

Age and Stimulus in Past Life Memory Cases: A Study of Published Cases

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ABSTRACT: Ninety-five published past life memory cases in which the previous person was identified were analyzed for the relationship between the subject's age at the time of first speaking of the previous life and the presence of a stimulus to the memories on that occasion. These factors also were analyzed in subseries of 30 Indian and 65 non-Indian cases, and the results of the analyses were compared. The proportion of stimulated to unstimulated cases was found to vary significantly between younger and older age groups in the main series ($p = .00005$), the Indian subseries ($p = .0014$), and the non-Indian subseries ($p = .0079$), using chi-square tests. In a two-factor ANOVA with age as the dependent variable, the main effect of type of case (stimulated vs. unstimulated) was significant ($p = .0006$), but the interaction between type of case and culture (Indian vs. non-Indian) was not significant.

Research on reincarnation during the almost 30 years since Ian Stevenson (1960a, 1960b) published his seminal paper, "The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations," in this *Journal*, has been mainly proof-oriented: that is, it has been largely concerned with the investigation of past life memory cases and with the establishment of reincarnation as the best available interpretation of them.

Analyses of process-related variables have been reported from time to time (e.g., see Stevenson, 1970), but process-oriented studies have begun to appear only recently. Chadha and Stevenson (1988) identified two correlates of violent death in past life memory cases, and I (Matlock, 1988a, 1988b) have related the age of the subject at the time of first speaking of the previous life to the strength of the claimed memories.

That the subject's age may play a crucial role in past life memory cases is suggested by the sharp contrast between the reports of adults and children. Children's cases may include not only numerous verifiable statements, but also recognitions of persons associated with the previous life and behavioral and even physical correspondences between the subject and the previous person (Stevenson, 1987).

Children often begin to speak about previous lives spontaneously, without apparent stimulus,² and continue to do so for several years before

¹ I would like to thank the several persons—too many to mention by name—who gave advice and assistance on this paper in the various stages of its development.

² In their phenomenology, past life memories seem to resemble what psychologists call "involuntary" autobiographical memories (see Neisser, 1982; Rubin, 1986). Involuntary memories need not be entirely spontaneous, but may be stimulated by a variety of environmental cues, often quite subtle ones (Salaman, 1970). Examples of stimuli (cues) to past life memories are given below.

the memories begin to fade. Adult recall, by contrast, tends to be stimulated, and it comes in flashes or visions, often during dreaming or meditation.³ Although an initial memory may lead to other related memories in adults, the period during which this occurs is rarely as protracted as the period during which children speak about their memories.

The comparative richness of children's cases means that they are much easier to verify than adult cases. According to Stevenson (1983, p. 191), in the Asian children's cases he has studied, the previous person is identified more often than not. This situation contrasts markedly with adult cases (see Lenz, 1979), in only a few of which the previous person has been identified.⁴ (Following Stevenson's lead, I will call cases with identified previous persons *solved* and cases without identified previous persons *unsolved*.)

Moreover, there are cases transitional in form between the typical child and adult cases. In these transitional cases, subjects are a few years older than the average when they begin to speak about their memories, the memories rarely occur without stimulation, relatively few statements are made, and strong behavioral or physical features are less likely (Matlock, 1988a). Nonetheless, the possible influence of the subject's age on the cases has received little attention from researchers.

For the most part, consideration of the age factor has been confined to an examination of the ages at which subjects begin and cease speaking of previous lives (see Cook et al., 1983; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1979, 1987). Stevenson (1987, p. 102) notes that the generally early age at which subjects first speak of previous lives (case onset) is a crossculturally recurrent feature of past life memory cases.

The only previous study to look at the age of the subject in relation to other factors is that of Chadha and Stevenson (1988). That study found a significant ($p < .01$) relationship between subject's age at case onset and the previous person's mode of death, cases in which violent death had occurred being more likely to have subjects who were younger when they first began to speak of their memories.

A strong effect of subject's age on the cases should occasion no surprise. The child's cognitive development may be expected to relate to the penetration into consciousness of images related to a previous life, whether or not these images derive from a life he or she actually lived before. If, however, the subject's age can be shown to affect such cases,

³ Pasricha, Murthy, and Murthy (1978) describe an adult case with memories occurring during a psychotic break.

