



ESSAY

# Clarifying Muddied Waters, Part 2: What the Sudduth-Tucker Debate About James Leininger Suggests For Reincarnation Research

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## HIGHLIGHTS

Themes raised during recent debates of a highly controversial case of reported reincarnation offer constructive insights for setting research standards to improve new studies.

## ABSTRACT

Part 1 of this invited paper presented a secure timeline for the James Leininger reincarnation case, showing Michael Sudduth's criticisms of it to be unfounded. Part 2 begins with an analysis of the exchange in this journal between Sudduth and Jim Tucker over Tucker's investigation, then recommends improvements that might be made in the investigation and reporting of reincarnation cases to address criticisms, overcome a will to disbelieve in the evidence, and reach scientists and scholars open to following the research findings where they lead. Proposals are grouped under three headings: Case Study Methodology, Reporting Standards, and Statistical Analysis.

## KEYWORDS

Criticism of reincarnation research; reincarnation research methodology

## INTRODUCTION

In inviting me to join the debate between Michael Sudduth (2021c, 2022b) and Jim Tucker (2022) over the James Leininger reincarnation case, James Houran wrote:

I wondered whether you might be willing to prepare a commentary that would follow their exchange in which you assess the valid points from each author and then propose a standardized research protocol to help guide future case

studies on reincarnation. Or, at least outline what you think are the key variables that must be considered when striving to "solve" these cases in a way that controls for confirmation bias, etc.

I accepted because I thought it would be helpful to provide an independent appraisal of the Leininger case and of the exchange between Sudduth and Tucker, but even more because of the opportunity to consider what might be improved in investigating and reporting reincarnation cases. In Part 1 of this paper (Matlock, 2022b), I



presented a secure timeline for the case, backed by supporting documents sent to the Psi Open Source repository. That secure timeline undermined Sudduth's main assertions, and I came down decisively on Tucker's side of the debate. In Part 2, I analyze rhetorical aspects of the Sudduth-Tucker exchange and present recommendations for improvements in reincarnation case study methodology and reporting.

## SUDDUTH VERSUS TUCKER

The apparently successful verification of James Leininger's past-life memory claims was first described in *Soul Survivor*, a book directed to the general reader by his parents with the assistance of a professional writer (Leininger et al., 2009). Jim Tucker was able to begin his investigation only after the publication of *Soul Survivor*, but he has since written about the case on three occasions (Mills & Tucker, 2015; Tucker, 2013, 2016). Tucker's 2016 contribution was an article in the journal *Explore*, where he focused on James's memory claims and associated behaviors mentioned in an unaired pilot for a proposed television series entitled *Strange Mysteries*. The *Strange Mysteries* segment was taped before the person to whom James referred was identified and constitutes "early-bird" documentation of his past-life-related statements and behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

Early-bird cases are prized because the subject's memory claims and witness testimony are uncontaminated by knowledge acquired after the previous life has been identified. The Leininger case is widely regarded as one of the evidentially strongest American reincarnation cases, but that is not how Sudduth perceives it. For Sudduth, the case has numerous problematical aspects to which he has drawn attention in blog posts (2021a, 2021b, 2022a) and a paper published in this journal (2021c). Tucker (2022) replied to Sudduth's paper, followed by a response from him (Sudduth, 2022b). The journal issue with their exchange also included Part 1 of the present paper (Matlock, 2022b). I begin Part 2 with a consideration of Sudduth's (2022b) response to Tucker (2022).

### Structure and Cogency of the Arguments

Tucker (2022) concentrates on the validation of James's memory claims and concludes that "much of Sudduth's (2021c) paper is ultimately beside the point" (p. 89). Sudduth (2022b), in turn, opens his response by arguing that Tucker's reply is mostly beside the point. "Tucker's response is largely focused on defensive posturing and cherry-picking claims . . . and trying to show that my depiction of the James Leininger case involves

various 'distortions, mischaracterizations, and outright misinformation' (p. 84)." Sudduth concedes, "This could be instructive and effective as a critique," adding, "but only if Tucker showed how his purported corrections and narrative amendments were consequential to the cogency of my arguments" (2022b, p. 91). He elaborates:

[Tucker] doesn't say much, if anything, about my *arguments*—for example, what specific conclusion I draw from the facts I present, and how that conclusion feeds into a wider argument. On occasion, he tries to address what he thinks I'm arguing, but his objections betray various confusions about the content and structure of my argument—for example, not understanding how cumulative case arguments work or how to distinguish claims essential to an argument from those that are of minor significance or tangential. Tucker's response may be a passionate exercise in apologetics, but it does little to address the cogency of my arguments. (Sudduth, 2022b, p. 91; his italics)

It appears that Sudduth, a philosopher, and Tucker, a child psychiatrist, have different expectations regarding academic discourse. Tucker's (2022) thesis is simple. He emphasizes what he understands to be the crux of the matter, the question of whether James Leininger's account of what befell James Huston, Jr., matches what happened to James Huston, Jr. Sudduth (2021c), on the other hand, raises questions not only about the basis on which James Leininger's statements can be confirmed as applying to James Huston, Jr., but about what James Leininger said, and when, because he does not trust James's parents as witnesses. Sudduth hints that the problems he sees with this case plague reincarnation research generally.

There is nothing wrong in principle with Sudduth's approach; reincarnation research certainly can benefit from a hard look at problems of this kind. However, to be appreciated, skeptical scrutiny should meet the same standards as the work it critiques. There should be feedback between surmises and facts in evidence, and unsupported surmises should be surrendered or, at least, tempered. If the facts point in directions other than an a priori assumed one, the proper way forward is to accept the evidence and move on to the next issue, not to continue levying allegations which have been proven wanting. Unfortunately, the latter tack is pursued by Sudduth (2022b) in his response to Tucker. He summarizes the "main threads" of his paper (Sudduth, 2021c) thus:

(i) "The Leiningers are not reliable as informants"

(Sudduth, 2022b, p. 92).

Tucker acknowledges the inconsistencies in the Leiningers' account that so trouble Sudduth, then voices what for him is an overriding consideration: "[Y]es, in telling their story over the years, Bruce and Andrea Leininger may have been inconsistent at times on some of the details. *That's why we go by the documentation*" (2022, p. 89; his italics). Sudduth's response (2022b, pp. 97–98) is to list inconsistencies in the Leiningers' testimony as if Tucker has not acknowledged them. Sudduth (2022b, pp. 98–99) questions the significance of date stamps on internet downloads to which Tucker draws attention, preferring to follow a dubious timeline advanced at one stage by Bruce Leininger, whose testimony he otherwise deems unreliable.

(II) James was exposed to specific ordinary sources of information that (a) raise the probability of non-reincarnation explanations of the presumed facts in the case and which, therefore, (b) lower the probability of the reincarnation hypothesis relative to those same facts.

(III) Tucker's investigation was blind to several important ordinary sources of information to which James was exposed proximate in time to important claims and behaviors his parents attributed to him (Sudduth, 2022b, p. 92).

Tucker (2022, pp. 88–89) does not dispute that James was exposed to ordinary sources of information, but he questions Sudduth's timeline and underscores what for him is the crucial issue: Nothing in the ordinary sources of information to which James was exposed would have supplied him with details about Huston's life and death, which he began to relate when he was barely two years old. Sudduth never addresses this issue directly. He insists on crediting an inference by Andrea Leininger that Huston drowned in his sinking plane (2022b, p. 98), even though Tucker (2022, p. 88) reminds him that nowhere is James himself reported to have said this.

Both Sudduth (2021c) and Tucker (2022) employ cumulative argumentation. Sudduth builds his case by approaching his central argument from different angles; Tucker responds by showing that on point after point Sudduth's allegations fail when confronted with facts.

## Epistemological Issues

Sudduth is much concerned with what constitutes evidence in support of past-life memory claims. He says:

Tucker's entire critique depends on a variety of unstated assumptions about how we should understand *evidence*. When is one statement evidence for another statement? When would it be good evidence? Ultimately, my paper was designed to drive the reincarnation train into a collision course with these crucial questions in epistemology. Tucker failed to see this, or he chose to ignore it. (Sudduth, 2022b, p. 91; his italics)

*What makes any fact evidence for the truth of a claim?* If we're not clear about the answer to this question, we can't be clear about why the presumed facts of the JL case—for example, what Tucker presents in his tables—are evidence for reincarnation, much less why they would be good evidence. And if we're not clear about this, we're not going to be clear about why anything I've said undercuts the JL case as evidence for reincarnation." (Sudduth, 2022b, p. 92; his italics)

For Tucker, as for reincarnation researchers generally, evidence in relation to past-life memory claims is constituted of facts which show the memory claims to be accurate, inaccurate, or somewhere in between. Reincarnation researchers further distinguish between verified memory claims that are general, applicable to many people, and those that are specific, applicable to few people or to a single person. The latter have greater value than the former and the more of them there are, the more confident researchers can be that purported memories are indeed memories of the life of a given deceased person. After searching for ordinary sources for the memories, researchers consider non-ordinary sources (e.g., spirit possession, living agent psi). When all ordinary and non-ordinary sources have been found wanting, reincarnation stands as the default explanation.

