

TWO CORRELATES OF VIOLENT DEATH IN CASES OF THE REINCARNATION TYPE

by N. K. CHADHA AND IAN STEVENSON

ABSTRACT

Data from 326 cases suggestive of reincarnation studied in eight different cultures were analyzed with regard to two correlates of violent versus natural death of the previous personality whose life the subject claimed to remember. Cases having a violent death showed a shorter interval between death and birth than ones having a natural death ($p < .01$). The effect was found in all cultures studied (except Sri Lanka), but reached statistical significance in only one individual culture (India) and for the group taken as a whole. The age of the subject when first speaking about the previous life was also found to be significantly lower with violent death (compared with natural death) ($p < .01$).

INTRODUCTION

We can analyze spontaneous cases in two ways. First, we can study individual cases and by careful scrutiny of the testimony for them try to eliminate all interpretations supposing normal communication of the information to the percipient's experience; then, if we succeed in this, we can try to eliminate various interpretations supposing paranormal processes until the one that seems best remains. Second, we can analyze a series of cases of the same general type with a view to discerning recurrent features in them. The finding of such recurrent features leads to the delineation of a type of 'standard case' having these features. (This is a kind of taxonomy of spontaneous cases.) We can then examine such standard cases further for correlated features.

In the study of cases suggestive of reincarnation four features have been identified as recurring in the cases of all cultures so far analyzed. Two of these, the young age when the subjects first speak about their claimed memories of previous lives and the tendency for these memories to fade in later childhood were identified as recurrent features from the analyses of cases that were published before the modern period of systematic investigation had even begun (Stevenson, 1960). A high incidence of violent death (of the concerned previous personality) also emerged early as a third recurrent feature of cases in three different cultures (Stevenson, 1966, 1970). Later, a high incidence of violent death was found among the cases of five other cultures (Stevenson, 1980; Cook *et al.*, 1983). A fourth recurrent feature noted in the cases of all cultures (so far studied) is the frequent mention by the subject of the previous personality's mode of death. Analysis also showed that the subject was more likely to mention the mode of death when it had been violent than when it had been natural (Cook *et al.*, 1983); in cases with violent death 94 per cent of the subjects mentioned the mode of death, but in cases with natural death only 52 per cent of the subjects did so ($p < .00001$).

Although there was no doubt after the mentioned analyses that violent death figures prominently in the cases of all cultures with sufficient numbers of cases for analysis, the significance of this finding remains open to different interpretations. The most obvious of these is that the high incidence of violent death is merely an

artifact of the haphazard manner by which investigators had learned of most cases. Humans appear to have a keen interest in violence, and they are likely to remember accounts of violent deaths longer than accounts of natural ones. Accordingly, informants for cases might remember and later inform investigators about cases having the feature of violent death when they would tend to forget and not mention ones with natural death. A survey of reincarnation cases in a randomly selected sample of persons in a district of Uttar Pradesh, India, gave some support to this interpretation. The incidence of violent death in a nonrandomly selected series of Indian cases ($N = 172$) was 46.8 per cent; but the incidence in the (much smaller) survey series ($N = 19$) was only 35 per cent. The survey respondents had been asked to mention *any* case that they could remember having heard about within their own immediate surroundings; and the lower incidence of violent death among the survey cases suggests that part of the high incidence of violent death in nonrandomly selected cases may be due to the greater memorability for informants of cases with the feature of a violent death.

Even so, the incidence of violent death in the survey sample (35 per cent) far exceeds that of the general population of India, which is 7.2 per cent (Demographic Yearbook, 1970). We should not therefore attribute all the high incidence of violent death in the cases to artifacts of reporting; instead, we should search for other explanations of this high incidence.

The foregoing analyses derived only from simple counts of frequencies of particular features. The present paper takes our analyses further by reporting the results of correlations of violent death with two other features of the cases: the interval between the previous personality's death and the subject's birth (which we sometimes refer to as the 'intermission period'); and the age when the subject first spoke about the previous life.

