

Ian Stevenson

Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) was a Canadian-born psychiatrist based at the University of Virginia, who devoted much of his career to psychical research. He is best known for his pioneering work on the phenomenon of past life memories among young children, as described in his landmark study *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* and other publications.

Life and Career

Early Years

Ian Pretyman Stevenson was born in Montreal, Quebec, on 31 October 1918. From birth, he suffered from bronchitis, which in infancy led to bronchiectasis, the permanent inflammation of the bronchial tubes.^[1]

Stevenson's father was a Scottish lawyer turned journalist who wrote for the *Toronto Star* newspaper. His English mother possessed a large collection of books on metaphysics, comparative religion and alternative healing; she became a devotee of Theosophy when Stevenson was young. Stevenson read many of his mother's books. These subjects had their appeal, but because he could see no way to approach them scientifically, Stevenson took no serious interest in them at the time.^[2]

Stevenson began his university studies at the University of St Andrews, but when he returned to Canada for the summer of 1939, World War II was in the offing. His medical condition made him ineligible for military service and he switched to McGill University in Montreal for the fall term. At McGill, he studied physics, chemistry, and biology, along with history. After receiving his BSc in 1940, he enrolled in McGill's medical school. He completed the four-year program in three years and graduated at the top of his class in 1943.^[3]

Medical Career

Stevenson did the first year of his post-graduate residency at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, conducting research in biochemistry. Unfortunately, his bronchiectasis returned and intensified, and he was advised to relocate to a warmer and dryer environment. He completed his residency and internship at St Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1945-46, and in 1946-47 held fellowships in internal medicine at the Alton Ochsner Medical Foundation and in biochemistry at the Tulane University School of Medicine, both in New Orleans, Louisiana. The move to the southern United States brought about an immediate improvement in his health and he remained in that country, becoming a naturalized American citizen in 1949.^[4]

His biochemistry research required killing rats in order to dissect their kidneys, an activity Stevenson found repulsive, so in 1947 he shifted to psychosomatic medicine with a fellowship to work at New York Hospital. When psychosomatic medicine did not develop into the specialty he expected, however, he entered psychoanalytic training. In the autumn of 1949 he returned to New Orleans as assistant professor of psychiatry and medicine at the Louisiana State University School of Medicine. Three years later he was promoted to associate professor of psychiatry. In 1956 he was asked to join the medical faculty of the University of Virginia as tenured professor and chairman of its Department of Neurology and Psychiatry. He was not yet 39 years old when he moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 1957.^[5]

Entrance into Parapsychology

Stevenson read widely and at the end of 1954 encountered *New World of the Mind*, by [JB Rhine](#), which mentioned a Medical Section of the [American Society for Psychical Research](#) (ASPR). He joined the ASPR in February 1955 but had little time for parapsychology until he went to Charlottesville eighteen months later. From then on, he spent an increasing amount of time on parapsychology, supported by grants from the [Parapsychology Foundation](#).^[6]

Carlson Professor of Psychiatry

Soon after he reached Charlottesville, Stevenson began to think about giving up the chairmanship of his department so that he could engage full time in research and writing. Parapsychology Foundation grants helped to compensate for income from his clinical practice and allowed him to stop seeing patients, but he was still spending a good deal of time on administrative tasks. [Chester Carlson](#), the multi-millionaire inventor of the dry copying Xerox process, created a research endowment that included a chair for Stevenson. The chair became a reality in 1965 and after Carlson's death in 1968 was named for him.

