

*REVIEW ARTICLE*

## **Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives: Past, Present, and Future Research<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**—Ian Stevenson began researching cases of young children who claimed to remember previous lives in 1961. His approach involved a rational, scientific attempt to discern exactly what the children said about a previous life and how much of it could be verified to be accurate for one particular deceased individual. He discovered that cases could be found all over the world. He also learned that memories were not the only items that seemed to carry over for these children. A number had birthmarks that matched wounds suffered by the previous person, and many demonstrated anxieties or emotional longing that appeared to be derived from the previous events that they described.

Researchers have now studied over 2500 cases in a project that is still ongoing. This review traces the history of these investigations and presents the current work, which includes increasing use of a database containing over 200 variables for each case. The conclusions that can and cannot be drawn from the research are examined, and future studies to be done in this area are considered.

**Keywords:** reincarnation cases

### **Introduction**

Ian Stevenson came to the University of Virginia to be the chairman of the Department of Psychiatry in 1957. He had published extensively in medical and psychiatric journals by that time, primarily in the area of psychosomatic medicine, but he also harbored an interest in parapsychology. When the American Society for Psychical Research announced a contest in 1958 for the best essay "on the topic of paranormal mental phenomena and their relationship to the problem of survival of the human personality after bodily death," Stevenson submitted the winning entry, entitled "The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations" (Stevenson, 1960). In this piece, Stevenson reviewed 44 previously published reports from various

sources of individuals, mostly young children, from various parts of the world who had described memories of previous lives.

After Stevenson's paper was published, two people who read it would have a significant impact on his career. One was Eileen Garrett, a well-known medium who was President of the Parapsychology Foundation. She learned of a child in India who was making statements like those in Stevenson's paper. She asked Stevenson if he would be interested in investigating the case and offered him a small grant to do so. He accepted and went to India in 1961. By the time of the trip, he had learned of five cases, but once there, he found 25 cases in four weeks. Similarly, after hearing of one or two cases in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Stevenson spent a week there and saw seven cases. He realized that children's claims of past-life memories were much more common than anyone had known.

Another person who read Stevenson's article with great interest was Chester Carlson, the inventor of xerography, the basis for the Xerox Corporation. Carlson offered to fund research into these cases, and though Stevenson initially turned down the offer because of his obligations as chairman of his department, he eventually began devoting more time to the cases with Carlson's help.

In 1966, Stevenson published his first book of these reports, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Stevenson, 1966). The title is indicative of Stevenson's even-handed approach, in which he did not accept that reincarnation occurred and did not take the cases at face value. Instead, he attempted to document the cases as carefully as possible and at times in exhaustive detail.

With Carlson's funding, Stevenson stepped down as chairman of the department in 1967 to focus full time on the research. He created a small research division (now known as the Division of Perceptual Studies) in which to carry on the work. The following year, Carlson died unexpectedly. Stevenson thought he would have to resume his mainstream career, since he was dependent on Carlson's funding, until it was discovered that in his will, Carlson had left over \$1 million dollars to the University of Virginia for this work. A controversy broke out over whether the university would accept the money, given the unusual nature of the research, but eventually it did and the work continued.

### A Case Example

Kumkum Verma, a girl in India, is an example of the subjects that Stevenson studied (Stevenson, 1975). She was from a village, but when she was 3-½ years old, she began saying that she had lived in Darbhanga, a city of 200,000 people that was 25 miles away. She named the district of the city where she said she had lived, one of artisans and craftsmen, and her family did not know anyone from that district. Kumkum made numerous statements, and her aunt wrote down many of them. Some of her notes were lost, but Stevenson was able to get a copy of 18 of Kumkum's statements that her aunt had recorded. The detail in these statements included her son's name in the life she was describing and the fact

that he worked with a hammer, her grandson's name, the town where her father had lived, and personal details, such as having an iron safe at home, a sword hanging near the cot where she slept, and a pet snake that she fed milk to.

Kumkum's father talked to a friend who had an employee from the district in Darbhanga that Kumkum had mentioned. The employee went there to search for the deceased individual, the previous personality, that Kumkum was describing. He found that a woman had died five years before Kumkum was born whose life matched all of the details listed above. Of note is the fact that Kumkum's father, a landowner and homeopathic physician, visited the family in Darbhanga once but never allowed Kumkum to see them, apparently in part because he was not proud that his daughter seemed to remember the life of a blacksmith's wife.

