

Paranormal Research

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THE DECLINE OF PAST LIFE MEMORY
WITH SUBJECT'S AGE
IN SPONTANEOUS REINCARNATION CASES

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INTRODUCTION: THE TYPES OF REINCARNATION CASE

Cases suggestive of reincarnation may be assigned broadly to one of three classes: (a) Cases of spontaneous past life memory, (b) cases of induced past life memory, and (c) cases consisting of past life readings by psychics or mediums. In older writings on reincarnation, one finds mention of two other classes: (d) Cases based on *deja vu* experiences, and (e) cases involving child prodigies. The evidence for reincarnation derived from these last two classes clearly is inferior to the evidence derived from memories of previous lives, however, and one rarely finds them cited in the modern literature. For an overview of the types of reincarnation case, see Stevenson (1987, page 39-54).

Certainly the most familiar type of reincarnation case today is the hypnotic age regression to previous lives, an example of the induced class of past life memory case. Other induced cases involve memories arising under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs.

There are now any number of hypnotic regression accounts in the popular literature, including several volumes of "past life therapy" case studies by clinical psychologists. Unfortunately, for all its popularity, the age regression type of case does not offer much more evidence for reincarnation than do cases of *deja vu* and child prodigies.

The regression material is dramatic--often very dramatic, and highly persuasive for that reason--but it doesn't check out very well. Often it is blatantly wrong. Occasionally a few details are verified, but only rarely is the reputed previous person shown to have existed. For its part, past life

therapy can be strikingly effective, and some therapists argue that this is evidence that the accounts are genuine memories. But this is a fallacy. Psychoanalysis realized early on that the description of imaginary events could have the same healing power as the retrieval of actual memories. These stories may simply provide a psychologically safe vehicle for reliving and relieving a trauma. In sum, if the evidence for reincarnation rested on the hypnotic regression material, it would be weak indeed.

Cases of past life readings by psychics or sensitives also receive much attention today. They are a major component of the contemporary channeling scene. Now, there is an obvious difference between having memories of a previous life oneself and being told by someone else that one has lived this life. For this reason alone, cases involving sensitives are inferior to other types of case offering evidence of reincarnation. But they are weak also in that the material they provide is not very good from an evidential point of view. The cases are usually impossibly vague, and when verifiable data is given, as with so many of the hypnotic cases, it simply does not check out.

The least well known class of reincarnation case is the spontaneous case. This is ironic, for this is also the strongest class from an evidential point of view--the class upon which the argument for reincarnation, such as it is, can be said to depend.

Of the spontaneous cases, certainly the best are those involving young children, investigated over the last 30 years by Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia (see Stevenson, 1987). In these cases, a child, usually between ages 2 and 5, begins to speak about a previous life. He may say he was so-and-so, lived in such-and-such a place, was married to this person, died in that way. He may talk so much about the previous life and demand so often to be taken to the place of that life that finally his parents oblige. Usually what the child has been saying checks out upon investigation. Moreover, on travelling to the town of the previous life, the child may find his way unaided to the previous home. Once there he may recognize people and things and ask about others.

Not only children, but adults also sometimes claim to remember previous lives spontaneously (see, e.g., Lenz, 1979). Adult memories are very much weaker than child, however, and for several reasons. While many children give the impression that the memories are always with them, adults typically remember previous lives in flashes, a scene or a few related scenes at a time. Adults identify less strongly with the memories than do children. Finally, adults much less often remember names, of people or of places, which means that in adult cases the previous person is identified much less frequently than in child cases.

The sharp contrast between child and adult spontaneous reincarnation cases suggests that the age of the subject may play an important role in them. However, this potential factor has received little attention from researchers. In this paper, I will try to show that the typical adult case is only an impoverished form of the same type as the child. I will then outline an hypothesis of past life memory that explains why this should be so.

One last introductory comment. I will not be concerned in this paper with the quality of the evidence for reincarnation, beyond selecting for discussion only cases in which the previous person has been identified. Issues of verification and interpretation have been dealt with extensively elsewhere (see, e.g., Chari, 1978; Gauld, 1982, page 172-87; Stevenson, 1987, page 141-64). In my opinion, the evidence for reincarnation from the spontaneous cases is now strong enough to be taken at face value, for heuristic purposes. I would like to see how far we can go with our analysis of cases, if we accept them for what they claim to be. But this should not be construed as a commitment to belief in reincarnation in any traditional sense. Although I believe that the data from the spontaneous cases suggests that something like what we call reincarnation does occur, I am not at all sure what this means.