James signed drawings of naval battles "James 3." He said that he died when the plane he flew off a boat called *Natoma* was struck in the nose, caught fire, and crashed into the water. This occurred at or near Iwo Jima, while fighting the Japanese. A pilot named Jack Larsen had been there as well. Investigation determined that James Huston, Jr., had flown off the USS *Natoma Bay*, an escort aircraft carrier supporting the battle for Iwo Jima during World War II. Huston's plane had been downed by Japanese anti-aircraft fire and crashed into the water. A diagram in his squadron's after-action report depicting the flight paths of each plane on the mission showed Larsen flying alongside Huston.

Tucker (2022) is interested primarily in facts record-

ed in documents, but he is more willing than Sudduth to credit eyewitness testimony he finds credible. The squadron's after-action report did not mention Huston's plane being struck in the nose or on fire as it descended, probably because Huston was the "tail end Charlie" of the run and his squadron-mates were flying away from the scene at the time. However, Bruce Leininger interviewed four airmen (on three separate occasions) from another escort carrier who had seen Huston's plane hit. All said it was hit in the nose by flak fired from the ground, causing it to burst into flames.

When it comes to evaluating the veracity of memory claims, facts provided in witness testimony are in principle no different from facts recorded in contemporary written documents, although there may be more questions about their reliability. For this reason, researchers try to interview multiple first-hand witnesses independently and compare their testimony; the more consistency among witnesses, the more confidence there can be in what they have to say. Sudduth (2021c, 2022b) does not share this standard and dismisses all eyewitnesses to Huston's downing, saying that they are recalling circumstances long after the event, even though one of them refreshed his memory with a memoir he had written years before, closer to the time of its occurrence.

Reincarnation researchers have learned to attend to a case subject's behaviors, in addition to his statements. James's memories of Huston were preceded by nightmares of Huston's downing and accompanied by drawings of it. The behaviors that are of greatest interest to Tucker (2016) are those that were cited in the *Strange Mysteries* pilot. Following Schouten and Stevenson (1998), he terms cases with records of statements and behaviors made before the identification of the previous life (cases with early-bird documentation) "Type B" cases and cases with statements and behaviors recorded after the identification of the previous life "Type A" cases. In discussing Tucker's emphasis on early-bird testimony, Sudduth states:

Tucker's distinction between A and B cases overlooks a third classification of cases which Stevenson wrote about and which I briefly discussed in note 4 of my *JSE* essay (pp. 1011–1012): documentation made before anyone has even attempted to verify the claims of the subject (Stevenson, 1974, pp. 4, 71, 270–271). (Sudduth, 2022b, p. 94)

In practice, cases with early-bird documentation are those in which statements were written down before attempts to verify them were made (Matlock, 2021), so

Sudduth's distinction is a distinction without much of a difference. The James Leininger case is unique among early-bird cases in that there was no list of James's statements made before Huston was identified, much less before Bruce began his investigation. For Sudduth, this is greatly concerning, because "there are many ways the process of attempting to verify a subject's claims can contaminate the facts, especially when the inquiry is conducted by someone close to the subject" (2022b, p. 94).

True, but that is why the date stamps on Bruce's internet search results are so important. Bruce searched for "Natoma" on August 7, 2000. Sudduth (2022b, p. 99) wants to deny early-bird status to James's claim to have flown off *Natoma Bay*, despite the date on the search result, noting that *Natoma* was not cited in the *Strange Mysteries* pilot. But why would Bruce have conducted that search had James not mentioned the name? The *Natoma* claim does not stand alone. Around the same time, James said many other things about Huston that are recorded in a Master Timeline constructed by the Leiningers for Ken Gross in preparation for writing *Soul Survivor* (Matlock, 2022b).

Sudduth emphasizes that merely listing early-bird items is not enough; the items must be validated too: "[T]he ABC program only documents the Leiningers telling of the story in spring of 2002. Documenting *what* they said is not equivalent to documenting the *accuracy* of what they attributed to James" (2022b, p. 95; his italics). Past-life memory claims must be verified, of course. No reincarnation researcher would accept the veracity of early-bird statements without verifying them; their value lies not in their presumed truth, but in the assurance that they were expressed before the previous life was known. Tucker (2016, p. 204) indicates the sources of verifications for the Type B items on his list. James made one significant error: He was wrong that Huston died in a Corsair, but as it turned out, Corsairs were familiar to Huston, who had test-flown the plane for carrier landings and owned a model that hung in the ship's ready room for recognition training (Matlock, 2022b, p. 106). Sudduth, however, questions whether James got right the many things he is said to have gotten right:

The mind isn't a video recorder. Memory represents a reconstruction of earlier events. It's considerably less reliable than we assume, especially at the level of detail required in the JL case. And Bruce Leininger's memory is no exception. It actually fits the rule. He has, by his own admission, misremembered multiple important facts in this case.

So, the documentation in this case prior to

the identification of the previous personality is problematic in ways that Tucker has not acknowledged. There are more ways to get things wrong than to get them right, and I don't see that Tucker has alleviated these concerns. Consequently, the reliability of the early-bird documentation in this case is at best anyone's guess. (Sudduth, 2022b, p. 95)

This head-spinning, mind-bending declaration ignores the fact that major elements of the early-bird testimony are backed by dated documents and that most of those that were mentioned only in the *Strange Mysteries* pilot were later determined to be correct. To suggest that recorded statements which turn out to be correct might have been misremembered strikes me as ridiculous in the extreme.

### Ordinary Sources of Information

James related many memories of Huston's life and demonstrated extensive knowledge of World War II military aviation not backed by dated documents or taped interviews and so without early-bird status. Sudduth (2022b, p. 94) properly remarks on the importance of including in an evaluation of the case all of James's statements, not only those with early-bird documentation. Tucker (2013, pp. 64–87) described many of these other items in *Return to Life* and I included a comprehensive list of them in my secure timeline (Matlock, 2022b, pp. 108–111).

At the heart of Sudduth's (2021c) argument is the supposition that James's accurate knowledge may be traced to ordinary sources of information. Sudduth went to considerable trouble to reconstruct what James would have seen in the Cavanaugh Flight Museum gift shop on his first visit. Although there was not a Corsair on display then, in one of his blog posts Sudduth (2022a) reports that he discovered one in James's neighborhood; this, he suggests, is why James erroneously said he was flying a Corsair at his death. According to Sudduth, another major source of information for James's memory claims was a video about the Blue Angels (Atkeison, 1994/2020) that his father purchased for him on their first visit to the Cavanaugh. This video is a documentary about the celebrated Navy promotional team that follows them on a European tour in 1993. James watched this video so often that he wore out the tape, obliging Bruce to purchase a replacement (Matlock, 2022b, p. 103). Sudduth maintains that the gift shop displays and video provide the details that James narrated and presented as memories, but do they?

Table 1 is a list of James's statements relating to Huston, abstracted from Table 1 in Part 1 of this paper (Matlock, 2022b, pp. 108–111). The statements, in the left-hand column, are numbered as in the earlier table, which provides their context. Statements made before and after the identification of James Huston as their referent are separated. September 25, 2002, is the approximate date Bruce received the squadron war diary that gave details confirming James's recollections. This was the first validation of any of his memory claims other than Huston's affiliation with *Natoma Bay*, which was documented in a January 7, 2001, search Bruce did for fatalities associated with aircraft carriers during World War II. Bruce was not fully confident in the identification until he heard from the third and fourth eyewitnesses to Huston's downing at a veterans' convention in September 2003, however (Matlock, 2022b, p. 106). Series of statements made on the same occasion are grouped together when they can be treated as a unit. Asterisks (\*) mark 12 statements with early-bird documentation.<sup>22</sup> Section signs (§) indicate that further information is supplied in Part 1.

In the right-hand column of the present Table 1 are evaluations of the correspondences to Huston (correct, partially correct, incorrect, unverified) and the sources of verification. Of James's 38 recorded statements or statement groups, 32 are entirely correct, one is partially correct, two are incorrect, and three are unverified. A dagger (†) indicates an item that James might have picked up from the Cavanaugh gift shop displays, according to Sudduth's (2021c) reconstruction, and a double dagger (‡) indicates an item he might have acquired from the Blue Angels video he watched obsessively for months. None of the items in Table 1 are marked with daggers or double daggers, casting doubt on Sudduth's (2021c, 2022b) confident and oft-repeated assertion that James's memory claims were derived from these ordinary sources of information.