⁴ These statements apply to past life memory cases as a group. Some cultural variation is present within the group. Solved cases outnumber unsolved cases in all Asian countries except Sri Lanka. There are many fewer solved than unsolved nontribal American cases (Cook, Pasricha, Samararatne, U Win Maung, & Stevenson, 1983). American child cases may be as weak as American adult cases, although there are some fairly strong American child cases (see Stevenson, 1987, and cf. Lenz, 1979).

we may have found a way of explaining why some cases are strong whereas others are weak and of predicting which cases will be relatively strong or weak.

In Matlock (1988a) I demonstrated the decline of past life memory with subject's age in a descriptive way, but unfortunately data are not available to test this relationship more rigorously. The present study seeks to establish a relationship between the subject's age and the stimulation or lack thereof of the initial memories. This analysis may appear to be a poor substitute for the studies that ideally we would like to do, but it turns out to provide a fairly good measure of the effect of subject's age on past life memory.

My examination of the subject's age in relation to past life memory has been confined to spontaneous cases. I have not considered induced cases (involving, e.g., hypnosis or hallucinogenic drugs) or "past-life readings" of sensitives. Reasons for excluding these types of cases have to do partly with the phenomenological differences between them and spontaneous cases and partly with the fact that very few of them are solved. For discussions of the other types of past life memory cases, see Gauld (1982), Stevenson (1987), and specifically on hypnotic regression cases, Venn (1986).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY

The original idea for this study came from reading reports of past life memory cases and puzzling over the differences between child and adult cases. I began to realize that there were transitional cases between the two forms. Past life memory cases seemed to become progressively weaker as the subjects grew older. It appeared, moreover, that the older the subject at the onset of the case, the more important was the role that stimuli played in eliciting the memories.

I undertook a preliminary study of 88 cases 2 years ago (Matlock, 1988b) and found my hunch to be supported. Since that time I have obtained reports of 21 other cases. I have included these in the present analysis, while excluding from it cases in which the initial memory occurred in other than the subject's normal waking state (e.g., during sleep or meditation). Not only would it be difficult to know for sure what a young child's state of consciousness was at the time of his or her initial memories, but my sample of such cases ($n = 3$) was too small to be meaningful. I have also excluded from the present sample 11 cases reported in publicly available but unpublished theses (Cook, 1986; Pasricha, 1978). The present sample thus overlaps considerably with the sample used earlier (the two samples have 74 cases in common), but does not coincide with it.

Besides trying to confirm my original findings, in the present study I seek to show that the relationship between subject's age and stimulation of the initial past life memories holds crossculturally. Variables that appear

to be independent of culture—such as the young age at which children begin to speak about previous lives, the fading of the cases after a few years, the preponderance of solved cases with younger subjects, the high incidence of violent death and associated short intermission and relatively early age of first speaking of the previous life—may be considered recurrent features of past life memory cases. I expected that the relationship of subject's age at case onset to stimulus would prove to be another recurrent feature of the cases.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: The older the subject at the time of first speaking of a previous life, the more likely the memories are to have been stimulated.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between subject's age and stimulation of the memories is independent of culture; it is a recurrent feature of the cases.

RELATIONSHIP OF AGE TO STIMULUS

Method

Sample and sources. Only published cases involving subjects in their normal waking states at the time of the initial recall were included in the study. Furthermore, only solved cases for which information was given for the age of the subject at onset were included. This last requirement necessitated discarding 30 (solved) cases. Thus, the sample of 95 cases was selected from a larger pool of 125 cases. These 125 cases constitute all of the solved, published cases with initial memories occurring in the subject's normal waking state of which I have been able to obtain accounts, and all but 7 whose references are known to me.⁵ The remaining 7 cases are older cases that appeared in obscure places, and (based on accounts from similar sources that I do have) I believe probably would not provide sufficient data for the purposes of this study.

Sixty of the 95 cases used in this study were investigated and published by Stevenson (1974, 1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1980, 1983, 1987; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1977). Of the remaining 35 cases, the most important sources were Delanne (1924), Durant (1968), Fielding Hall (1902), Sahay (1927), Shirley (1936), Story (1975), and Sunderlal (1924). Minor sources (contributing one case each) were Andrade (1980), Grant (1956), Khare (1930), Lê Quang Hu'o'ng (1972), Lenz (1979), Osborne (1937), Pasricha (1983) and Pasricha and Barker (1981), R. (1915), Rankawat (1959), Rawat (1985), and Scott-Macnab (1975).