### Typical Features

Stevenson found that the subjects in these cases tended to talk about a previous life at a very young age, often starting at the age of 2 or 3 years and stopping by the age of 6 to 7 years. They made their statements about previous lives spontaneously, without the use of hypnotic regression. The children described recent lives—the median interval between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the child being only 15 months—and ordinary lives, usually in the same country. Some described being deceased members of their own families, but others, like Kumkum, talked of being strangers in other locations. In those cases, if the children gave enough details, such as the name of the other location, people were often able to go there and find that someone had died whose life matched the details given by the child. The one part of the previous life that was often out of the ordinary was the mode of death, as over 70% of the previous personalities had died by unnatural means, often with violent or sudden deaths.

In addition to the statements, many of the children showed behaviors that seemed connected to the previous lives. Many showed emotional longing for the previous family as well as emotions toward individual family members that were appropriate for the relationship that the previous personality had with the family members. In the cases involving violent death, over 35% of the children showed phobias related to the mode of that death (Stevenson, 1990). In addition, many of the children practiced repetitive play that seemed linked to the previous life, most often acting out the occupation of the previous personality and occasionally re-enacting the death scene (Stevenson, 2000).

Stevenson eventually discovered that these cases could be found wherever anyone looked for them. They have now been found on all continents except for Antarctica, where no one has looked. They are easiest to find in cultures with a belief in reincarnation, and Stevenson had associates looking for cases in a number of those places. In addition, cases have been reported in the West. Stevenson published a recent book of cases from Europe (Stevenson, 2003), and

particularly since the division set up a website, more and more American cases have been found as well (Stevenson, 1983a; Tucker, 2005).

### Continued Work

Stevenson continued to investigate past-life reports after the publication of *Twenty Cases*. In 1975, he began a four-volume series of books called *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*. The different volumes included carefully documented cases from India (Stevenson, 1975), Sri Lanka (Stevenson, 1977), Lebanon and Turkey (Stevenson, 1980), and Thailand and Burma (Stevenson, 1983b). Such work earned respect if not general acceptance. When the first volume was published, the Book Editor of JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association, wrote, "In regard to reincarnation he has painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases in India in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds" (King, 1975).

Stevenson also began to get other researchers interested in the work. These included Satwant Pasricha, a psychologist in India who began assisting Stevenson when she was a student; Erlendur Haraldsson, a psychologist at the University of Iceland; Antonia Mills, an anthropologist who was at the University of Virginia before going to the University of Northern British Columbia, where she is today; and Jürgen Keil, a psychologist at the University of Tasmania. They investigated and published cases independently of Stevenson. In 1994, Mills, Haraldsson, and Keil published a replication study. They produced a combined sample of 123 cases and stated, "The investigations of three independent researchers into reported cases of reincarnation in five cultures in which such cases are reported suggest that some children identify themselves with a person about whom they have no normal way of knowing. In these cases, the children apparently exhibit knowledge and behavior appropriate to that person" (Mills, Haraldsson, & Keil, 1994: 217).

Though this work did not gain widespread acceptance, it did garner respect in some mainstream quarters. In 1996, Carl Sagan, the late astronomer and a founding member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), wrote in *The Demon-Haunted World*, "At the time of writing there are three claims in the [parapsychology] field which, in my opinion, deserve serious study," with the third being "that young children sometimes report details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation" (Sagan, 1996: 302).

Over the years, Stevenson had been studying cases in which the subjects were born with birthmarks or defects that appeared to match wounds suffered by the previous personality. He did not report any of the cases until he could publish them as a collection. This turned out to be quite a large collection, and in 1997, Stevenson produced *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects*, a 2200-page, two-volume collection of over

200 such cases (Stevenson, 1997a). He also wrote a shorter synopsis of that work, entitled *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (Stevenson, 1997b).

In these books, Stevenson presented the cases and described his efforts to verify that the birthmarks or birth defects did in fact match wounds on the bodies of the previous personalities. These efforts included obtaining autopsy reports, if they were available, medical records or police reports, and eyewitness testimony about the wounds if no written records were available. He also included numerous pictures that showed birthmarks that were often not the nondescript blemishes commonly seen on babies. The subjects included a girl born with markedly malformed fingers who remembered the life of a man whose fingers were chopped off; a boy with only stubs for fingers on his right hand who remembered the life of a boy in another village who lost the fingers of his right hand in a fodder-chopping machine; a boy, born with a birthmark on the back of his head that was small and round like an entry wound and a birthmark toward the front of his head that was larger and more irregularly shaped like an exit wound, who remembered the life of a teacher who had been shot from behind and killed; and a girl who remembered the life of a man who underwent skull surgery and who had what Stevenson called the most extraordinary birthmark he had ever seen, a 3-cm-wide area of pale, scarlike tissue that extended around her entire head.