I cannot understand why Sudduth places so much weight on James's exposure to ordinary sources of information when he's unable to identify any source that could have informed James about Huston's life or death. Tucker (2022, p. 89) made this point, but it doesn't seem to have registered with Sudduth. Instead, Sudduth emphasizes James's knowledge of military aviation, which he thinks James could have learned from ordinary sources. He overlooks the fact that many of the things James talked about—such as distinguishing a Zeke from a Betty and a Tony from a Zero—are not represented in either the Cavanaugh gift shop or the Blue Angels video, yet have reference to Huston's experience. Huston shot down both a Zeke and a Tony and so would have been familiar with these types of aircraft. Could James not have drawn on his

**TABLE 1.** James Leininger's Statements About His Previous Life and their Correspondence to James Huston

Statement Made by James Leininger	Correspondence to James Huston, Jr.
<b>Statements made before identification of James M. Huston, Jr., c. September 25, 2002</b>	
<b>S1.</b> One of JL's first words was "airplane." He would say "airplane crash" whenever he saw or heard an airplane.	Correct.
<b>S2</b> (2000, Mar. 14). JL tells AL that appendage on bottom of toy plane is not bomb but "dwop tank."	Correct; this would have been within JH's knowledge.
<b>S3</b> (2000, Aug. 11). The little man of his dreams was himself.	Correct, if JL was remembering being JH.
<b>S4</b> (2000, Aug. 11). His plane crashed on fire,*	Correct, per eyewitness reports.
<b>S5</b> (2000, Aug. 11). because it was shot by the Japanese.*	Correct, per JH's squadron after-action report.
<b>S6</b> (2000, Aug. 12). He knew it was the Japanese because of the big red sun.	Unverified, but the Japanese flag bears a big red sun.
<b>S7</b> (2000, Aug. 27). His name was James.	Correct.
<b>S8</b> (2000, Aug. 27). He was flying a Corsair*	Incorrect.
<b>S9</b> (2000, Aug. 27). off a boat*	Correct.
<b>S10</b> (2000, Aug. 27). named <i>Natoma</i> .*	Partially correct. It was the USS <i>Natoma Bay</i> .
<b>S11</b> (2000, Oct. 5). In his dream there was another pilot, Jack Larsen.*	Correct, per after-action report.
<b>S12</b> (2000, Nov. 25). Seeing picture of Iwo Jima in book, JL says that is where his plane was shot and crashed.*§	Incorrect.
<b>S13</b> (2001, late spring or early summer). He was "the third James"	Correct.
<b>S14</b> (2000, summer). Japanese fighters were called Zekes and Japanese bombers were called Bettys.§	Correct.
<b>S15</b> (2001, c. Sep. 1). He had been a pilot*	Correct.
<b>S16</b> (2001, c. Sep. 1). whose airplane was shot in the engine*	Correct, per eyewitness reports.
<b>S17</b> (2001, c. Sep. 1). and crashed into the water.*	Correct, per after-action and eyewitness reports.
<b>S18</b> (2001, early May). Corsairs tended to get flat tires on landing.§	Correct.§
<b>S19</b> (2001, early May). and they tended to turn to the left on take-off.§	Correct.§
<b>S20</b> (2002, July 2). JL says on camera that Corsairs got flat tires when they landed.*§	Correct.§
<b>S21</b> (2002, July 29). JL is overheard telling imaginary audience, "I was a Navy pilot and the Japanese shot me down."*§	Correct.
<b>Statements made after identification of James M. Huston, Jr., c. September 25, 2002</b>	
<b>S22</b> (2002, Oct. 11). He found his parents at a big pink hotel in Hawaii. He also saw them dining on the beach.§	Unverified, but JL's parents stayed at a pink hotel when vacationing in Hawaii and one night dined on the beach.
<b>S23</b> (2002, Oct. 20). When JL receives JH's model Corsair from AHB, smells it and says it smells like an aircraft carrier.§	Correct.
<b>S24</b> (2002, Dec. 25). JL says he named his GI dolls Billie, Leon, and Walter because that's who he met when he died.§	Unverified, but Billie Peeler, Leon Conner, and Walter Devlin of the <i>Natoma Bay</i> pre-deceased JH.§

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<b>S25</b> (2002, Dec. 25). He named his dolls based on their hair color. Billie's hair was brown, Leon's was blond, and Walter's was red.§	Correct.§
<b>S26</b> (2004, Jn. 25). When JL sees BL use sanding disk, says there weren't enough record albums on <i>Natoma Bay</i> .	Correct, per <i>Natoma Bay</i> veterans.
<b>S27</b> (2004, Feb. 1). When served meatloaf for first time, JL says meatloaf was often served on <i>Natoma Bay</i> .	Correct, per <i>Natoma Bay</i> veterans.
<b>S28</b> (2004, Aug. 1). JH had a sister named Annie and another named "Roof." Annie was four years older than JH and "Roof" four years older than Annie.§	Correct, per AHB.
<b>S29</b> (2004, Sep. 11). When JL meets Bob Greenwalt, Greenwalt asks if he knows who he is, and JL says "Bob Greenwalt." Later JL explains that he recognized Greenwalt by his voice.§	Correct.
<b>S30</b> (2004, c. Sep. 12). During tour of Nimitz Museum, JL notices five-inch cannon and remarks, " <i>Natoma Bay</i> had one of these." Asked where, says "on the fantail.§	Correct, per <i>Natoma Bay</i> veteran.§
<b>S31</b> (2004, Nov 26). JL describes how Billie Peeler was killed in a plane crash while off duty.§	Correct, confirmed in letter to Peeler's mother.§
<b>S32</b> (2004, Dec. 15). JH's father had been an alcoholic and this affected the family.§	Correct in all details, per AHB.
<b>S33</b> (2005, Jan. 15). Speaking of Chichi Jima mission where JH died, LL says, "There were no fighters, only anti-aircraft fire on this hop."§	Correct.
<b>S34</b> (2005, Mar. 3). There was an antenna missing from the side of a model FM-2 fighter plane BL made.§	Correct.
<b>S35</b> (2005, Mar. 3). On <i>Natoma Bay</i> , they would make napalm bombs from drop tanks.§	Correct, per Jack Larsen.
<b>S36</b> (2005, Apr. 1). JL says that Japanese plane shown on History Channel program is a Tony, not a Zero. "It [a Tony] is smaller and faster than a Zero."§	Correct. per <i>Natoma Bay</i> veterans.
<b>S37</b> (2005, late Dec.). When AHB sends him a painting JH's mother made of him, JL asks her if he may have the painting their mother had made of her also.§	Correct, per AHB, who said only she and JH knew this.
<b>S38</b> (2006, Sep. 4). At memorial service in Futami harbor on Chichi Jima for JH, JL recognizes direction from which JH flew in.§	Correct, confirmed by BL from diagram in after-action report.

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*People:* AHB = James Huston, Jr.'s sister, Anne Huston Barron. AL = Andrea Leininger. BL = Bruce Leininger. JH = James Huston, Jr. JL = James Leininger.

\* Has early-bird documentation.

§ For details, see Part 1 of the present article (Matlock, 2022b).

† Documented in Cavanaugh Flight Museum gift shop, per reconstruction by Sudduth (2021c).

‡ Mentioned in Blue Angels video watched by JL.

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past-life memory for this knowledge (Matlock, 2022b, p. 112)? Sudduth does not address the possibility.

Sudduth says almost nothing about the behaviors James exhibited in line with his claimed memories. These behaviors are listed in Table 2, again abstracted from Table 1 in Part 1 of this paper, and given the B numbers assigned there (Matlock, 2022b, pp. 108–111). The behaviors are grouped by class (James's nightmares and post-

traumatic play, his regular play and artistic expression, behaviors that appear to have been cued, and behaviors of a general nature that do not fit into one of the other classes). Consistencies and inconsistencies with what is known about Huston are marked in the right-hand column. As in Table 1, section signs indicate that further information is supplied in Part 1 of this paper. Asterisks indicate items with early-bird status, daggers those which

might be based on things seen in the Cavanaugh gift shop, and double daggers those conceivably prompted by the Blue Angels video.

All of James's behaviors listed in Table 2 are consistent with Huston's life. None appear to have been modeled on the Cavanaugh gift shop displays. Three (B9, B5, and B12) conceivably were influenced by the Blue Angels video (Atkeison, 1994/2020), but only in the most tenuous way. The video shows parts of pre-flight checks (B9), although it does not foreground these. Pilots are regularly shown wearing headgear, but never in the act of putting it on (B5, B12), much less going through other preparations for flying (B5). At the same time, both the gift shop displays and video contain many images that are not represented in James's memories of military aviation or Huston's life and death.

Sudduth (2022a, p. 95) asserts that Tucker's (2022) response to his discussion of James's ordinary sources of information "involves considerable obfuscation and misdirection," whereas that is what Tucker and I are alleging of his treatment. Again, it seems we are attending to different things. What is paramount for Tucker and me is how well James's memory claims and behaviors match what is documented about Huston's life and death. Sudduth is endeavoring to question the matches by raising what seem to us to be irrelevancies. Rather than providing James with details of his memories, his exposure to museum displays and, especially, watching the Blue Angels video incessantly, appear to have helped draw memories of Huston into his conscious awareness and make the memories clearer in his mind. This sort of triggering is a major feature of past-life recall, especially as subjects age (Matlock, 1989, 2019), and many of James's later statements about Huston came in response to things he saw and heard (Matlock, 2022b, p. 112).

### Summation: Muddied Waters

Sudduth considers the "central question" of his (2021c) paper to be, "*Why are any of the presumed facts of this case evidence—decent, dandy, or damn good evidence—for reincarnation?*" (2022b, p. 99; his italics). I take it that by "presumed facts" he means James's confirmed memory claims. The confirmations in and of themselves are significant, given that James should not have known any of these things. This is especially true of the statements with early-bird status, because there is no doubt that James related them before the identification of Huston as their referent. But it is not merely that individual statements are verified, it is that there are so many of them and that James's identification with Huston is supported by a variety of behaviors. It is the whole ensemble, not any piece

in isolation, which suggests reincarnation. Reincarnation has a logical advantage, in that it can more plausibly explain James's verbal and behavioral identification with Huston than ordinary sources of information can. And James's case does not stand alone: There are many other cases of the same caliber in the published record.