⁵ Several new cases were published in 1988 (Andrade, 1988; Mills, 1988; Stevenson & Samaratne, 1988), too late to be included in this study.

Coding. I coded all cases for age and stimulus. Case onset was taken as the subject's first mention of the previous life. In all instances, the status of the case (solved or unsolved) was clear from the account. However, the age of the subject at onset and the nature of the memories (unstimulated or stimulated) frequently was not so obvious.

Care was exercised to exclude from analysis all cases that were vague or ambiguous about the subject's age at onset. For example, those cases that said simply that the subject had begun speaking of a past life "in childhood," without specifying at what age, were excluded. Also excluded were cases whose accounts said explicitly that the subject had had memories for some time before speaking about them and cases in which the main memories emerged in the teen years, but for which there were some prior (although unverified) memories in childhood. However, cases in which behavioral memories were reported to have preceded a subject's statements were included, the age at which the first statement was made being taken as the age at onset. When the subject was said to have made the first statement "as soon as he (or she) began to talk," the age at onset was taken (uniformly) as 1.5 years. (This policy may be one reason for the peak at 1.5 years in Figures 1 and 2.)

Cases were coded as either unstimulated or stimulated, depending on whether or not a stimulus to the initial past life memory was reported. Stimuli included such events as an encounter with a person from the previous life or a visit to a place associated with the previous life. The stimuli appeared to act as associations or cues for the past life memory and were external to the subject (i.e., their reporting depended upon the observation of adults or older siblings who reported the case and not on self-reports of the child subjects). In unstimulated cases, there was no such cueing reported.

Unless the account stated explicitly that there was a stimulus involved, it was assumed to be unstimulated. This practice may have inflated the number of unstimulated cases. Conceivably, stimulation of some sort is involved in all (or nearly all) past life memory cases. This would be particularly true in those cases (of which the sample contained several) in which the subject and previous person were of the same (nuclear or extended) family. Certainly there would be ample opportunity for stimulation in same-family cases, without that fact ever being obvious. (Post hoc analyses [see below], however, found no significant relationship between same-family cases and age of the subject at case onset.) *Unstimulated* may best be read as *without reported stimulus*. This qualification weakens but does not vitiate the distinction between stimulated and unstimulated cases; stimulated cases would be those in which stimuli were more apparent and therefore (presumably) more influential in a case's development.

Procedure. Ages at onset were taken in half-year intervals, from 1 to 15 (the age of the oldest subject in the study). The median age was found to be 2.75 years, and the series was broken into two age groups, around the

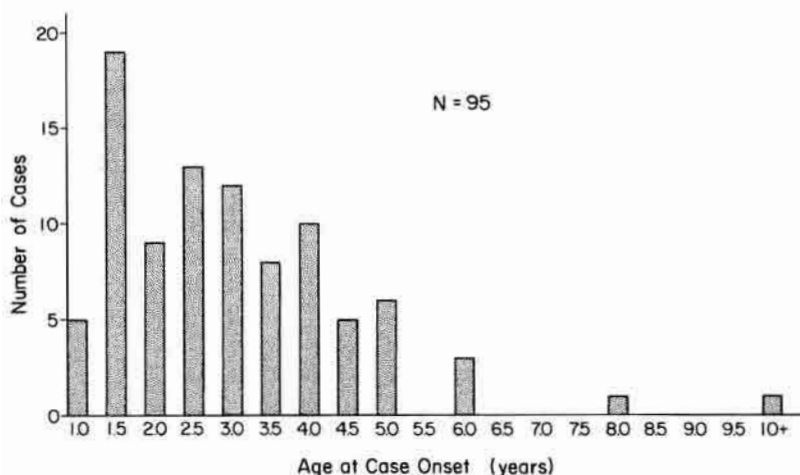


Fig. 1. Distribution of past life memory cases by age of subject at onset.

median.⁶ In the younger age group were cases with subjects 2.5 years or younger ($n = 48$). In the older age group were cases with subjects 3 years or older ($n = 47$).

The comparison of the distribution of the types of case (stimulated or unstimulated) in the two age groups (younger or older) was done using a chi-square test. This statistic was chosen for the main analysis to allow for some imprecision in the ages coded for the subjects. An ANOVA was performed on the same data, and its results are reported below.