These cases demonstrated that this phenomenon did not consist entirely of children's memories and were not dependent entirely on the memories of informants. The birthmarks and birth defects represented tangible evidence of carryover from a deceased individual and indicated that this carryover could seemingly have physical manifestations on a developing fetus.

### Other Recent Work

In recent years, the focus of the work has extended beyond the individual cases to include examinations of groups of cases. At the University of Virginia, each case is coded with regard to 200 variables, and this information is then entered into a computer database. While this process is a long-range, ongoing project, enough cases have been entered into the database to permit analysis. In 2000, a strength-of-case scale based on birthmarks/birth defects, statements about the previous life made by the children, behaviors of the children that appear related to the previous life, and the distance between the child's family and the family of the previous personality was applied to 799 cases (Tucker, 2000).

The scale showed that the apparent strength of cases did not correlate with the initial attitude that the children's parents had toward their statements, indicating that parental enthusiasm did not make the cases appear stronger than they actually were. The strength of cases did correlate with the amount of acceptance by the previous personalities' families, suggesting that those families used criteria similar to the ones in the scale to assess the children's claims. The strength of the

cases also correlated with the age that the children began talking about the previous life in a negative direction (so the children started earlier in the stronger cases), the amount of emotion that the children demonstrated when discussing the memories, and the amount of facial resemblance between the children and the deceased individuals. These findings were consistent with the idea that in the stronger cases, more past-life residue had carried over to the new life.

Another study making use of the database involved an analysis of memories the children reported of events occurring during the interval between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the child (Sharma & Tucker, 2004). Approximately 20% of the children in these cases make such reports, some describing terrestrial events such as funerals and some reporting activities in other realms. The analysis indicated that the subjects who reported interval memories, compared to those who did not, made a greater number of statements about the previous life that were verified to be accurate, recalled more names from the previous life, had higher scores on the strength-of-case scale, and were more likely to state the names of the previous personalities and to give accurate details about their deaths. Thus, the interval memories appeared to occur along with more memories of a previous life.

Close analysis of 35 such cases in Burma indicated that the interval memories could be broken down into three parts: a transitional stage, a stable stage in a particular location, and a return stage involving a choice of parents or conception. The reports of interval memories by the Burmese children were compared to reports of near-death experiences (NDEs). They showed features similar to the transcendental component of Western NDEs and significant areas of overlap with Asian NDEs. It thus appeared that interval memories and NDEs could be considered parts of the same overall phenomenon, reports of an afterlife. This casts doubt on the explanation of NDEs as fantasies produced by dying brains, since the subjects reporting the interval memories are young and healthy.

Another area of recent research has involved psychological testing of the subjects. Haraldsson has published studies of two groups of subjects in Sri Lanka and one in Lebanon. In the first Sri Lankan set (Haraldsson, 1995), 23 children between the ages of 7 and 13 years who had reported memories of a previous life when they were younger were compared to 23 controls who had not made such reports. The subjects had greater verbal skills and better memory than the controls, performed much better in school, and were more socially active, but were not more suggestible. They obtained a higher problem score on the parent Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) but not on the Teacher's Report Form.

Similar results were obtained with a second group of 27 children in Sri Lanka (Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannpillai, 2000). They performed better in school than controls did, and they were not more suggestible. They showed more behavioral problems on the CBCL, including oppositional traits and obsessional and perfectionistic traits. On the Childhood Dissociative Checklist (CDC) they scored higher than controls, particularly in the areas of rapid changes in personality and frequent daydreaming.

In Lebanon, Haraldsson (2003) found that 30 children who had reported memories of previous lives did not differ from controls on cognitive tests or school performance. They obtained higher scores for daydreaming, attention seeking, and dissociation than controls did, but they did not reflect higher scores for social isolation and suggestibility. Haraldsson speculated that the children might be showing mild symptoms of a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to their past-life statements. He found that children who reported a violent death had higher scores (more symptoms) on the CBCL but not on the CDC, and the question of PTSD requires continued consideration.

### **Explanations for the Cases**

To summarize this phenomenon, children's reports of past-life memories occur worldwide, and 2500 cases have now been studied. Some of the children come from areas with a cultural belief in reincarnation, but some do not. In many cases the child's statements have been verified to be accurate for one particular deceased individual. A number of the children have also had birthmarks or birth defects that match wounds on the body of the deceased individual. In addition, many children show behavioral features that appear linked to their past-life statements, such as emotional longing for the previous family and phobias related to the mode of death of the previous personality. Some have also appeared to recognize people or places from the previous life, and some of these recognitions have occurred under controlled conditions.