Sudduth's (2021c, 2022b) bluster notwithstanding, there is nothing in the ordinary sources of information to which we know James was exposed as a toddler that could have informed him about Huston's life and death, nor is it easy to imagine what ordinary sources there might be that could have so informed him. Only a small fraction of James's reported memories and behaviors have early-bird status, but of those the accuracy of the majority are confirmed. From the perspective of reincarnation research, much of Sudduth's exegesis is irrelevant, as Tucker (2022, p. 89) affirms. It is irrelevant because it deflects from the core concern, the question of whether there is satisfactory support for James's past-life memory claims. Although Sudduth appears to appreciate this and returns to the problem repeatedly, his argument overall does more to muddy the waters than to clarify them. In this, he is in good company with self-described skeptics of reincarnation.

Fraser Nicol (1976) insinuated fraud on the part of Indian lawyer K. K. N. Sahay (1927), who not only recorded in writing, but published, his son Jagdish Chandra's past-life memories before he set about verifying them. Stevenson (1975) later went over this case, interviewed Jagdish Chandra in adulthood, and added additional details. He (Stevenson, 1977b, 1977c) protested the imputation of fraud, introduced by Nicol apparently on no basis other than his inability to think of a better "normal" explanation for the accuracy of Jagdish Chandra's memories. Nicol (1977a, 1977b) doubled down rather than back down on the fraud theory, and Paul Edwards (1996, pp. 256–258) embraced Nicol's analysis uncritically. Nicol's stance is not unlike Sudduth's (2021a, 2021b, 2021c) insistence on portraying the Leiningers not only as unreliable witnesses, but as having distorted the timeline of events in *Soul Survivor* to support their favored narrative (2021c, pp. 987–990). This theory has nothing going for it except that it does not require us to take reincarnation seriously as a possibility.

We might describe Sudduth, Nicol, and Edwards as pseudo-skeptics as opposed to real skeptics. Bruce Leininger was a real skeptic, whose doubts about reincarnation gave way as evidence of the accuracy of James's past-life memories accumulated (Matlock, 2022b). Sudduth, Nicol, and Edwards evince what may be termed a will to disbelieve, and this brings them to imagine all manner of possibilities alternative to what the evidence attests.



**TABLE 2.** James Leininger’s Behavioral Memories of James Huston

James Leininger’s Behavior	Correspondence to James Huston
<b>B2</b> (1999, Aug. 15). AL and BL return home from night out to find JL shrieking and crying in his sleep. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.
<b>B3</b> (2000, early May). JL begins having nightmares 3-5 times weekly until Feb. 2001, after which they come much less frequently. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.
<b>B11, B16, B20</b> (2002, 2003, 2004, Mar. 2). JL has nightmare on anniversary of JH’s death in 2002, 2003, and 2004, after frequency has lessened. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.
<b>B4</b> (2000, May-June). JL begins bashing planes into coffee table, breaking off propellers. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.
<b>B6</b> (2000, Aug. 1). JL demonstrates little man trying to kick his way out of plane in his waking state. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent. JH would have been trying to kick the canopy off his plane. per <i>Natoma Bay</i> veterans.
<b>B7</b> (2001, late Spring or early summer). Shortly after 3rd birthday in 2001, JL begins drawing battle scenes, particularly naval scenes with aircraft, signs some James 3. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.
<b>B13</b> (2002, Apr. 15). JL makes cockpit in the closet of Bruce’s home office from old car seat and other articles, plays at plane crashing. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.

**Regular Play and Artistic Expression**

<b>B10</b> (2001-2002). JL plays with GI Joe dolls daily, bathes with them, sleeps with them. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent. The dolls resembled flyers JH had known. JL named them accordingly.
<b>B15</b> (2002, Sep. 2). JL and cousin play war and "shoot Japs" at community swimming pool. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.
<b>B21</b> (2004, Oct. 31). At school, JL decorates pumpkin to resemble F-16 Thunderbird.	Consistent.

**Cued Behavior**

<b>B1</b> (from c. April 1999). As an infant, JL points to airplanes in sky multiple times a day.	Consistent.
<b>B8</b> (2001, late spring or early summer). While playing with an airplane, JL stands up and salutes, saying, "I salute you and I'll never forget."	Consistent.
<b>B9</b> (2001, Oct. 30). At Sertoma (Louisiana) Airshow, conducts what the Ls are later told looks like a pre-flight check on an airplane. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent. <sup>†</sup>

They are far from alone in this attitude, which, it seems to me, is responsible, more than any other factor, for reincarnation research not receiving the respect it deserves. I do not mean to assert that all past-life memory claims are indicative of reincarnation. I and other researchers (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016, pp. 255–260; Rivas, 1991; Stevenson et al., 1988) have documented several spurious

identifications. We did so by following the evidence, not by refusing to credit it. Why does this approach encounter so much resistance from the academic community? Why do so many scientists and scholars cling to a will to disbelieve rather than follow the evidence before them?

Phrasing the question like this suggests that these scientists and scholars are familiar with the evidence for

<b>B17</b> (2003, Oct. 20). JL appears to recognize pewter statue of George Washington and <b>B18</b> Corsair model from Natoma Bay from JH's effects, places statue on desk in his room. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent. AHB verified JH had the statue of George Washington on his desk.
<b>B19</b> (2003, Dec., or 2004, Jan.). BL pieces together world map and asks JL where JH's plane went down. JL points to vicinity of Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent.

### General Behavior

<b>B5</b> (2000, May-June). JL begins ritual when getting into car seat. Puts on imaginary headphones, facemask, and harness (seat-belt), as if preparing to fly a plane.	Consistent. <sup>†</sup>
<b>B12</b> (2002, before Apr. 15). At local air show, JL mounts cockpit of Piper Cub, grabs the headgear and puts it on with "chilling familiarity."	Consistent. <sup>†</sup>
<b>B14</b> (2002, July 29). JL likes to pretend he is a singer and will stand on the head of our bed and sing. <sup>§</sup>	Consistent, per AHB. JH had a good singing voice.

AHB = James Huston, Jr.'s sister, Anne Huston Barron. AL = Andrea Leininger. BL = Bruce Leininger. JH = James Huston, Jr. JL = James Leininger.

Notations: <sup>†</sup>Has early-bird documentation. <sup>§</sup>For details, see Part 1 of the present article (Matlock, 2022b). <sup>†</sup>Portrayed in Cavanaugh Flight Museum gift shop, per reconstruction by Sudduth (2021c). <sup>†</sup>Portrayed in Blue Angels video watched by JL.

reincarnation, whereas I suspect most are not. They rely on gate-keeping pseudo-skeptics such as Sudduth, Nicol, and Edwards to tell them what to think; their will to disbelieve reinforced, they see no need to examine the evidence for themselves. The will to disbelieve has much to do with a conviction that reincarnation cannot possibly occur because consciousness is generated by the brain (a physicalist dogma linked to materialism), rendering postmortem survival inconceivable. Another problem is that researchers rarely make clear how they conceive reincarnation to operate. There are many different ideas about reincarnation in the world's religious traditions, and without an evidence-based theory of reincarnation, the concept is too nebulous to support scientific argumentation. If we are to move reincarnation beyond the default position it currently holds in explanatory models, we must spell out how we understand it to work. I address these topics in *Signs of Reincarnation* (Matlock, 2019) and return to them below. In the end, I am not sure there is anything researchers can do to break through committed pseudo-skepticism, but we can try harder to reach colleagues prepared to follow evidence where it leads.

## COUNTERING THE WILL TO DISBELIEVE

In his editorial introducing the journal issue in which Sudduth's (2021c) critique of the James Leininger case appears, Stephen Braude writes:

All CORT [cases of the reincarnation type] cases are messy. Investigators must interview the subject, family members, and (when possible) crucial figures in the life of the previous personality. In fact, it typically requires considerable detective and interpretive work merely to identify the previous personality from the often vague or ambiguous behaviors and statements of the subject. And then, investigators must still obtain testimony from the remaining living persons (if any) who knew the apparent previous personality, simply to establish that the subject's apparent recollections about the previous personality are reliable. Moreover, the interview process can be muddied by the fallibility of memory, and by conscious or subconscious motives either to please (or frustrate) the interlocutor or simply to confirm a deep wish for the case to be a genuine instance of reincarnation. And of course, many cases also require the services of translators whose own biases, inadequacies, and needs might influence the direction or accuracy of the testimony obtained. (Braude, 2021b, pp. 726–727)<sup>3</sup>

Braude is mistaken that "it typically requires considerable detective and interpretive work merely to identify the previous personality." In many Asian cases, children

specify precise details, including the names of people and places, that permit their parents to trace the previous persons rather easily. Children frequently show the way to what they say are their former homes and recognize articles and people there. Consequently, most of Stevenson's Asian cases were solved by the subjects' families before he arrived on the scene. That is why there are so few Asian early-bird cases. As of 2005, cases with early-bird documentation accounted for only 33 of more than 2500 cases, the vast majority Asian, in the University of Virginia files (Keil & Tucker, 2005, p. 97).<sup>4</sup> Even in Western cases, it is not always hard to identify the previous person. It took Rylann O'Bannion's mother no more than five minutes searching online to identify Jennifer Schultz once Rylann remembered dying in a plane crash, given that she had previously said she might have lived in Louisiana (Matlock, 2019, p. 6). A case I am presently studying was solved when the case subject's mother posted about her son's memory claims in my Signs of Reincarnation Facebook group, and her account was recognized by the previous person's mother.