Results

Distribution by age. Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of past life memory cases by age of subject at onset, in half-year intervals. The distribution reflects the disproportionate number of past life memory cases with young subjects. As noted, the median age for the series was 2.75 years. The mean of 2.89 years is in agreement with the mean of 37.16 months (3.10 years) given by Cook et al. (1983) for a much larger series ($N = 458$) of solved cases.⁷

Relationship of age to stimulus. Figure 2 shows the relationship of age at case onset (in half-year intervals) to type of case (unstimulated or stimulated).

The proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (43:5) in the younger

⁶ This median split was made for purposes of statistical analysis and should not be interpreted as implying a developmental break between subjects younger and older than 2.75 years.

⁷ Being unpublished, most of these cases were unavailable for the present analysis.

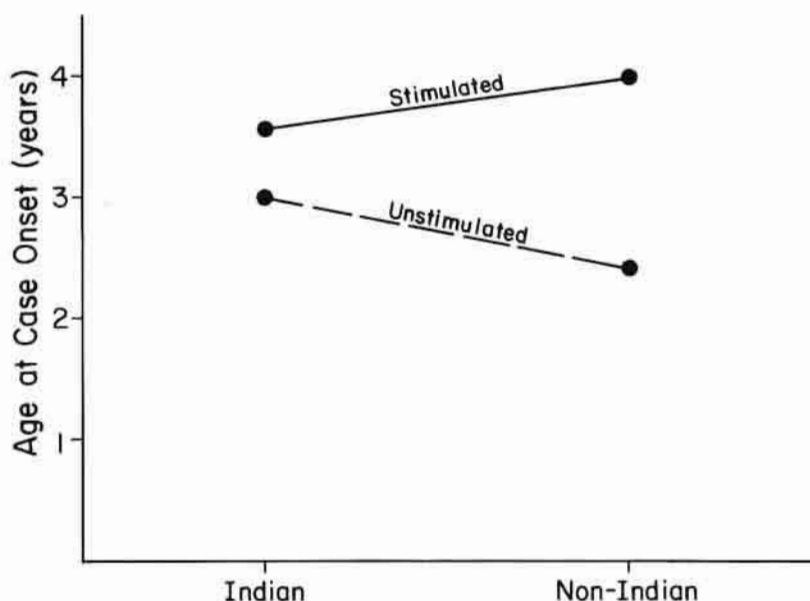


Fig. 2. Distribution of past life memory cases by age of subject at onset and type of case (stimulated or unstimulated).

age group varied significantly from the proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (23:24) in the older age group ($\chi^2 = 16.43$, 1 *df*, $p = .00005$).

ANALYSIS OF INDIAN AND NON-INDIAN SUBSERIES

Method

Indian cases were chosen to test Hypothesis 2 because they represented the largest block of cases in the sample. There were 30 Indian cases, all with Hindu subjects. The remaining 65 cases were represented by 15 other countries (and cultures), none of which contributed more than 11 cases each.⁸

The median age at onset (2.75 years) of the main series was used to determine the division between the younger and older age groups in the Indian and non-Indian subsamples. This resulted in an unbalanced number of cases in the two age groups in the Indian analysis. The younger age group (≤ 2.5 years) included 11 subjects, whereas the older age group (≥ 3

⁸ Sri Lanka (Sinhalese subjects) contributed 11 cases, Turkey (Alevi subjects) 10 cases, and the rest fewer than this. Six nations (Belgium, Cuba, France, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam) contributed one case each.

years) included 19 subjects. The actual median age of the 30 Indian cases was 3 years, and the mean was 3.22 years. The mean conforms to the finding of Cook et al. (1983) of a mean age of 38.06 months (3.17 years) in a series of 179 solved Indian cases.⁹

Both the Indian and non-Indian subseries were analyzed on the relationship of age at case onset to stimulus. The relationship of stimulus to culture (Indian or non-Indian) was also analyzed. In addition, a two-factor ANOVA was performed to determine if there was a difference in the mean ages for Indian versus non-Indian and for stimulated versus unstimulated cases, as well as to see if the two factors interacted to produce differences in ages. The SAS software package used was the Type I sum of squares.