METHODS

Sources of Data

Cases that met the following criteria were selected for analysis from the files of the collection of the University of Virginia:

(a) The subject's statements had been independently verified by I.S. or an associate (solved cases).

(b) The case had received a rating of 1, 2, or 3 on a 1 to 5 point scale of 'thoroughness of investigation.' This scale takes account of such aspects as the number of informants interviewed during the investigation of the case and success in obtaining written documents confirming oral testimony. The rating scale is as follows:

1. Very thoroughly, all major and minor sources investigated.
2. Thoroughly, most major sources and several minor sources investigated.
3. Fairly thoroughly, but several important sources not investigated.
4. Not too thoroughly, many sources only skimmed or not investigated at all.
5. Not at all thoroughly, even most important sources omitted; very little information.

(c) The previous personality must have died before the subject's birth.

These criteria set aside all unsolved cases, all that had not been investigated with moderate or complete thoroughness, and all cases with anomalous dates.¹ Many of the originally available cases were thus eliminated. For example, from a pool of more than 300 cases in India we found that only 114 met the above criteria. We restricted the analyses to the cases of eight different cultures, these being those for which we have a sufficient number of cases for the analysis of subgroups. For the analysis of the intermission period we found 326 cases satisfying our criteria; for that of age at first speaking about the previous life we found 324 cases.

For the cases selected we examined the case files and listed on worksheets the data that interested us for the planned analyses. For many cases we could use values already entered into a codebook or listed on worksheets prepared during the analyses reported in Cook *et al.* (1983). Whenever discrepancies were found between the three sources of data—notes and documents in the case folders, codebooks, and previous worksheets—we discussed these together. We were usually able to resolve the discrepancies (some of which arose from errors in previous recording). In a few instances we decided that the data of a case were insufficiently reliable for a particular analysis and the case was removed from the series for that analysis. Other data from the same case might be used in another analysis.

We should say something about our confidence in the data we did not reject, but kept in the analysis. The classification of the previous personality's death as natural or violent seemed in general straightforward. For nearly all cases among the Tlingit tribe (of Alaska) we had earlier obtained Death Certificates (from the Department of Vital Statistics, Juneau, Alaska) which recorded the date and cause of death. We obtained written documents of similar value, such as reports of postmortem examinations, for a much smaller proportion of the cases in other cultures. For most of these we relied on memories of firsthand informants acquainted with the previous personality, who were interviewed, as mentioned, by I. S. or a close associate. There was rarely any doubt about whether a person had died violently or naturally. Readers may wish to know that we classified death from a snake-bite as violent, although some persons might consider it natural.

For the Tlingit, as mentioned, we obtained in nearly every case a reliable date of death from the Death Certificates. We also obtained precise dates of death for a number of cases in other cultures, including all those for which we had studied a postmortem report. (These give the date of death or information that permits an accurate judgement about it; sometimes a postmortem may be delayed for a day or two after death, but rarely longer.) In all other cases we had to rely on the memories of our informants. These were the same persons who had furnished information about the mode of death. If the death had occurred within the previous ten years, the informants rarely disagreed with each other to an

¹ In a small number of cases the subject remembers the previous life of a person who died *after* the subject was born. Although these cases resemble standard cases of the reincarnation type in their other features, some persons may prefer to subsume them under the heading of possession. The case of Jasbir (Stevenson, 1966/1974) and Chaokhun Rajsuthajarn (Stevenson, 1983) are examples. Cases of this type comprise less than 1 per cent of the approximately 2,500 cases in the series of the University of Virginia.

important degree. For more remote deaths they often did. If we received several different statements about a date we usually took the average, but we did not hesitate to set aside the statement of an informant who seemed to be merely guessing or otherwise unqualified to remember accurately. It is worth noting that Asians in general remember dates of death much more accurately than do Westerners; this is partly because in both Hinduism and Buddhism ceremonies are held on behalf of the deceased at regular intervals after the death.