Braude is right to warn about witnesses' potential memory failings in the absence of early-bird documentation, but "the services of translators" are of less moment than he assumes. Stevenson worked with teams of local assistants and most of his Asian interpreters were academic colleagues, some of whom co-authored journal papers with him. Among 33 published early-bird cases, only two required interpreters in recording the initial testimony (Matlock, 2021), and an increasing number of cases are being investigated and reported by natives of the countries in which they develop (see under Local Researchers, below).

Skeptics are fond of citing the critique of Stevenson's work by Champe Ransom, his research assistant in the early 1970s. Ransom's critique was first publicized by D. Scott Rogo (1985), then amplified by Paul Edwards (1996). A lengthier, yet still abbreviated, version of his remarks has since appeared (Ransom, 2015), and we can see that they were made in relation to the first edition of *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Stevenson, 1966). Ransom alleges problems similar to those broached by Braude (2021b), adding concerns about Stevenson's practice of spending only a few days conducting interviews on a case. These few days do not constitute the entirety of Stevenson's involvement with a case, however. He had colleagues gather information before and after his visits and returned to cases repeatedly over periods of years to check on witnesses' memory reliability and monitor the subject's development (Matlock, 2019, p. 107).

Keith Augustine (2015) presents a catalog of criticisms of Stevenson's research but appears to have read none of

the original case reports. Critics who make original points often betray how little informed they are. Leonard Angel, widely considered the foremost skeptical authority on Stevenson, is under the impression that Stevenson began his fieldwork in the 1950s (not 1961) and concluded it in the 1970s (not 1990s) (Angel, 1994, pp. 273–274). He (Angel, 2015, p. 577) says that Stevenson wrote four books, whereas Stevenson authored 15 books (Matlock, 2019, p. 103). Murray and Rea (2008, p. 276) state that Stevenson produced two volumes under the heading *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*, dating both to 1975, whereas Stevenson issued four volumes in the series between 1975 and 1983. Murray and Rea (2008, p. 277) assert that "independent investigation" of Stevenson's work "has turned up methodological flaws in the vast majority of his case studies," declining to provide support for this contention.<sup>5</sup> Uninformed criticisms, with critics citing each other without reviewing the original sources, produce little more than noise, yet the racket deters scientists and scholars who otherwise might be interested in the work from examining it for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Michael Nahm (2021) notes that the skeptical critique is grounded in a "motivated physicalist model," according to which "protagonists involved in CORT are driven to create them artificially by conscious or unconscious motives, thereby fulfilling psychological needs adapted to the prevailing cultural context" (p. 40). The processes to which Nahm alludes include parental influences on behavior and distortions of memory, such as paramnesia and cryptomnesia, affecting witness testimony. Without question, investigators must be concerned with these and other "normal" factors (Stevenson, 1974, pp. 331–343; 2001, pp. 150–164), although their impact on the cases is hugely overdrawn in skeptical commentary. Nahm maintains that these mundane factors cannot account for strong early-bird cases, but as we saw with Nicol (e.g., 1976) and Sudduth (e.g., 2021c), this has not stopped critics from finding fault with early-bird case investigations. Thus, despite its evidentiary assets, early-bird documentation alone seems unlikely to break through the will to disbelieve. A major take-away from the Sudduth–Tucker exchange is that we must go wider if we hope to bypass pseudo-skeptical gatekeepers and reach a receptive scientific and scholarly audience.

Stevenson left us a sound methodology, involving interviews with multiple first-hand witnesses on both the present- and previous-life sides of a case, coupled with the collection of death certificates, police records, autopsy reports, and other documents to check and augment witness testimony. Stevenson's methods continue to be followed by the reincarnation research community. They have been endorsed by numerous authorities, among

them psychologists J. G. Pratt (1973), Alan Gauld (1982), and John Beloff (1990), and philosophers Robert Almeder (1992), R. W. K. Paterson (1995), and David Ray Griffin (1997), whose voices unfortunately have been drowned out by the pseudo-skeptical cries. This does not mean there are no improvements to be made, but the more important improvements have little to do with common critical complaints, which are not as momentous as they are made out to be (Matlock, 2022d). I have grouped my proposals under three headings: Case Study Methodology, Reporting Standards, and Statistical Analysis.

## Case Study Methodology

Several critics have made suggestions for changes in case study practices they say would help alleviate their concerns.

**Lester's desiderata.** David Lester (2005) advances six desiderata for reincarnation case investigations.

1. The investigators must be present from the start. A case is required, in which, when a child begins to recall a previous existence, the words that he says are recorded right from the beginning.

2. The record should involve videos of the child, or at least audio recordings, permitting verbatim transcripts and observations of whether coaching or prompting of the child took place.

3. Preferably, the investigators must be present continuously from this point on so that they can monitor what the child is told by his or her parents, relatives, friends of the family, and acquaintances.

4. The desires of parents or others for the reincarnation to be valid interfere with the case. . . . Thus, the investigators should include believers and skeptics, and they should take care to minimize the influence of parents and relatives on the child. . . .

5. Cases for reporting should not be selected; rather, all cases should be recorded, examined, and reported for others to examine.

6. Prior to the arrival of the investigators, the child should not be allowed to visit the place of the previous incarnation or meet people who knew the previous incarnation. . . . (Lester, 2005, pp. 148–150)

Lester (2005) demonstrates that he has read extensively in the case material, a rarity among skeptics, so his recommendations deserve careful consideration. I have

to wonder how seriously he takes them, though. Does he really imagine families would allow the intrusion into their lives that a team of skeptics and believers monitoring them “continuously,” perhaps for years, would pose? On top of this, there is the inhibitory effect their presence might have on the young child. Most children with past-life memories relate them sporadically, as they come to their minds, and many are shy around strangers. Occasionally one encounters a child with extensive memories who can respond to questions, but this is not the norm.

Moreover, it is never clear how a case will develop after a child's first allusion to having lived before. Many children, especially in Western countries, make one or a few statements, then drop the subject. Also, there may be nonverbal memories expressed before a child starts to speak about the previous life. James Leininger had recurrent nightmares for months before he began to tell his parents what they were about—a “little man” unable to escape an airplane on fire. Lester doesn't trust a case subject's parents to be objective observers, but I don't see how we can avoid depending on them. Parents, siblings, and other caretakers are in the best position to observe a child and note statements, behaviors, and emotional displays from the outset. In some early-bird cases, parents were the first to document a child's statements (Matlock, 2021).

Researchers are rarely in a position to ensure that a case subject has not met the previous family before the start of their investigations. Most of Stevenson's cases were “solved” by the families before he learned about them. Going forward, researchers may wish to prioritize cases which have not yet been solved, so that they can observe and control their development, but this complicates Lester's fifth desideratum, documenting all cases of past-life memory. Apparent past-life memories are reported far more commonly than Lester may realize, but the majority are too weakly developed to permit verification and so remain unsolved.<sup>7</sup> With the limited resources available, researchers must choose which cases to study. Erlendur Haraldsson appreciated that this might produce biases, so randomly selected three cases from a sample of 29 about which he and his Lebanese colleague Madj Abu-Izzeddin had collected preliminary information (Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin, 2004). The three cases do not differ appreciably from other cases of their type. One is relatively weakly developed and another is unsolved, but Stevenson and others have published numerous weakly developed and unsolved cases. For a comprehensive inventory of cases from a single culture, most weakly developed and unsolved, see Rivas (2020) regarding the Netherlands.

**Audio and Video Recordings.** Vitor Visoni (2010),

like Lester (2005), is concerned about parental influences on children recounting past-life memories and urges the use of audio and video recordings to screen for this. Kemal Atasoy was six years old but retained clear memories when interviewed by Jürgen Keil, in the presence of his mother (Keil & Tucker, 2005). Visoni fears Kemal's mother might have helped Kemal "in a subtle way, to answer the questions" (2010, p. 104), but since Keil chose not to employ a tape recorder, this possibility cannot be appraised. In reply, Keil and Tucker (2010, p. 295) note that Kemal's mother could not have shaped his testimony, because she knew nothing about the events described, which turned out to pertain to an Armenian man who had died in Istanbul, 850 kilometers away from Kemal's home in central Turkey, 50 years before his birth. Keil and Tucker defend Keil's decision not to record his interview with Kemal, saying that although this may seem ideal, "the process of getting [recordings] can be impractical, or worse can impact on the quality of the information being obtained" (2010, p. 295).

Stevenson similarly preferred to make written notes rather than tape recordings, observing that recordings "become filled with irrelevancies, and they miss many of the nonverbal features of the interviews." Stevenson tried "to record on tape whatever the subject himself tells us he remembers about the previous life" (2001, p. 135), however. Videos sometimes reveal issues missed in the moment (Mills, 2003), and with the greater ease of video recording with devices such as cell phones, the advantages of a video record easily outweigh the problems attendant to audio recording. Researchers therefore might wish to employ video routinely, although if parents do not consent to making the recordings public, its use will be restricted to the investigation. Happily, such videos often can be shared. An increasing number of videos of children relating past-life memories are appearing on the internet. Kuldip Dhiman (2022c) has begun to post his Indian case investigations to YouTube with English-language narration and subtitles.