Results

Relationship of age to stimulus in Indian cases. Again, the proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (11:0) in the younger age group varied significantly from the proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (8:11) in the older age group ($p = .0014$, Fisher's Exact Method).

Relationship of age to stimulus in non-Indian cases. The proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (32:5) in the younger age group varied significantly from the proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (15:13) in the older age group with non-Indian cases also ($\chi^2 = 7.06$, 1 *df*, $p = .0079$).

Relationship of stimulus to culture. The proportion of unstimulated and stimulated cases (18:12) in the Indian series did not vary significantly from the proportion of unstimulated to stimulated cases (47:18) in the non-Indian series ($\chi^2 = 1.44$, 1 *df*, $p = .23$).

Comparison of the interaction between variables in Indian and non-Indian cases. Age was used as the dependent variable in the ANOVA. The main effect of type of case (unstimulated vs. stimulated) was highly significant ($F[1, 91] = 12.71$, $p = .0006$). The main effect of culture (Indian vs. non-Indian) was not significant. The interaction between type of case (unstimulated vs. stimulated) and culture (Indian vs. non-Indian) also was nonsignificant ($F[1, 91] = 2.14$, $p = .147$). Figure 3 shows this finding graphically.

POST HOC ANALYSES

Several post hoc, exploratory analyses were performed using the SAS software package that provided the ANOVA reported above. Factors examined included the subject's sex and nationality (European or non-European), the length of the interval between lives, the previous person's manner of death (natural or violent), and the relationship of the subject to

⁹ Most of the cases are unpublished.

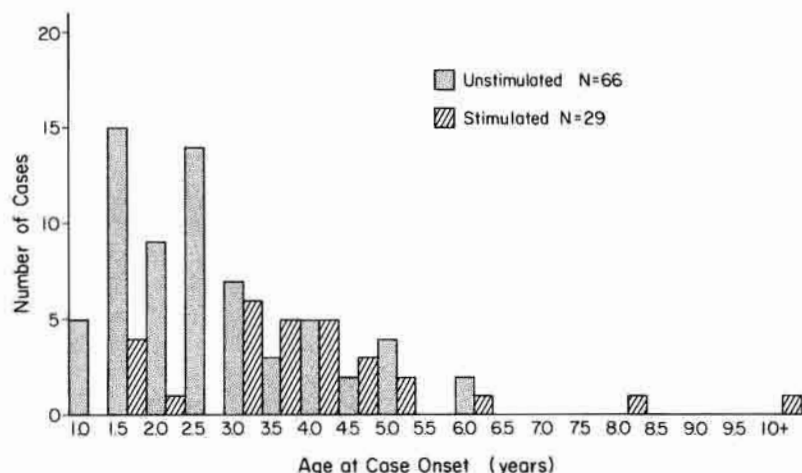


Fig. 3. Mean age of subject at onset as a function of type of case (stimulated or unstimulated) and culture (Indian or non-Indian).

the previous person's family (same family or not), as well as whether the subject's memories were stimulated or unstimulated. Although most tests had theoretical rationales, only one gave a significant result.

As remarked above, it is conceivable that all past life memories are stimulated to some degree, although the stimulus is more apparent with older subjects. If some stimulus is always present, we would expect it to show up particularly often in cases in which the subject and previous person were of the same family. The greater chance of stimulation in same-family cases might then result in a younger age at first speaking of the previous life in these cases than in others. However, a *t* test found no significant difference in the age at case onset in same-family and other cases ($t[87] = -0.536, p = .597$).

Chadha and Stevenson (1988) found that subjects of cases in which the previous person had died violently were significantly younger ($N = 326, t = 3.35, p < .01$) than subjects of cases in which the previous person had died a natural death, but this finding was not confirmed with the present sample ($t[66] = 0.231, p = .819$). Nor was Chadha and Stevenson's finding that the interval between the lives was significantly shorter ($n = 324, t = 4.345, p < .01$) in violent-death cases confirmed ($t[56] = 0.689, p = .495$).

A subjective reading of case reports suggests that the length of the interval between the lives, like the likelihood of the initial memories to be stimulated, increases with the age of the subject. Cases with older subjects appear to involve longer intervals than cases with younger subjects. This impression, however, was not supported ($r[72] = .163, p = .164$).