Our information about dates of birth has about the same validity as that for deaths, and we judged the informants' statements about it in the same way as for their statements about death. Because the subjects were born at least nine months or more, and often several years, after the previous personality's death, the date of birth was not so far back as the corresponding date of death and therefore should have been better remembered. For the Tlingit we obtained Birth Certificates in nearly every case, but we rarely had such documentation for cases elsewhere. Citizens of some countries, e.g. Lebanon and Turkey, are required to have an Identity Card that, in principle, records the date of birth. However, these Identity Cards are notoriously inaccurate and can seldom be relied upon. (Readers interested in the reasons for the falsification of these Identity Cards can find some information about this in Stevenson [1980].)

For the child's age of first speaking about the previous life we relied on the person or persons who seemed best informed about this matter. This was usually the subject's mother, but a grandmother, older sister, or other person would sometimes furnish relevant information. Fathers were less well informed, on the whole, but were not automatically disqualified by us.

So far as we know, there were no differences in the methods used for obtaining the data in different cultures (except for the fortunate circumstances of obtaining official certificates for the Tlingit). We think that any biases that may have entered into the collection of the data would have affected those of all cultures equally. Interested readers may find further information about the methods of interviewing practiced in Stevenson (1966, 1975).

To what extent are 'cases of the reincarnation type' best interpreted as instances of reincarnation? In other words, how strong is the evidence obtained in the study of these cases that favors reincarnation as their best explanation? For the cases of the present analyses we can only answer this question in general terms, because the strength of the evidence for some paranormal process varies greatly from case to case. Elsewhere one of us (I. S.) has published a table showing the percentages of cases (in ten different cultures) in which the families of the subject and previous personality were (a) related, (b) acquainted, and (c) unknown to each other before the case developed (Stevenson, 1986). In the cases of some cultures (for example the Tlingit of Alaska) nearly all the cases (96 per cent) were of the 'same-family type.' In contrast, among the cases of Sri Lanka only 19 per cent were same-family cases and in 52 per cent the two families had not known each other before the case developed. In India 43 per cent of the cases occurred in families who had been strangers before the case developed.

However, the appraisal of paranormal elements in a case must take account of other factors besides mere prior acquaintance between the families. On the one hand, two previously unacquainted families may be brought together through a child's statements about a previous life and may then erroneously agree that he

has spoken correctly about a particular deceased person. On the other hand, same-family cases and cases in which the families were previously acquainted may include impressive evidence of a paranormal process, such as the occurrence of two unusual birthmarks (each unique in the subject's family) that correspond in location to two wounds on the previous personality. We will return to this problem after presenting our results.

Statistics Used

The present paper was concerned with a sample of 326 subjects from eight different cultures, namely, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Lebanon, Thailand, U.S.A. (non-tribal cases), and Tlingit (native tribe of Alaska). The data were analyzed on the basis of descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were employed to learn the nature of the mentioned variables to be examined. The inferential statistic was the t-test, employed to find out the significant differences, if any, between means related to violent death and natural death for the intermission period and for the subject's age at first speaking about the previous life.

RESULTS

The results are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 for each culture separately and also for the total sample summed over all cultures.

Table 1. Interval between Previous Personality's Death and Subject's Birth (in months) in Cases with Natural and Violent Death

Country	Natural Death			Violent Death			t-Value
	Mean (In Months)	S.D.	N	Mean (In Months)	S.D.	N	
India	61.26	91.34	59	22.07	28.02	49	3.125*
Burma	40.77	42.71	26	33.59	45.47	22	0.561
Sri Lanka	44.77	46.55	14	77.57	49.97	14	1.901
Turkey	19.71	25.61	7	13.98	17.69	25	0.673
Lebanon	30.10	44.88	13	12.77	17.41	29	1.350
Thailand	63.91	93.24	11	50.55	55.42	16	0.426
U.S.A. (non-tribal)	254.20	195.71	5	96.88	98.42	8	1.670
Tlingit (Alaska)	69.28	56.32	18	64.60	60.32	10	0.201
Total	72.60	81.24	153	46.50	55.12	173	3.350*

*p < .01.