THE TYPES OF SPONTANEOUS PAST LIFE MEMORY

One of the most important findings of reincarnation research with spontaneous cases has been that child subjects may give much more than statements about a past life to substantiate their claim to have lived before as certain persons. They may recognize persons who figured in the past life, and taken to the town of the past life they may find their way unaided to the previous person's home. Child subjects may exhibit personality traits and behaviors which are characteristic of their claimed previous persons. Behaviors may include phobias associated with the previous person's death (e.g., a child who claims to remember a death by drowning may have a phobia of water), and skills, including language skills (for a consideration of the last, see Stevenson 1974b, page 14-8). Finally, there may be physical correspondences between the subject and the previous person, such as a subject's birthmark which matches in size, shape, and position death-wounds or other marks on the previous person's body. Other physical correspondences include physical deformities, internal diseases, and general likeness about the hair, eyes, stature, and so forth.

I will speak of four types of past life memory: verbal, imaged, behavioral, and physical. By verbal memory I mean the recall of proper names, dates, or other facts. By imaged mem-

ory I mean the purely imaged part of memory, that which may allow children to recognize persons or places (imaged memory may, of course, be expressed verbally, but note that this is different from what I call verbal memory). Behavioral memory will denote correspondences in behavior between the subject and previous person. Physical memory will denote similarities of a physical nature. I realize that to speak of behavioral and physical memories is somewhat a violation of our usual understanding of the word memory, but I believe the terms are conceptually useful, if not entirely satisfactory from a philosophical point of view.

The importance of distinguishing among the types of past life memory lies in the fact that they do not always run together. Frequently one finds one or more of the types without the others. Also, different factors appear to affect the strength of different types of memory. For instance, cases in which the previous person died in infancy, childhood, or youth tend to have weaker behavioral memories than do cases in which the previous person died in mature or older adulthood. The types of memory also, as we shall see, appear to decline at different rates as the subjects of the cases age.

THE TRANSITION FROM CHILD TO ADULT PAST LIFE MEMORY

I will illustrate the transition from child to adult forms of spontaneous past life memory by describing five cases, all investigated and published by Stevenson. The cases are selected from a large number of published cases, but their choice is not as subjective as might be thought. Most spontaneous reincarnation cases involve very young subjects, and the number of cases per age drops off precipitously with subjects older than 4 at case onset (the time of the first mention of the previous life).

Readers should bear in mind that I have given summaries only of the cases. Full support for the cases as suggestive of reincarnation will be found in the case reports.

The Case of Bishen Chand Kapoor

This case was first investigated by Sahay (1927, page 9-15) and later reported, with additional details, by Stevenson (1975, page 176-205). It is one of the small group of cases in which a written record of the subject's statements was made before verification was attempted.

Bishen Chand made his first reference to a previous life at the age of 10 months. This utterance was the word "pilvit" or "pilivit," corresponding to Pilibhit, a town 50 kilometers away. As he began to speak more coherently, Bishen Chand gradually added details of a previous life in Pilibhit,

including the name of the person he said he had been, Laxmi Narain. At age 5 1/2 he was taken to Pilibhit, where he recognized places and made more statements about the previous life, and where both earlier and later statements were found to correspond, in fact, to one Laxmi Narain, who had died two years before Bishen Chand was born.

In addition to verbal and imaged memories, Bishen Chand had behavioral and physical memories. He exhibited a precocious sexual interest in women, asked for meat, and as a young child was found drinking alcohol, although others of his family were vegetarians and teetotalers. Laxmi Narain, however, had had a lover, and had taken meat and alcohol. Bishen Chand showed (for his family) an unusual interest in kite flying, in music, and a desire to wear expensive clothes, all of which things matched the habits of Laxmi Narain. Bishen Chand could play without instruction a musical instrument (the tabalas) that Laxmi Narain had played and used correctly some words of Urdu, a language with which Laxmi Narain had been acquainted. Finally, both Bishen Chand and Laxmi Narain suffered from eye infections. Bishen Chand was given a special ointment that had worked with Laxmi Narain, and this helped to clear up his condition as well.