Ohkado Masayuki (Ohkado, 2018) describes a pilot study inspired by Deb Roy's (2009) "naturalistic longitudinal recordings" of young children's speech development, from which much can be gleaned about the interaction between children and their caretakers. Ohkado asked mothers to record their children's responses to questions about birth, womb, pre-life, and past-life memories. Because many children replied that they did not have memories of these types, Ohkado argues that suggestion is not a hazard of this method. There remain ethical issues related to the encouragement of past-life recall in young children who do not report memories spontaneously, due the manifold difficulties the memories may present to the

children and their families (Matlock, 2019, pp. 193–200), and this would have to be monitored and managed. Nonetheless, Ohkado's prospective approach allows cases to be followed from their inception, something called for by Lester (2005), and has the potential to enrich our understanding of past-life recall.

**Controlled Testing.** Angel (2015) would like to see "controlled experimental work" comparing matches between a pair of "co-living" individuals, "X cases," with comparison of a case subject's statements to facts about his predecessor, "Y cases," in order to rule out chance correspondences in the identifications of previous persons and establish that there is something in need of explanation. Researchers would have established that there was something in need of explanation only if (a) "the correspondences of co-living pairs in X cases is as good as those between pairs in Y cases," and (b) blind judges "tend to ask for special explanations of the correspondences in the Y cases more often than they tend to ask for explanations of the correspondences in the X cases" (Angel, 2015, p. 576).<sup>8</sup>

Edelmann and Bernet (2007) are correct that "no attempt has ever been made to compare the child's score in describing the designated household with a control household" (p. 94). They sketch a complex research protocol intended to address this shortcoming, but unfortunately it is unworkable as presented. Their project would proceed in four phases, employing three teams of investigators independent of each other and of the project director. In the first phase, one team would interview the child with past-life memories; in the second phase, a different team would interview the child's parents; in the third phase, a third team, unaware of anything the child or his parents have said, would collect data about an identified previous person as well as about a second, unrelated (control) person; in the fourth phase, the project director would collate the data, determine if the child's statements matched the identified previous person better than the control, and write up the case report.<sup>9</sup>

This project assumes that a previous person has been identified before the investigation begins, but the most serious flaw in the design is the requirement that the third team collect data about the previous person without knowing what the case subject and his parents have contributed. The idea of having different teams work on the two sides of a case is good, as is the use of controls, and reincarnation research could profitably adopt these practices. However, if investigators of the previous-life side of a case have no knowledge of what the case subject has said, they would need to collect vast amounts of data for there to be any chance of evaluating all of a subject's statements. A better idea would be to furnish the team

with a list of statements and behaviors with decoy items mixed in with actual items, not informing them which were which (Matlock, 2019, pp. 109–110). The same list could be assessed against a control child without past-life memories, or controls could be drawn from a pool of other children from the same culture whose cases have been studied previously.

Checklists with decoy items might be presented to case subjects as well. In a variation of this technique, Tucker (2013, pp. 105–106; 2021, pp. xii–xiii) uses photographs in controlled recognition tests. He presents subjects with sets of pictures, only one of which is associated with the identified previous person. Ideally, the pictures would be presented to the subject by an investigator who did not know which were the targets. Similar tests could be done with sets of articles. Delorme et al. (2021) suggest that a dying person be asked to “assemble a collection of their unique favorite objects” and give them to researchers in a sealed box without informing them of its contents. If later a child claimed to remember the dying person’s life, he would be asked to describe the contents of the box and it would be opened. Since no living person knew what was in the box, correct identification of the objects would support the reincarnation hypothesis, “barring the possibility of clairvoyance”—but given that clairvoyance is among the factors that researchers must rule out as an alternative to past-life memory, this would hardly serve as a decisive test of reincarnation.

A better-designed prospective study would take advantage of the ability to plan reincarnation before death, as has occasionally been done. Some planned reincarnations involve predictions of congenital physical anomalies such as birthmarks or birth defects (Matlock, 2019, pp. 154–155). Another strategy to explore would be cadaver marking, which is related to “experimental birthmarks” in a large swathe of eastern Asia and occasionally elsewhere in the world (Matlock, 2017a; Tucker & Keil, 2013).

**Process Variables.** To date, reincarnation case studies have focused on “proof” as opposed to “process” issues, a legacy of psychical research investigations of apparitions, poltergeists, and ESP. Tucker (2022, p. 84) expresses this orientation when he writes, “The two most important issues in any case of the reincarnation type . . . are what the level of evidence is that the child possessed accurate information about the life of the previous personality and whether the child could have learned this information through ordinary means.” The emphasis on establishing veridicality while ruling out sources of knowledge alternative to reincarnation is what distinguishes the parapsychological approach from the approaches of mainstream psychology and anthropology. I think we would be wrong to abandon it. However, as David Hess (1988) observed

years ago, this need not be an either/or situation, and investigators would do well to pay more attention to process variables in the cases they study.

Braude (1995, 2003, 2021a) has been at the forefront of advocating for more psychological sensitivity in reincarnation case studies. He says:

[A] solid majority of the investigations betray a lamentable and often surprising psychological superficiality—treating the subject and relevant others as mere psychological stick figures, rather than the real-life steaming, stinky caldrons of issues, fears, and hidden agendas that deeply influence human behavior. . . . Second, the case studies too often provide only shallow treatment of key topics having their own extensive and obviously pertinent literatures—for example, on the nature of language mastery, and the mysteries of savants, prodigies, and dissociative creativity. (Braude, 2021a, pp. 36–37)

Braude makes good points here, although he apparently means to suggest that investigators are missing things that would bolster interpretations of the cases alternative to reincarnation. Consideration of psychological factors sometimes can show past-life memory claims to be false (e.g., in cases of self-deception: Stevenson et al., 1988). But this must be demonstrated, and I do not see that Braude (1995, 2003) has demonstrated it in the case of Uttara Huddar, which he often cites in illustration. I think it is fair to say that Stevenson (1984; Stevenson & Pasricha, 1979, 1980), while acknowledging Uttara’s psychological problems, places little emphasis on them, instead stressing her highly unusual behavior and responsive use of an archaic dialect of Bengali that are consistent with the person her alternate personality (Sharada) claimed to be; but it is also true that Braude, in highlighting the psychological elements of the case, barely confronts the parapsychological ones.<sup>10</sup>

Visoni (2010, p. 106) would like to have seen psychological tests conducted to answer what he regards as “basic questions” in the case of Kemal Atasoy (“Could the child be easily influenced? Does the family possess some history of psychological disorders?”), to which Keil and Tucker (2010, p. 296) respond that they are “unaware of any psychological disorder that could lead a child to know numerous details about a man who lived 850 km away and died 50 years before.” Be that as it may, in one case (Pasricha et al., 1978), past-life memories emerged in a psychotic state. Sometimes with children, although more often with adults, dissociative states are implicated in past-life memory retrieval (Matlock, 2019, pp. 206–

207). Braude (1995, 2003) notes that dissociative states, such as that which Uttara entered during her Sharada phases in her 30s, are psi-conducive, but since dissociative states are associated with past-life memory retrieval also, it would seem unwise to place much weight on the psi-conducive nature of these states as evidence for an alternative mode of information acquisition in reincarnation cases.

Braude (2021a) is right to draw attention to the “shallow treatment” of psychological and other pertinent topics in many cases. The proof orientation of reincarnation research means that these issues have not received concerted attention. If researchers do not have the backgrounds necessary to attend to them, specialists could be added to the investigation teams. Having a therapist on the team would be helpful with cases involving mental health issues. Families frequently contact researchers with mental health concerns, but few researchers have the training to deal with them.

**Local Researchers.** Stevenson investigated cases worldwide (1977a), in many cultural and linguistic settings, often requiring interpreters. Erlendur Haraldsson and Jürgen Keil likewise needed interpreters in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Lebanon, and Turkey. Anthropologist Antonia Mills studied Hindi as an aid to her work in India, but never became fluent in it. The interpreters on whom Stevenson, Haraldsson, Keil, and Mills relied were not invariably tourist interpreters, as critics apparently assume. Some were, but the majority were persons (often fellow academics) who assisted Stevenson and his colleagues not only in interpreting but by undertaking interviews and other activities of their own.

Until recent years, local researchers rarely took the lead in investigating and reporting (the main exceptions being Satwant Pasricha [2008, 2019] in India, and Hernani Andrade [1988] in Brazil). As reincarnation research has moved away from reliance on elite investigators, this situation has changed. Titus Rivas (2003, 2020) and Dieter Hassler (2013, 2018) have sought out cases in the Netherlands and Germany, respectively. K. S. Rawat (Rawat & Rivas, 2021), who assisted Stevenson, and Kuldip Dhiman (2002a, 2002b, 2022c), who assisted Mills (Mills & Dhiman, 2011), have contributed cases from India. In an essay submitted to the recent Bigelow Institute (BICS) competition, Akila Weerasekera and Shanaka de Silva (2021) describe a new Sri Lankan case. Ohkado Masayuki (Ohkado, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2022) has written about several Japanese cases. Meanwhile, Jim Tucker (2013, 2021) and I (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016; Matlock, 2019, 2022a), along with K. M. Wehrstein (2019, 2021), have concentrated on cases in English-speaking regions.