Stevenson was able to give up the chairmanship in 1967 and became director of a new division within the Department of Neurology and Psychiatry. Originally this was called the Department of Parapsychology but in 1987 was renamed the Division of Personality Studies (DOPS). Since 2005, it has been called the [Division of Perceptual Studies](#).^[7]

Marriage and Family Life

Stevenson married twice. He was wed the first time to pediatrician Octavia Reynolds in 1947. She died of illness in 1983 and in 1985 he married Margaret Pertzoff, a professor of history at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, who survived him. The marriages were happy, but neither produced children.^[8]

Last Years and Death

Stevenson continued to spend some time at DOPS following his retirement from the University of Virginia in 2002, when he gave up the Carlson Chair to [Bruce Greyson](#). Among his last writings were an essay about the Polish psychic [Stefan Ossowiecki](#), which appeared in a book by [Mary-Rose Barrington](#) published in 2005.^[9] His last journal article, an autobiographical account, appeared in 2006.^[10] Stevenson died in Charlottesville, Virginia, of pneumonia on 8 February 2007.^[11]

Reincarnation Research

1960 Case Review

Stevenson is best known for his extensive research on [reincarnation](#), especially with [children who recall previous lives](#). His first foray into this area came in response to an essay contest announced by the ASPR in 1958. He had begun to notice accounts of people, mostly children, who recalled previous lives, and in 1959 stepped up his hunt for such accounts. His essay, 'The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations', won the essay prize and was published in two parts in the ASPR *Journal* in 1960.^[12]

In the first part of this paper, Stevenson reported having found published accounts of 44 cases in which the deceased person whose life was recalled had been identified. In 28 cases, the subjects (all young children) had made at least six corroborated statements about deceased persons unknown to their families. In the second part of the paper, Stevenson called for further research on this phenomenon. Although he did not let on that he was thinking about doing this himself, by the time

his article was published, he knew of several new cases in India and was trying to obtain funds to go there and investigate these cases.^[13]

Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation

In 1961, Stevenson obtained a grant from the Parapsychology Foundation to go to India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to study cases. He was able to look into seventeen cases in India and three in Ceylon in the time he had available and continued to develop information about them through agents in those places. Later, with Chester Carlson's support, he went to Alaska and then to Brazil. In 1964, he travelled to Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Israel. The more cases he studied around the world, the more impressed he became by the [cross-cultural patterns](#) in them. He selected twenty representative cases for his first book of case reports, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, which was published in the ASPR *Proceedings* in 1966, then reprinted with follow-up information on eighteen of the child subjects by the University Press of Virginia in 1974. The book has been something of a best seller and is still in print in its 1980 paperback edition.^[14]

Cases of the Reincarnation Type

Stevenson originally intended a sequel to *Twenty Cases* called *Thirty Additional Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. This book was to include fifteen cases from the United States, Great Britain and Germany, along with fifteen cases from Asian countries. It was never completed, however, and instead Stevenson published a series of four volumes under the heading Cases of the Reincarnation Type. The four volumes were devoted to Asian countries – India, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Lebanon, Thailand and Burma. All were issued by the University Press of Virginia. Stevenson planned further volumes in the series, but after a change of editors, the press ceased being interested in his work.^[15] His book *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type* did not appear until 2003, from a different publisher. Stevenson wrote a journal article about American cases,^[16] but left a book of American cases unfinished at his death in 2007.

Stevenson's last book from the University Press of Virginia was a volume intended for the general reader, *Children Who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation*.^[17] It summarized a few cases but was mostly a résumé of his field work and what he had learned about reincarnation from the study of cases, mostly of young children. In addition to his books, Stevenson published a large number of journal articles on cases suggestive of reincarnation. Some reported individual cases, others cultural patterns, yet others were devoted to recurrent themes, such as children's play or phobias that related to the previous life they recalled.^[18]

Reincarnation and Biology

When Stevenson first went to India and Ceylon, he expected to find cases that consisted mainly of claims to remember previous lives. He was surprised that the cases included [behavioural features](#) and a good many had [physical features](#) as well. Among the most striking of the latter were birthmarks or congenital deformities that related to the previous life, often to the death in that life. Although he encountered such physical traits everywhere he studied cases, it was the Tlingit Indians of Alaska who first brought their importance home to him. The majority of Tlingit cases had family connections or represented reincarnation within the same community, where the manner of death was known, and the birthmarks and defects provided vital clues in helping the Tlingit identify who a newborn had been before.