The Case of Mallika

This case was first reported by Stevenson (1974a, page 105-8) in Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation.

From early childhood, Mallika was strongly attracted to her family's upstairs neighbor, Srimati Mourougassigamany. When she was barely 4, she visited this woman's apartment for the first time. Noticing some embroidered cushions there, she claimed to have made them, and when told that they had been made by a woman who had died 10 years before, she claimed to have been this person--who actually was Srimati Mourougassigamany's deceased sister.

Mallika began to call Srimati Mourougassigamany "sister," but was asked to address her as "aunt" instead. When Mallika met Srimati Mourougassigamany's brother, she immediately called him "brother," and became equally attached to him. Behavioral memories included a certain way of bathing, certain gestures, and a manner of walking independently and ahead of people. Mallika also correctly identified people in photographs and made a specific association to the name of a cow Srimati Mourougassigamany's sister had owned.

Mallika's few statements about the previous life were always stimulated by objects, persons, or events occurring in her presence. She had no completely spontaneous verbal or imaged memories, and while her behavioral memories were moderately strong, no physical memories were reported.

The Case of Suleyman Andary

This case was reported by Stevenson (1980, page 52-76) in the third volume of his series, Cases of the Reincarnation Type.

As a small child, Suleyman Andary had some vague memories of having lived before. He remembered the name of a village, Gharife, and that he had had an olive-press there. At age 5 or 6, he spoke some names of people in his sleep. When told of these the next morning, he identified them as children he had had in his past life. However, fuller memories did not begin to come to him until about age 11, on an occasion when his grandmother came to his house and asked to borrow a religious book. He refused to lend this to her, and pressed to explain why, suddenly recalled that in the previous life he had not allowed religious books to leave his house.

Subsequently Suleyman made an effort to recall further details of the previous life, and succeeded in bringing forth some. Among other things, he remembered the name of the person he said he had been, Abdallah Abu Hamdan, and that he was the mukhtar (mayor) of Gharife. When he was 13 Suleyman was taken to Gharife, where he led the way to Hamdan's home, and where he made additional statements as well as recognitions of persons and places.

On the whole Suleyman's verbal and imaged memories were not strong, and neither were his behavioral. Although he liked to carry himself like the important adult he believed he had been, and was much more interested in religion than were his family or peers, he lacked the specific behavioral memories typically found in cases with younger subjects.

The Case of Pratomwan Inthanu

This case was reported by Stevenson (1983, page 140-70) in Cases of the Reincarnation Type, Vol. 4.

Pratomwan Inthanu was about 20 when, during meditation, she remembered fragments of two previous lives. The memories surfaced quickly and within a short period of time, in the form of a series of images, sense impressions, and voice-overs that gave the names of related persons and places.

Both previous persons died in infancy, the more recent one at the age of three months. Pratomwan became aware of details of this baby's illness and death and of certain events occurring after its death, including the unusual circumstances of its burial. When opportunity afforded, Pratomwan visited the village indicated by her memories, there located the parents of this child and the undertaker who had buried her, and verified her detailed recollections. She spontaneously recognized the undertaker, and called him by name.

Pratomwan's memories of the second (and probably earlier)

previous life were less detailed, although they included sufficient information to permit her to verify them as well. The previous person involved in this second set of memories had died at 13 months. Again, Pratomwan travelled to the town of this life and found her way unaided to the previous person's family home. There she pointed to one of a series of photographs and said, correctly, that this had been her previous person's mother, who had since died. She also answered correctly four test questions put to her by her previous person's father.

Pratomwan's memories stand in sharp contrast to those of Bishen Chand, Mallika, and Suleyman Andary. Pratomwan's imaged memories were dominant. Her verbal memories, while strong enough to be verified, nevertheless were relatively weak, and she had no reported behavioral or physical memories. Her case is fairly typical of adult spontaneous cases, although its veridical elements make it considerably stronger than most.