Apart from Pasricha, Rawat, and Tucker, none of us

were trained by Stevenson, but all employ his methodology. The cases we have studied are similar to those reported by Stevenson and his first-generation colleagues, replicating their research and its findings. The contributions of researchers native to the languages and cultures in which these cases develop help address concerns about Stevenson’s potential misunderstanding of the data he was collecting. Work by local researchers is to be encouraged; I hope and expect that we will see more of it in the future.

**Remote Research and Interviewing.** Fieldwork, entailing personal interaction with the case subject and witnesses on both sides of a case, is central to Stevenson’s methodology. Fieldwork remains the ideal investigative strategy with reincarnation cases, especially in more complex cases and cases headed for journal publication, but this does not mean that other strategies are unacceptable. Remote interviewing over Zoom or similar services does not require travel and can be an inexpensive and effective means of involving multiple members of a team (including, potentially, skeptics). Zoom sessions can be recorded and archived for later reference. Interviews conducted through instant messaging and email leave written records that can be consulted and quoted.

Online resources can greatly assist research, especially with the growing number of cases reported from Western countries. They were crucial to Bruce Leininger in pursuing James’s memory claims. Scott Perry recalled an historic event, the 1937 Los Angeles New Year’s Flood, which is documented in newspaper archives which, along with genealogical, meteorological, and other online records, proved invaluable in studying his case (Matlock, 2022a). K. M. Wehrstein (2019, 2021) relied on online resources in her investigation of Will’s adult memories of Wilhelm Emmerich and Wilhelm Schmidt. Research of this kind leaves a track record that can be declared and replicated, providing another hedge against criticism.

## Reporting Standards

In this section, I am concerned not with case study methodology, but with the reporting of results.

**Journal Publication.** In science, publication in peer-reviewed journals is more highly esteemed than publication in books. Ideally, data are presented first in journals and only later released in books. For this reason, in their scoping review of the reincarnation research literature, Moraes et al. (2022) examined journal publications exclusively. They identified 78 reincarnation studies published between 1960 and 2021, 47 of them containing case reports. Since several of these papers treated more than one case, the total number of cases described in

journal publications is somewhat higher than this. Even so, it represents a severe undercount of published cases. There is no definitive count of cases available in books as well as journals, but they likely total between 400 and 500, 225 in Stevenson's (1997) massive two-volume *Reincarnation and Biology* alone.

Moraes et al. (2022) found an upward trend in the number of research publications, with a peak around the year 2000 and a decline in the present century. This makes sense, inasmuch as Stevenson was responsible for the great majority of journal papers and his output declined after 2000; he died in 2007. I want to draw attention to a different trend, however—the trend away from publishing cases in journals to publishing them in books. Stevenson increasingly turned to books for his reports. This was due to the number of cases involved; journals were reluctant to allot space to the same topic from the same author quarter after quarter. But the trend did not end with Stevenson. Although Haraldsson, Keil, and Mills have published in journals,<sup>11</sup> as have Hassler, Ohkado, and Wehrstein, Tucker and I have favored books over journal publication. We both have journal publications (Matlock, 2022a; Tucker, 2016; Tucker & Keil, 2001), but have described most of our cases in books (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016; Matlock, 2019; Tucker, 2013, 2021).

The trend away from journal publication has been exacerbated by the rise in self-reported and parent-reported cases aimed at the general public rather than the scholarly reader. The James Leininger case was first reported by his parents (Leininger et al., 2009), summarized by Tucker (2013) in a general-interest book, and only later treated in a journal paper (Tucker, 2016). Book publication is only marginally effective in reaching a scholarly audience and may be one reason Stevenson's work is regularly misrepresented in critical writings. I believe Tucker and I would do well to reverse our practice and give more attention to publishing case reports in journals. I will go further and encourage publication in open access journals, due to their greater visibility on the web. Another thing researchers might consider is restudying more cases that have appeared in popular publications, as Tucker (2016) did with James Leininger (Leininger et al., 2009) and Mary Rose Barrington (2002) did with Jenny Cockell (1994).

Researchers may want to give more attention also to submitting their work to mainstream publications. This typically means writing more briefly, downplaying proof-oriented concerns, and discussing what may appear to be peripheral issues. The language and presentation should be appropriate for the target audience, as in a study by Marieta Pehlivanova et al. (2018). As Hess (1988) pointed out, attending to nonevidential (as well as evidential) aspects of "paranormal" phenomena is one of

the surest ways for parapsychologists to attract support from other disciplines because the broader relevance of the phenomena becomes clearer. Stevenson (e.g., Stevenson & Pasricha, 1979, 1980) sometimes published a brief report in a mainstream journal, followed by a fuller report in a parapsychology journal.

**Timelines and Tables.** In his analysis of the James Leininger case, Sudduth (2021c) is greatly concerned with the chronology of events. "The plausibility of the reincarnation interpretation of this case depends essentially on there being a credible chronology of events," he says (p. 935)—which is why I devoted Part 1 of this paper to establishing a secure timeline. I agree with Sudduth (2021c) that "a chronology must include contextual details that bear on the adjudication of various proposed explanations of the subject's behaviors and claims" (p. 935) and that "without a robust chronology of events, we're flirting with confirmation bias" (p. 945).

The last is true of all reincarnation cases, I think. It is important to show how a case unfolds, step by step, from a child's first verbal or nonverbal reference to a previous life through the identification of a person whose life matches the child's memory claims, and to show how external events impinge on these developments. It may not be possible to construct timelines in the detail that skeptics would wish, but we would do well to make the attempt. In addition to helping forestall critical objections, timelines may disclose unnoticed dimensions of the cases. Many of James Leininger's statements were cued by things he saw or heard, suggesting the role of recognition memory in past-life recall (Matlock, 2022b, p. 112). With Rylann O'Bannion, a detailed timeline revealed how a gradually lessening trauma allowed memories to surface more freely, fully, and accurately (Matlock, 2019, pp. 22–30). Ohkado's (2022) table of developments in the case of Takeharu suggests that Takeharu's memories of dying with the sinking of the battleship *Yamato*, which had no model in his family or early environment, might have been triggered by phobic reactions to being surrounded by water in the bathtub.

Stevenson routinely tabulated a child's statements and behaviors, emphasizing their verification, but did not place them in timelines. Constructing at least a general timeline of events is an essential part of case investigations, because without it researchers cannot arrive at a satisfactory understanding of a case's development. It would be good if, in writing up reports, researchers would pass along this understanding to readers by combining Stevenson's table elements with a chronology of events, as Ohkado (2022) and I (Matlock, 2019, 2022b) have done.

Timelines in early-bird cases would make clear which of a subject's statements were made (a) before the inves-



tigation began, as distinct from (b), before the previous person was identified, and they would track (c), statements made after the identification but before the two families met for the first time and had opportunity to exchange information.<sup>12</sup> In cases such as the James Leininger case, timelines would also place in context (d) records that are recognized retrospectively to have documented past-life memory claims before the person to which they referred was known.

A related analytical technique is attributed to anthropologist David Read Barker by D. Scott Rogo (1985, p. 79). Barker worked with Stevenson in the late 1970s. According to Rogo, he found it useful to make separate tabulations of statements that a child could have learned by “normal” means from those which required some “paranormal” explanation. A variation would be to separate items of general knowledge from more recondite items. Ideally, the classifications would be done by someone blind to the verification status of the subject’s statements.

**Theoretical Framework.** Reincarnation currently holds a default position in explanatory models. We conclude that a previous life is the most likely basis of a subject’s memory claims and behaviors because alternative possibilities seem less tenable. Although this conclusion is logically defensible, it is not strongly persuasive. When we say that cases are suggestive of reincarnation, what exactly do we mean? Are we embracing notions of retributive karma, of past lives on other planets, of astral bodies between lives? These are tenets of the Theosophical conception, which, thanks to Edgar Cayce, has had a major influence on Western beliefs (Matlock, 2019).

Edwards (1996) presumes that reincarnation is universally understood according to Theosophical precepts, and hence “if Stevenson’s reports are evidence for reincarnation they must also be evidence for the collateral assumptions [derived from Theosophy] just mentioned” (p. 255). Clearly, Edwards has not read enough of Stevenson to realize that he rejects the Theosophical position because it is not supported by his case data. The only part of the Theosophical model Stevenson endorses—on theoretical grounds—is the astral body, which he terms a “psychophore” (Stevenson, 1997, 2001). The psychophore would act as a “template” for the new body (Stevenson, 1997, vol. 2, p. 2084); it would bear a deceased person’s “mental elements,” which would “act on the morphogenetic fields of an embryo or fetus” (Stevenson, 2001, pp. 234, 251).