The length of the interval between lives also appears from case reports

to be longer in European than in non-European cases (with nontribal American cases treated as European and Alaskan tribal cases treated as non-European), but this impression, also, was not confirmed ($t[72] = -0.423, p = .684$). Nationality was examined in relation to subject's age at case onset as well, but this test too gave a nonsignificant result ($t[93] = -1.64, p = .123$).

Male subjects outnumbered females by about 2 to 1 (66% to 34%), a finding similar to that of Stevenson (1986) with a series of 1,152 cases (63% to 37%, solved and unsolved cases combined). A marginally significant ($n = 67, \chi^2 = 4.074, 1 \text{ df}, p = .044$) relationship was found between the subject's sex and the previous person's manner of death, with male subjects figuring more often in violent-death cases than female subjects. Stevenson has not reported the results of a similar analysis, but see his table showing the incidence of the previous person's manner of death by the subject's sex in eight cultures (Stevenson, 1980, pp. 356–357).

The significant relationship between age and stimulus remains this study's most important finding. An exploratory multiple regression using the six variables described above to predict the age of the subject at case onset gave a nonsignificant result ($F[7, 49] = 1.63, p = .149$). The six variables together accounted for only 18.9% of the variance in the age at onset, meaning that factors not examined in this study have considerably more impact on age at onset than do factors that were examined. Interestingly, the only variable taken alone that predicted age was stimulus ($F[1, 49] = 4.23, p = .045$).

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1, which stated that the older a subject at first speaking of a previous life, the more likely the initial memories were to be stimulated, was strongly confirmed. It is difficult to understand how chance or statistical artifacts could explain the magnitude of the result. Nor, given the number of sources and the period of time over which the data were collected, does it seem reasonable to posit consistent sampling error or investigator bias as explanations.

Hypothesis 2, which stated that the effect of subject's age was independent of culture, was also confirmed. A significant effect was obtained with all cases, with Indian cases, and with non-Indian cases. There was no significant difference between the Indian and non-Indian series, which suggests that the impact on the cases of the subject's age at onset is a recurrent feature of them.

Post hoc analyses, moreover, confirm the major influence that stimulus has on the subject's age at his or her initial recall of the previous life. However, although the statistical results are strong, it must be remembered that this study did not involve independent data coding or independent checks on coding decisions. Even more important are the inherent weaknesses of the database employed.

Many of the case reports on which I relied were very brief, even circumstantial, and lacked all but basic information. I was hampered particularly by looking for data that were not considered of central importance to researchers, and so were not systematically recorded by them. Even the data that were collected are not entirely reliable. In investigating cases, researchers typically reached the scene after (sometimes long after) the cases had been solved and were then in a position of interviewing witnesses and doing their best to confirm the facts of the cases for themselves. In very few cases do we have contemporary investigations with written records of a subject's statements made before verification of them was attempted.¹⁰

On the other hand, I would not like my findings to be taken to signify less than I believe that they do. I was careful to exclude the more unreliable cases from analysis, and I chose a statistic that would allow for some variability in the accuracy of the data I did use. The trends nevertheless are strong and consistent. In the present study, both the chi square and ANOVA found a highly significant effect for the relationship between age and stimulus.

The meaning of these findings must remain ambiguous for the time being. The curve in the relationship of age to stimulus may reflect nothing more than the physical and psychological maturation of the subjects (cf. Matlock, 1988a). Young children may be more predisposed to imagery than are older children and adults. Even if so, however, this hypothesis alone is not enough to explain solved past life memory cases, given their veridical nature. Perhaps subjects' imagery is combined with ESP (perhaps retrocognitive ESP), although the lack of consistency in experimental research with children (Palmer, 1978, pp. 146–148) would not lead one to predict the findings of the present study. The possibility remains that subjects of past life memory cases indeed are recalling events from lives they lived before.

The main evidence for or against reincarnation will continue to come from proof-oriented research with past life memory cases. Nonetheless, the results we obtain from process-oriented studies such as the one reported here can assist in our evaluation of individual cases (see Matlock, 1988a) and help us to clarify our thinking in regard to the possibility of reincarnation. The proof and process approaches are complementary, and both are needed if we are to come to a satisfactory understanding of the past life memory phenomenon.

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¹⁰ The three cases recently described by Stevenson and Samaratne (1988) bring the number of cases with written records made before verifications to 24, 12 of them published.

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