The Case of Uttara Huddar

So far we have seen the types of past life memory declining as the subjects of the cases advance in age. Cases with the youngest subjects may exhibit all four types of memory. By the time a subject is four or five, physical memories tend not to be reported, and by the time he or she is in the teens, behavioral memories are weak. Adult cases consist of little more than vague imaged memories, occasionally--as in the case of Pratomwan Inthanu--fortified with some veridical verbal memories. With the case of Uttara Huddar (Stevenson, 1984, page 73-153), we take up an anomalous adult case.

Uttara Huddar enjoyed good health until her twenties, when she began to be afflicted by various physical ailments. For several years she was treated as an outpatient by a Dr. Joshi, who in time admitted her to his private hospital. While at the hospital, Uttara took part in group meditation, and her personality began to change. She became irritable and distracted, she dressed differently, and she began to speak a language which was identified as Bengali. She was banished from Dr. Joshi's hospital after she burst into his room one evening (as he was dining with a female assistant) and began berating him in this new language. Uttara was almost 33 at this time.

Uttara returned to the home of her parents, who knew no Bengali. In order to cope with her, they introduced her to Bengali speakers. Uttara, in her new personality, then gave her name as Sharada, and began to tell of her life in Bengal. The last thing she remembered before awakening in this strange place was being bitten by a snake. Now she wanted nothing so much as to return home to her husband and to give birth to the

child she was carrying. Sharada showed herself to be intimately acquainted with Bengali geography and customs, albeit of a century or more before. She gave out several names of her husband's family, which were subsequently found listed on that family's genealogy. (Unfortunately, because the genealogy is confined to the male line, Sharada's existence itself remains unconfirmed.)

Sharada did not represent a permanent change of personality for Uttara, but rather a periodic phase that she went through. Sharada phases lasted for anywhere from a day to several weeks over the course of years. The phases were usually triggered by certain days, called Ashtami days; Sharada said she had been bitten by the snake on an Ashtami day. When she was out, Sharada suppressed Uttara's personality entirely, although with time the phases became less frequent and long, and the two personalities began to merge.

We thus have here an adult case with imaged, verbal, and behavioral memories stronger than those found in any child case so far published. It will be best if I reserve my final comment on this case until I have developed my hypothesis of past life memory, but for now I will point out the importance of meditation and stimuli in this case. Uttara's memories did not come to her in meditation, as Pratomwan's did, but meditation clearly played a role in releasing them. Another factor leading to Sharada's initial emergence may have been the presence of Dr. Joshi, whom, as it turned out, Sharada believed to be her husband in new physical form. Later phases were triggered by Ashtami days, anniversaries of the day of Sharada's death.

FACTORS OTHER THAN AGE THAT AFFECT PAST LIFE MEMORY

The age of the subject at the onset of a reincarnation case appears to be an important variable affecting the strength of past life memory, but it is not the only variable. I have shown how the types of past life memory decline at different rates with the advancing age of the subject, but the types of memory are variously affected by other factors as well.

Behavioral memory is related to the previous person's age at death, with the strongest behavioral memories occurring in subjects whose previous persons died in the ages of maturity (Stevenson, 1983, page 98-9). Physical memory is related to the previous person's mode of death (natural or violent), with the strongest physical memories occurring when the previous person died violently (Stevenson, 1970, page 8-9). Verbal memory is related to the geographical distance between lives; it is very weak in so-called "international cases," where the subject and claimed previous person are natives of different countries (Stevenson, 1983, page 215-6).

The interaction of these factors with the subject's age at the time of the past life memory is bound to be a complex matter, whose full elucidation will require considerably more and better data than presently are available. So far analysis has been done with only one of these variables. Chadha and Stevenson (in press) found that cases with previous persons who met violent deaths had subjects who were significantly younger when they began speaking about their memories than did cases with previous persons who died natural deaths ($p < .01$).

The relationship of subject's age to the strength of past life memory appears to be affected also by two other variables not addressed by the present study--the state of consciousness of the subject at the time of the initial memory, and the presence or absence of a stimulus to the initial memory.

In the majority of child cases, past life memories arise in the waking state, without any alteration of consciousness. Adult cases, however, often do involve altered states of consciousness, especially dreaming or meditation. The cases of Pratomwan Inthanu and Uttara Huddar illustrate this point.