I am not convinced that a discarnate mind requires a subtle body to maintain its coherence and if a discarnate mind can affect its new body (through psychokinesis), as

Stevenson posits, I do not see why it might not do so directly. In *Signs of Reincarnation* (Matlock, 2019), I suggest that what survives death and reincarnates is a stream of consciousness continuous with embodied life. A person’s memories, personality traits, behavioral dispositions, and so forth are carried in a subconscious stratum of his consciousness stream, I think. I conceive of reincarnation as possession of a body by a consciousness stream, bringing with it subconscious material as well as conscious awareness. Most of us never have memories of previous lives penetrate our conscious awareness, although under certain circumstances some of us apparently do. My theory requires acceptance of no new explanatory concepts or rejection of established findings in biology or other sciences.

Stevenson’s and my theories are not the only data-based models of reincarnation available. Keil (2010) proposes that reincarnation cases reflect “thought bundles” created at death and subsequently absorbed by young children.<sup>13</sup> Andrade (2011) presents an elaborate theory, drawing on Brazilian Spiritist concepts. Other theories at least partially informed by data are framed by Paul Von Ward (2008) and Eric Weiss (2012). Whether we choose one of these models or another<sup>14</sup> is less important than making our thinking clear. If we do not do so, we invite readers to imagine reincarnation on their own terms, potentially producing not only confusion, but rejection through misunderstanding, as with Edwards (1996).

## Statistical Analysis

The large number of investigated reincarnation cases, both in files at the University and Virginia and in publicly available publications, allows for correlation and pattern analyses and for hypothesis testing.

**Cross-Cultural Patterns.** From the start of his investigations in the 1960s, Stevenson realized that he was learning about far too many cases to permit the in-depth study of all. He decided to concentrate on a few representative cases but collect basic data on others for pattern analyses. For several years, he provided statistical profiles of what he came to regard as key variables, such as the median length of the intermission between lives and the prevalence of cases with changes of sex, culminating in a comparison of ten cultures in a paper devoted principally to the Igbo of Nigeria (Stevenson, 1986).

The most striking cultural variation Stevenson discovered lies in the prevalence of sex-change cases. He did not hear of these cases in cultures that held sex change between lives to be impossible, although they came to his attention elsewhere. Skeptics (e.g., Augustine, 2015, p. 27) often tout this as evidence that the cases are so-

cially constructed, although they disregard the possibility of selection bias due to suppression of cases in places where sex-change is deemed impossible and overlook culture-linked patterns not so tightly anchored to beliefs, e.g., intermission length (Matlock, 2019, pp. 187–188). Skeptics also ignore universal or near-universal variables, such as the young age (2–3 years) at which children typically begin relating past-life memories and the tendency for the memories to fade by late childhood. Interestingly, some universal or near-universal patterns, e.g., those involving manner of death and age at death, are related to the previous person rather than the case subject (Matlock, 2017b; 2019, pp. 177–189). The latter patterns, in particular, are hard to reconcile with the motivated physicalist model.

**Correlations Between Variables.** Correlations between variables present even more of a challenge to the motivated physicalist model. A cross-cultural study by Narender Chadha and Stevenson found that children began to speak about previous lives earlier, and the intermission was shorter, in cases with violent as opposed to natural deaths (Chadha & Stevenson, 1988). Pehlivanova et al. (2018) showed that in sex-change cases, children frequently displayed cross-dressing or other gender-nonconforming behaviors, whereas in cases without a change of sex between lives, these behaviors were absent.

Iris Giesler-Petersen and I (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016) examined memories of the intermission period, revealing both commonalities and differences between Asian and Western cases. Although Asian and Western intermission memories are, in many respects, strikingly similar, Westerners most often describe the intermission as passing in “heaven,” whereas Asians usually depict it passing in a realistic terrestrial setting. Giesler-Petersen’s and my study is one of the few statistical studies conducted independently of the University of Virginia. In a recent paper (Matlock, 2022c), I reported that 32 (89%) of 36 published cases with intermissions of under nine months (i.e., the previous person died while gestation was under way) had congenital physical anomalies. This is surprising, given that Stevenson (1993, p. 404) says that birthmarks and birth defects appear in roughly 35% of the cases in his collection.<sup>15</sup>

**Hypothesis Testing.** The formulation and testing of hypotheses play important roles in the advancement of any science, but to date most pattern and correlation analyses in reincarnation research have been exploratory, not tied to formal hypotheses. An exception is the study of Schouten and Stevenson (1998), which sought to test the socio-psychological assumption that subjects acquired information about previous lives from interactions with persons of those lives by comparing cases with

written records made before the present and previous families had met with cases with records made after their first meeting.

An early paper of mine furnishes another example. In reading case reports, I noticed a tendency for past-life memories to arise in response to stimuli more often with older children and adults than with younger children and tested this association on the 95 published past-life memory accounts then available. My hypothesis was confirmed, both cross-culturally and with Indian cases alone (Matlock, 1989). As reincarnation research continues to mature, and a theory of the reincarnation process becomes established, I hope we will see more hypothesis testing.

## CONCLUSION

In outlining improvements to the methodology and reporting of reincarnation cases, I’ve adopted several suggestions offered by critics and, in general, tried to address skeptical concerns. If implemented, these improvements should go some distance in diminishing the will to disbelieve and should make it easier to reach scientists and scholars open to this research. Here are the highlights of my recommendations:

- Researchers should continue to seek out and report cases with early-bird documentation. Although not immune to criticism, these cases effectively address issues of memory reliability.
- Investigations by local researchers, native to the cultures and languages in which the cases develop, are encouraged. Such investigations avoid the problematical aspects of reliance on interpreters.
- Researchers would do well to adopt a protocol in which different investigators or investigation teams work on the case subject’s and the previous person’s side of a case. Consideration should be given to including subject specialists and open-minded skeptics on research teams.
- The team investigating the previous person’s side should be blind to the memory claims of the case subject. To achieve this most effectively, the team might be furnished a list of statements, behaviors, and physical traits related to the identified previous person with decoy items mixed in.
- The same list might be assessed against a control child or children (matched in age and background) for comparison to the case subject. The control children could either be selected for investigation along with research on the previous person or be drawn from cases previously investigated.
- If the case is active, researchers on the subject’s

side should include objective measures, such as photo or object line-ups for controlled recognition experiments. Other types of experiments, involving planned reincarnation and cadaver marking, might be considered as well.

- Research should move beyond strictly proof-oriented concerns to consider process issues. Researchers should pay attention to psychological and sociological factors that might affect the case's development.

- Researchers should prepare reports for journal publication first and only later include them in books. Open access publications are ideal because of their visibility on the web. Reports in books can be more detailed and include follow-up information on the case subject.

- In writing up their cases, researchers should be attentive to process-related, not solely proof-related, issues. This includes reviewing the pertinent literature related to key case features.

- Write-ups should include tables outlining the case's development, not only lists of statements and behaviors, as has traditionally been done.

- If they believe that the case is best explained by reincarnation, authors should make clear what they mean by describing or referring to a theory of reincarnation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term "early-bird testimony" was introduced by Stephen Braude (2003, p. 182) to refer to cases in which a case subject's memory claims had been recorded, usually in writing, before the deceased person to which they referred was identified.

<sup>2</sup> More detail about these 12 items is given in Table 2 of Part 1 (Matlock, 2022b, pp. 114–115).

<sup>3</sup> This passage is included, with some slight variation in wording, in Braude's Bigelow contest essay (2021a, pp. 31–32), where he labels it "the Problem of Investigative Intricacy."

<sup>4</sup> Only 20 of these cases have been published (Matlock, 2021). The remainder of the 33 published early-bird cases were either reported after 2005 or are not included in the UVA case collection. Among the 33 published early-bird cases, 23 are Asian and 10 are Western.

<sup>5</sup> Murray and Rea (2008, p. 277 n11) say it would "take us too far afield to discuss the problems in detail." Although earlier in their discussion of reincarnation (p. 275), they cite Edwards (1996), at this point they refer to a Further Reading section, which does not include Edwards (1996).

<sup>6</sup> For more in-depth responses to critics, see Matlock (1990, pp. 239–255; 2018; 2019, pp. 102–108, 114–117; 2022d; 2023).

<sup>7</sup> By "weakly developed" I mean a case with few statements or behaviors. An unsolved case is one in which it has not been possible to identify the previous life.

<sup>8</sup> For more detailed explication of Angel's (2015) proposed experiment, see Matlock (2019, pp. 103–104).

<sup>9</sup> For more extensive reflections on Edelmann and Bernet (2007), see Matlock (2019, pp. 109–110).

<sup>10</sup> I cannot take the space to deal with this complex case at greater length here. See Matlock (2019, pp. 211–213) for a more detailed treatment.

<sup>11</sup> Haraldsson published his cases first in journals and later collected them in a book (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> The distinction between (a) and (b) is emphasized by Sudduth (2021, 2022b); (c) is suggested by Nahm (this issue), citing Schouten & Stevenson (1998), who used this standard in their comparison of cases with and without prior written records.

<sup>13</sup> For critiques of Keil's (2010) theory, see Nahm and Hasler (2011) and Matlock (2019).

<sup>14</sup> It is possible also to acknowledge that the case data require a non-ordinary explanation without embracing reincarnation. Before I worked out the theory presented in *Signs of Reincarnation* (Matlock, 2019), I was agnostic on the question of whether the cases indicated reincarnation (1990, p. 255; 2011, pp. 808–809).

<sup>15</sup> I did not check published reports of cases with intermissions longer than nine months, so cannot provide a figure for the prevalence of congenital anomalies in them.

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