197-99.
- 31. Stevenson (2001), 215.
- 32. Mills (1990).
- 33. Matlock (2019), 184.
- 34. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), chap. 27.
- 35. Matlock (2019), 202.
- 36. Stevenson (2001), 98.
- 37. Cook et al. (1983), 121.
- 38. Stevenson (2001), 165.
- 39. Chadha & Stevenson (1988).
- 40. Tucker (2013), 200-2.
- 41. Stevenson (2001), 212.
- 42. Stevenson (2001), 213-14.
- 43. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 264-65.
- 44. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), chap. 27; chap. 29.
- 45. Barker & Pasricha (1979).
- 46. Stevenson (1980), 8.
- 47. Stevenson (2001), 94.

- 48. Stevenson (2001), 173; Pasricha (2001).
- 49. Stevenson (2001), 94-95.
- 50. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 188-89.
- 51. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 209.
- 52. Cook et al. (1983), 117.
- 53. Stevenson (2001), 174.
- 54. Stevenson (1986).
- 55. Slobodin (1994), 140.
- 56. Stevenson (1983b), 218 n13.
- 57. Stevenson (2001), 178.
- 58. Stevenson (1983a), 745.
- 59. Stevenson (1986), 211.
- 60. Muller (1970), p. 131.
- 61. Stevenson (1986), 211.
- 62. Mills (1994) 242.
- 63. Matlock (2019), 181-82.
- 64. Mills (1988), 401.
- 65. Slobodin (1994), 141.
- 66. Stevenson (1986), 211.
- 67. See https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/european-children-who-recall...
- 68. See https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/american-children-who-recall...
- 69. Stevenson (2001), 120.
- 70. Stevenson (1986), 212.
- 71. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 224 n22.
- 72. Muller (1970), 275.
- 73. See https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/american-children-who-recall...
- 74. https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/european-children-who-recall...
- 75. See https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/american-children-who-recall...
- 76. See https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/european-children-who-recall...
- 77. e.g., Lester (2005), 153-54.
- 78. Stevenson (2001); Matlock (2019).
- 79. Wilson (1982), 16.
- 80. Matlock (1990), 247.
- 81. Wilson (1982), 21-22.
- 82. Stevenson (2001), 215.
- 83. Stevenson (2001), 180.
- 84. Matlock (2019), 187-88.
- 85. Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), chap. 27, chap. 29.