I will report elsewhere a study that found a highly significant ($p = < .0001$) relationship between subject's age group (younger or older) and type of case (stimulated or unstimulated). My sample consisted of 95 published spontaneous cases in which the previous personality was identified. I used a median split to determine the break between the two age groups. Cases with subjects in the older age group were significantly more likely to have a stimulus reported than were cases with subjects in the younger age group. Recall that while the infant Bishen Chand Kapoor's memories were unstimulated, stimuli were reported in the cases of Mallika, Suleyman Andary, and Uttara Huddar, all older subjects.

Pratomwan Inthanu's memories were not stimulated, so far as we know, and this is something of which to take note, since Pratomwan also was an older subject. But Pratomwan's memories emerged in the course of meditation. Dream and meditation cases as a rule do not involve stimuli, although these cases occur commonly in the older age group. Elsewhere (Matlock, 1988, page 68) I have speculated that the altered consciousness in these cases might help bypass an unconscious blockage and allow the memories to surface in the absence of stimulation.

AN HYPOTHESIS OF PAST LIFE MEMORY

I am now ready to frame an hypothesis of past life memory. Briefly, this holds that children recall previous lives more readily than adults because they are physically and psychologically less mature than adults. Children's memories are more likely to arise spontaneously for the same reasons. As

the child matures, the memories penetrate with increasing difficulty, until by adulthood they are only a pale reflection of what they were in childhood. Stimulation is almost always required for past life memory to break into consciousness in adulthood, although altered states of consciousness may facilitate recall as well.

We can now come to a better understanding of the case of Uttara Huddar. I have suggested that past life memories penetrate in children comparatively easily because of children's relative physical and psychological immaturity. Children may be able to assimilate their past life memories more easily for the same reason. Uttara Huddar's past life memories may have penetrated as fully as they did because Uttara, at age 33, could not assimilate the memories as easily as she would have been able to do as a child. The fact that there was observed some blending of the personality of Sharada with that of Uttara strengthens the plausibility of this explanation.

My hypothesis can be extended in another direction to address an issue raised by C. T. K. Chari. Chari (1978, 1981) has charged that past life memory cases contain demonstrable errors and fantasies, using as examples, however, cases that are not spontaneous past life memory cases, and which thus can have no bearing on them (Matlock, 1988, page 64). Nonetheless, I would not be surprised to find the rate of error and fantasy intrusion increasing with subject's age at case onset. This is because, with increasing maturity, I would expect the subject's psychological defensiveness to increase. Past life memories would be blocked more often, and those that were allowed to pass would be more likely to be transformed. (For an example of a case with an identified previous person in which the subject made a large number of errors, see the case of Rakesh Gaur [Pasricha, 1983; Pasricha and Barker, 1981]. *Rakesh was 5 at the onset of his case.*)

I will be moving on to a discussion of the reincarnation process, but first I would like to comment on the applicability of my hypothesis to induced past life memory cases. Theoretically, induced cases could be accommodated by my hypothesis as examples of nonwaking cases, inasmuch as hypnotic and drug states are altered state of consciousness. However, cases of these types include not only many fewer verified statements but also many more demonstrable errors than spontaneous cases (Stevenson, 1987, page 42).

Induced cases have much less claim to being instances of genuine memory than do spontaneous cases; at the least, it is much easier to show how fantasy has entered into them. Elsewhere (Matlock, 1988, page 68) I have suggested that the weaknesses of these cases may be related to the fact that the "memories" are induced, rather than spontaneous. Whether or not this is so, induced cases appear to call for different explanatory mechanisms than spontaneous cases, and my hypothesis is not intended to account for them.

CONCLUSION: THE PROCESS OF REINCARNATION

I have demonstrated in a descriptive way the decline of physical, behavioral, verbal, and imaged past life memory with a subject's advancing age at the time of the first mention of the previous life. I have also cited statistical studies with large numbers of cases that reveal relationships between a subject's age at case onset, the strength of past life memory, and other factors. These findings I have then incorporated into an hypothesis.