Twenty Cases included several cases with birthmarks and birth defects, but after that, Stevenson held back his cases with physical features until he could present a large series together. The result was his massive, two-volume monograph, *Reincarnation and Biology*, which brought together 225 cases with

birthmarks, birth defects and other congenital abnormalities that linked a case subject to a deceased person. There were several examples of almost every sort of physical feature found in the cases. Although the majority of examples were of birthmarks and defects, there were cases of Asian children with memories of having been Europeans who had European facial structures, eye form, even skin color. Girls who recalled having been boys or men often were taller than their peers and their menarche might be delayed. Monozygotic twins sometimes had different physical appearances, in line with the people whose lives they recalled.

These physical carryovers led Stevenson to develop his theory of the psychophore, a subtle or astral body which would convey physical form from one life to another. He saw evidence for direct mental action as well, but he thought the mind acted on its new body from within the psychophore.^[19] *Reincarnation and Biology* remains in print, but as print-on-demand, but it can also now be read on the Internet Archive: [Vol 1](#), [Vol 2](#). Stevenson supplemented it with a summary volume called *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*,^[20] which is more widely available in a paperback edition.

Xenoglossy

[Xenoglossy](#) is the use of language unlearned in the present life. Stevenson studied examples of it in spontaneous reincarnation cases but also in [past life regression](#) under hypnosis. Although he recognized from the beginning of his research that most regressions provided much less evidence for reincarnation than waking memories did, he was interested in regressions in which unlearned languages were spoken responsively. He studied two cases of this type, one with a Swedish xenoglossy^[21] and other with a German xenoglossy.^[22] These cases were remarkably similar. In neither was it possible to identify the deceased person spoken about. The foreign languages were used haltingly, leaving openings for critics who expected a more robust deployment of the language, more like natural speech. However, Stevenson was convinced that the subjects had understood and used the language responsively, albeit in a limited way.

Xenoglossy in spontaneous cases of past-life memory is more natural. It is reported in most cases in which there is a difference in language between the previous lives and may include influences on accent as well as the use of dialectical expressions and words remembered from other languages.^[23] Responsive xenoglossy in spontaneous cases is rare, perhaps in part because there rarely are speakers of the language in question about when children who use it are growing up. The most striking example of responsive xenoglossy in a spontaneous case is in the adult case of Uttara Huddar, known generally under the name of the past life, [Sharada](#). Perhaps because she was older when the case developed, Uttara shifted into an alternate personality, much like a person afflicted with multiple personality or dissociative identity disorder. When Sharada was in control, she seemed to think she was living in early twentieth century Bengal and was unacquainted with modern Indian lifeways and technology. She spoke an archaic dialect of Bengali and conversed at length with several native speakers of that language, some of whom spent days with her.^[24]

Reincarnation's Explanatory Value

As a psychiatrist, Stevenson was much impressed that his child subjects not only recalled things from previous lives, they behaved in many ways like the people they recalled having been. These behaviours included things like [phobias for places or instruments of death](#) and [cross-dressing when the previous person was of the opposite sex](#). In a 1977 paper in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Stevenson suggested that reincarnation added a third influence to the development of personality, alongside genetics and upbringing.^[25] He cited examples from cases that showed that reincarnation might shed light on several unexplained features of human personality and biology, including inexplicable phobias and phobias; childhood sexuality and gender confusion; the appearance of unlearned skills; extreme difficulties with parents; vendettas and bellicose

nationalism; unusual birthmarks and other congenital abnormalities; [differences between monozygotic twin pairs](#); even [pregnancy cravings](#). In the reincarnation cases, a mother's pregnancy cravings might match the foods preferred by the previous person and favoured by her child after birth.^[26]

Critics and Supporters

Stevenson had no want of critics, but he had supporters also. His first critics came from within parapsychology. The Indian philosopher [CTK Chari](#) was insistent that the cases were mixtures of mistaken inference, social construction and the acquisition of information by psychic means.^[27] [Louisa Rhine](#), wife of JB Rhine, placed even more emphasis on psi.^[28] She accepted the children's apparently paranormal knowledge, but believed that it was all clairvoyantly obtained. Philosophers [Stephen Braude](#)^[29] and [Michael Sudduth](#)^[30] also promote psi explanations of the cases.