Normal and paranormal explanations for the phenomenon warrant consideration. The normal explanation that appears most likely for many of the cases is that faulty memories by the children's families cause them to believe that their children knew more about a previous life than they actually did. Researchers have not investigated most of the cases until after the previous personality has been identified. Thus, the possibility exists that after children make a few general statements about having had a previous life, their parents find another family that has lost a family member, and once the two families exchange information, they come to think that the children demonstrated specific knowledge about the previous life beforehand that they in fact did not (Brody, 1979).

Two studies have addressed this possibility. Stevenson and Keil (2000) compared reports that the families made about cases at different times. Keil re-investigated 15 cases that Stevenson had studied 20 years earlier to see if the reports by the families had become exaggerated over time. He and Stevenson found that informants only told a stronger story during the second investigation in one of the cases. In the second interview, the subject's family described an incident to Keil that they had not mentioned to Stevenson that involved the subject finding a special spoon that the previous personality, the subject's deceased brother, had kept on a high shelf in a fairly inaccessible place.

In three other cases the strength of the reports remained unchanged. Some of the details were different in one report compared to the other, but overall, the cases

had not grown stronger or weaker over time. The reports of the other 11 cases had become weaker by the time that Keil talked with the families. This was often because the informants gave fewer details than they had given to Stevenson years before. Thus, the study showed that the cases had not grown stronger in people's minds over time; in fact, the cases had become weaker as families, rather than creating new statements in their minds, had remembered fewer of them.

In the other study, Schouten and Stevenson (1998) compared 21 cases from India and Sri Lanka in which written records were made of the children's statements before the families met with 82 thoroughly investigated cases from those countries that did not include such records. The average number of statements in the cases with written documentation of the statements was 25.5, while the average in the cases without the records was significantly lower at 18.5 ( $p < 0.01$ ). The percentage of correct statements was essentially the same in both groups—76.7% in the written-record cases and 78.4% in the cases without records.

Thus, the findings were the opposite of what would be expected if informants were crediting the children with more, and more correct, statements than they had actually made before the families met. In the cases without written records, they credited the children with fewer statements, presumably because they had forgotten some of them since no one had written them down. Schouten and Stevenson pointed out that the study showed that if families do credit the children with more knowledge about the previous life than they actually demonstrated before the families met, they do not do so enough to affect the data in a measurable way.

This study, like the previous one, indicated that reports by informants grow less detailed, rather than more detailed, over time, since witnesses in the cases without written records remembered fewer statements by the children than are documented in the cases with written records. Taken together, the two studies cast doubt on what appears to be the best way to explain many of the cases by means of a normal mechanism, that witnesses incorrectly remember the children's statements about the previous life as being more impressive than they actually were.

Currently, the best explanation for the strongest cases appears to be that memories, emotions, and even physical traumas can, at least under certain circumstances, carry over from one life to a subsequent one. This is not to say that such carryover is universal or even common, since children with apparent memories of previous lives may well be the exception rather than the rule in many ways. The cases also do not necessarily confirm religious doctrines such as karma, and "carryover" may be a better description of the process than "reincarnation," a term that has those doctrines associated with it. Regardless of the term used, the cases contribute to the evidence for survival of consciousness after death.

### **Future Research**

Studies of this phenomenon are continuing in several areas. Haraldsson is conducting long-term follow-up studies of the children in these cases. He has

interviewed subjects, now grown, in Sri Lanka and will soon be doing the same in Lebanon. This will produce a more systematic assessment of the development of the subjects after childhood than has previously been available.

At the University of Virginia, work with the database will continue. This will allow for further analysis of particular aspects of the cases, similar to the recent study of memories of events between lives described above. In addition, more focus is being given to American cases. This led to the recent publication of a book about the research, written for a general audience (Tucker, 2005). If the phenomenon becomes better known to the public, it is hoped that more American cases and stronger American cases will become available.

Further psychological assessment of American cases is also planned. Possible studies include evaluation of parents to determine if particular parental traits are associated with the reports as well as a potential attempt to ask young children who have not spoken about a previous life about any memories they may have.

Stevenson died on February 8, 2007, at the age of 88. Before his death, he summarized his career in a final paper (Stevenson, 2006). Despite the void that Stevenson's death creates, a small group of researchers will continue the study of this intriguing phenomenon that he started more than 45 years ago.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from a presentation given at the SSE 25th Annual Meeting, June 10, 2006.

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