My hypothesis, I believe, makes intuitive sense; but it supposes the occurrence of reincarnation. Some readers may find it difficult to accept my hypothesis for that reason. Although this paper was not intended to address the question of whether reincarnation occurs, or how it might, I will conclude with a few remarks on these subjects. Reincarnation is commonly thought to face formidable philosophical and scientific obstacles, but I will try to show that these obstacles are less imposing than they are imagined to be. Insofar as I am speaking now about the reincarnation process rather than past life recall, my comments apply to all classes of reincarnation case, although they are directed specifically at cases of the spontaneous type.

It will come as no surprise, I am sure, that there are philosophers on both sides of the fence as regards reincarnation. The American philosopher C. J. Ducasse (1961), himself well disposed to the idea, reviewed the place of reincarnation in the history of Western thought. As Ducasse showed, Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus, as well as a great many modern philosophers--Hume, Kant, Fichte, Schopenhaur, Renouvier, McTaggart, James Ward, C. D. Broad--found the notion intelligible, if not congenial. On the opposing side are Terence Penelhum (1970) and Antony Flew (1972). Their objections turn on the difficulties of conceiving of disembodied survival, although Flew (1972, page 141-2) suggests that survival in some sort of astral form is conceivable. Thus, we have the way open to an coherent view of reincarnation suggested by a skeptical philosopher. Interestingly, very similar ideas are put forward by Stevenson (1987, page 237-60) coming from the vantage not of philosophy, but of field investigation.

Perhaps of greater concern than philosophical clarity to most readers is the seeming difficulty of reconciling the idea of reincarnation with the data and concepts from other areas of scientific investigation. There are three key problems with the reincarnation data, from the scientific point of view. First, Western science does not presently accept that any part of the human being can exist apart from the physical body; consciousness is an epiphenomenon of the brain, and when the brain dies, consciousness ceases. Second, current con-

cepts in biology have no place for outside influences on morphogenesis, the coming into being of form; DNA is believed to encode all the information necessary for the development of the individual. Third--as concerns the memory of previous lives--although the trace theory of memory has come to seem unlikely, neurobiologists continue to hold that the storage sites of memory will ultimately be found in the brain.

What is important to realize is that all of these dominant positions involve open questions. Work is actively underway in all these areas, and in all there are prominent persons who have dissented from the dominant view. Karl Lashley spent a lifetime probing the brain for the "engrams" of memory before deciding that they were not there (Lashley, 1950). Wilder Penfield, who devoted his career to the study of brain mechanisms, eventually came down on the side of an interactionist model of brain and mind (Penfield, 1975).

Of greatest interest to us, however, is the controversial work of Rupert Sheldrake (1981, 1988). Sheldrake's ideas concern the concept of morphogenetic and motor fields that govern the creation and maintenance of form and function. Biological entities would interact with these fields through "morphic resonance," which would provide also for their stability over time. Entities would resonate most closely with fields most closely resembling their own; the fields most closely associated with any individual entity would be that of its own past states.

Sheldrake (1982; 1988, page 210-22) extends his theory to explain memory. Memory would simply be morphic resonance with one's past states. This approach seems to me very promising, but when Sheldrake argues that past life memory may be explained as morphic resonance with the past states of others (Sheldrake, 1982, page 75; 1988, page 221), I think he goes wrong. Recall that by his theory we resonate most closely with our own previous states. Why should the states with which we resonate not be those of our own previous selves, assuming reincarnation to occur?

Notice now that Sheldrake's hypothesis can account for more than verbal memories of previous lives. His morphogenetic fields would provide a natural mechanism for the transfer of physical memories, and his motor fields for behaviors. Moreover, his hypothesis of formative causation is compatible with the astral body concept of survival put forward by Antony Flew (1972, page 141-2) and the "psychophore" concept of reincarnation postulated by Ian Stevenson (1987, page 237-40). We need only conceive of the astral body or psychophore as a physical reflection of the morphogenetic field.

Sheldrake's hypothesis is as yet unproven, although it is experimentally testable, and there already exists some experimental data in its support (Sheldrake, 1981, page 181-91; 1988, *passim*). Sheldrake's ideas have much going for them, although no doubt his hypothesis will undergo some adjustment

and refinement in the course becoming established, if it does become established. We should not bind ourselves too firmly to Sheldrake's ideas to explain the data of the reincarnation cases, although ideas of this sort may ultimately be what is required to explain the cases.

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