Writers [Ian Wilson](#) and [D Scott Rogo](#) leveled criticisms of Stevenson's methodology although Rogo admitted that his critiques were 'very trivial'^[31] and Wilson acknowledged that his complaints about dissident witnesses applied to very few cases.^[32] Wilson maintained that the fact that the majority of Indian children recalled living in better socio-economic circumstances in the previous life was evidence that the children were fantasizing better lives for themselves,^[33] ignoring the fact that within Indian culture, this would have implied a karmic demotion into the present life, not something the children would have been likely to brag about or their parents to have encouraged or advertised.^[34]

Although these criticisms were not of much moment, they were picked up by members of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), now the [Committee for Skeptical Inquiry](#) (CSI), and used to bludgeon Stevenson. Other self-identified sceptics sought to undermine specific cases. Philosopher [Leonard Angel](#) attacked one of Stevenson's Lebanese cases,^[35] although as Julio Barros showed, his criticisms had little foundation.^[36] Reincarnation researcher [James Matlock](#) has reviewed and thoroughly addressed other sceptical charges.^[37]

In the 1990s, replications of Stevenson's case studies by researchers such as [Antonia Mills](#), [Erlendur Haraldsson](#), and [Jürgen Keil](#) began to alter the appreciation of Stevenson's work in parapsychology.^[38] Stevenson's supporters include Matlock and philosophers [Robert Almeder](#),^[39] [David Ray Griffin](#),^[40] David Lund,^[41] and Peter Preuss.^[42] Almeder has said that Stevenson's case reports make it 'irrational' to think that reincarnation does not occur.^[43]

Other Research in Parapsychology

Spontaneous ESP

Although Stevenson came to focus his attention on reincarnation cases, he also studied spontaneous cases of ESP.^[44] He was especially interested in phenomena that he thought deserved more attention than they had received. An example is pre-conscious telepathic impressions, about which he wrote a book.^[45] In these cases, a person acts on a feeling or hunch without having any visual imagery or conscious awareness of what brought the feelings about. Stevenson also studied precognitive impressions and dreams.

Stevenson's approach to spontaneous cases of all types was in contrast to that of Louisa Rhine, who analysed the considerable number of cases sent to the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke, mostly by the percipients. She took the reports at face value and did not investigate the cases, so could not appreciate the role played by the agent, the person the experience related to. Stevenson investigated

both sides of cases and so saw clearly that the agent was often very much involved. The agent was often in crisis when the experiences occurred and had more motive to send awareness of them telepathically to the percipient than the percipient had to reach out to retrieve them.^[46]

Apparitions and Poltergeists

Generally, [apparitions](#) are visual ghosts, but apparitions may be auditory, olfactory or tactile in addition to or instead of visual. Stevenson had an interest in apparitions as evidence of survival and presented accounts of them in some of his reincarnation case reports.^[47] He also undertook an analysis of apparitions in a classic collection of case reports, *Phantasms of the Living*, published by the Society for Psychical Research in 1886, emphasizing reports that seemed to suggest survival of death more clearly than a strictly hallucinogenic or psi interpretation.^[48] The reincarnation cases he studied had a high incidence of violent death and he discovered the same with apparition accounts in *Phantasms of the Living*. On the whole, there was a great deal more evidence of motivation on the part of deceased agents than living percipients in the apparition cases as well.

Many [poltergeists](#) and outbreaks of poltergeist phenomena have been shown to be centred around living persons, often teenagers. Not all poltergeist phenomena can be explained in this way, however, and Stevenson was intent on showing that it was plausible to posit deceased agents in some cases. Some of his reincarnation cases incorporated poltergeist effects ascribed to deceased agents.^[49] In a journal paper on the subject, he described three cases, two of which he had personally investigated, and presented a list of characteristics that might help discriminate living and deceased agents.^[50] For instance, phenomena tended to be centred round persons with living agents but might be place-centred with deceased agents. The movement of objects typically seems purposeless with living agents but purposeful with deceased agents and the trajectories tend to be simple with living agents but may be complex, involving changes of direction and of speed, with deceased agents.

Near-Death Experiences

The term '[near-death experience](#)' was introduced by [Raymond Moody](#) in 1977, but Stevenson had taken an interest in these experiences for years. He treated them under the heading of out-of-body experiences and was especially concerned with those that included veridical perceptions of the material world. He investigated NDEs in India along with [Satwant Pasricha](#) and made several studies of NDEs together with colleagues in the United States.^[51] In one study, medical records were checked to see how close to death NDErs actually came. Only 45% of the NDErs were judged to have had life-threatening illnesses or injuries, yet some 82.5% of patients believed themselves to have been near death. Apparently a conviction that death is imminent is a more important trigger to these experiences than is the threat of death as such, Stevenson and his colleagues concluded.^[52]

Drop-In Mediumistic Communicators

In the area of mediumship, Stevenson was particularly concerned with [drop-in communicators](#), those who appeared at séances unbidden, were unknown to the medium or sitters, and yet gave verifiable accounts of themselves. He studied many such cases in Europe and the United States and planned to write a book about them. The book never came to be, however, and instead Stevenson published a series of journal papers describing cases of this type.^[53]

Experimental Studies

Stevenson was more concerned with spontaneous cases and survival research than he was with investigating psi in the laboratory, but he contributed to some experimental studies too. He was one of three experimenters involved in tests of card guessing with the high-scoring subject [Pavel](#)

[Stepanek](#).^[54] He undertook to confirm the ability of [Ted Serios](#) to imprint images on Polaroid film by the use of his mind alone^[55] and also investigated instances of metal bending inspired by [Uri Geller](#).^[56]

Professional Posts and Honours

Stevenson was a voting member of the ASPR from 1962 to 1995. He served on the ASPR board of trustees from 1972 to 1981. He was elected president of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) for the 1988-89 term. Stevenson was first elected to the council of the professional [Parapsychological Association](#) (PA) in December 1962. In 1965 and 1966, he served as vice-president, and in 1968 as president of the PA. He was treasurer of the PA in 1971, 1972 and 1978; president-elect in 1979; and president again in 1980. In 1986, he resigned from the PA over concerns that it admitted members who were not properly credentialed, transferring his support to the [Society for Scientific Exploration](#).^[57]

Stevenson was invited by the SPR to give its prestigious Myers Memorial Lecture in March 1982.^[58] In 1998, the Society for Scientific Exploration awarded him its Dinsdale Prize 'for his pioneering research into cases suggestive of reincarnation and his extensive scientific investigations of the evidence for survival of human personality beyond death.'^[59]

Legacy

Anthropologist and reincarnation researcher Antonia Mills, who worked with Stevenson in the 1980s, wrote in her memorial to him:

The legacy of Ian Stevenson to the dynamics of psychology is huge and not yet fully realized. What he has afforded the intellectual, academic, and professional psychiatric world will slowly and inevitably unfold and unfurl and reach out beyond academe to influence the understanding of personality by the larger culture and public. That is already happening not only through the work of Tom Shroder (1999)^[60] but also through the networks and web sites of lay people like Carol Bowman,^[61] who was influenced by the work of Ian Stevenson in her personal understandings of reincarnation in her own children. I am confident that his work will permeate more deeply into the views of Western lay people as well as psychiatric and psychological practice. I hope that his vision of the role of reincarnation in understanding personality will inspire more research carried out with the care that he exercised in his investigations, and that the legacy of his work will lead to new understandings.^[62]

Works

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Articles

Stevenson wrote a great deal, in psychiatry as well as in parapsychology. Many of his articles are listed in the Literature section, below. For a definitive, classified bibliography of his journal papers, see Emily W. Kelly's *Science, the Self, and Survival after Death*.^[63] Many of Stevenson's papers available in full-text PDFs for download from the [website of the Division of Perceptual Studies](#).

James G Matlock

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1.^ Kelly (2013).
- 2.^ Stevenson ([1989](#)).
- 3.^ Stevenson ([1989](#)).
- 4.^ Kelly (2013).
- 5.^ Stevenson ([1989](#)); Matlock (in preparation).
- 6.^ Matlock (in preparation).
- 7.^ Matlock (in preparation).
- 8.^ White ([2008](#)).
- 9.^ Barrington, Stevenson, & Weaver (2005).
- 10.^ Stevenson ([2006](#)).
- 11.^ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/health/psychology/18stevenson.html>
- 12.^ Stevenson ([1960a](#), [1960b](#)).
- 13.^ Matlock (in preparation).
- 14.^ Matlock (in preparation).
- 15.^ Matlock (in preparation).
- 16.^ Stevenson ([1983a](#)).
- 17.^ Stevenson (1987). An updated edition of this book was released in 2001.
- 18.^ For a comprehensive bibliography of Stevenson’s publications, see Kelly (2013).
- 19.^ Stevenson (1997a, vol. 2).
- 20.^ Stevenson (1997b).
- 21.^ Stevenson (1974).
- 22.^ Stevenson (1984).
- 23.^ Matlock (2019), 154-56.
- 24.^ The account of Sharada is included in Stevenson (1984).
- 25.^ Stevenson ([1977](#)).
- 26.^ Matlock ([2018](#)).
- 27.^ eg Chari (1967).
- 28.^ Rhine (1966).

29. ^ Braude (2003).
30. ^ Sudduth (2016).
31. ^ Rogo (1985), 77.
32. ^ Wilson (1982), 23.
33. ^ Wilson (1982), 21-22.
34. ^ Stevenson (2001), 251-53.
35. ^ Angel (1994).
36. ^ Barros (2004).
37. ^ See Matlock (1990, 2018, 2019).
38. ^ All of these authors conducted their own research and published reports of the cases they investigated. For a joint paper, see Mills, Haraldsson, and Keil (1994).
39. ^ e.g., Almeder (1992).
40. ^ Griffin (1997).
41. ^ Lund (2009).
42. ^ Preuss (1989).
43. ^ Almeder (1996), 512.
44. ^ Alvarado & Zingrone (2008).
45. ^ Stevenson (1970).
46. ^ Stevenson and Rhine debated these issues on several occasions. See in particular Rhine (1969, 1970 1970b) and Stevenson (1970a, 1970b).
47. ^ Matlock (2019).
48. ^ Stevenson (1982).
49. ^ Matlock (2019).
50. ^ Stevenson (1972).
51. ^ Greyson (2008).
52. ^ Stevenson, Cook, & McClean-Rice (1989-90).
53. ^ Haraldsson (2008).
54. ^ Pratt, Keil, & Stevenson (1970).
55. ^ Stevenson & Pratt (1968).
56. ^ Pratt & Stevenson (1976).
57. ^ Matlock (in preparation).
58. ^ Stevenson's presidential address was published as Stevenson (1983b).
59. ^ <https://www.scientificexploration.org/dinsdale>
60. ^ Shroder (1999).
61. ^ See <https://www.carolbowman.com/reincarnation-forum>. Bowman is now a clinical psychologist.
62. ^ Mills (2008), 106.
63. ^ Kelly (2013), 391-403.