The data of Table 1 show that violent death and natural death cases differed significantly at the 0.01 level of significance with respect to intermission period for the Indian culture as well as for the total sample (summed over all cultures). No statistically significant difference was observed for the cases of other cultures taken in the present study. However, the mean values of the intermission period show that the intermission period is less in cases of violent death compared with

those of natural death for all the cultures except that of Sri Lanka. Table 1 also shows that the variability of the intermission period was less among cases with violent death than among those with natural death.

Table 2 shows that a statistically significant difference was found between violent death and natural death cases at the 0.01 level of significance for the subject's age at first speaking about the previous life for the total sample (summed over all cultures). Furthermore, although no statistically significant differences were found for individual cultures examined in the study, Table 2 shows that the mean values for the subject's age at first speaking about the previous life are less in violent death cases than in natural death ones in all cultures except that of Lebanon. Here again, the variability among the cases with violent death is less than among those with natural death.

Table 2. Subject's Age (in months) of First Speaking of Previous Life in Cases with Natural and Violent Death

Country	Natural Death			Violent Death			t-Value
	Mean (In Months)	S.D.	N	Mean (In Months)	S.D.	N	
India	35.51	13.47	61	34.81	18.55	53	0.227
Burma	39.64	21.44	22	39.18	17.63	22	0.070
Sri Lanka	30.50	16.79	14	27.69	12.91	16	0.509
Turkey	30.33	10.61	6	29.32	11.58	22	0.203
Lebanon	27.69	12.74	13	28.37	10.36	30	0.170
Thailand	57.40	62.30	10	27.14	9.96	14	1.522
U.S.A.							
(non-tribal)	51.50	22.28	6	37.00	21.97	23	1.424
Tlingit (Alaska)	71.14	54.57	7	33.60	11.13	5	1.770
Total	42.96	25.91	139	32.14	15.82	185	4.345*

* $p < 0.01$.

DISCUSSION

We will first remark that the ideas for the two analyses here reported were developed *post hoc* and therefore could not have corrupted the collection of the data by the field interviewers. We should also note that although some cultures have a folk-belief about reincarnation according to which violent death may affect both the postmortem state and the next incarnation (and we shall return to this point later) such beliefs, so far as we have come across them, are not held uniformly. If we suppose that the informants, believing that a violent death leads to a more rapid reincarnation than natural death, adapted their memories of the dates to suit this expectation, we have to include in the supposition two sets of informants (one for birth and the other for death) who were interviewed separately. Moreover, we found the same effect among the Tlingit for the cases of which we were freed, with a few exceptions, from dependence on the memories of informants through having reliable official certificates.

Are there other normal processes that might have affected our results? In our Introduction we mentioned our belief (and supporting evidence) that violent deaths are more memorable than natural ones. One can imagine that parents remembering a violent death of which they have heard may connect it with remarks their child may make about a previous life. They might then incorrectly conclude that the child was referring to this particular violent death when he was not. They would not remember natural deaths so well or for so long. If this sort of mistake happened, it would lead to the inclusion in the series of cases having the feature of violent death and a short interval between death and birth that had a normal explanation. There is some risk of such a misidentification in cultures in which the subject and previous personality are likely to belong to the same family or same community, such as those of the Tlingit and the Burmese; it also exists in cultures where there is a strong pressure to identify of whom a baby is the reincarnation, such as exists among the Igbo of Nigeria and the Druses of Lebanon. However, in other cultures, such as those of India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, the inhabitants have little expectation either of finding a deceased person reborn or of identifying of whom a child may be the reincarnation. Supposing, however, that such mistaken identification does occur often, we should expect the correlation of a shorter interval between death and birth with violent compared with natural death to occur more strongly in the cultures in which cases with violent death—artificially increased in our series by the mentioned supposed mistakes in identification—exceed those with natural death. In fact, we found the strongest correlation for this feature in India, where the natural death cases exceeded the violent death ones (see Table 1). Moreover, we do not see any way in which the mentioned mistaken identification of subjects with persons having died recently and violently could lead to our results for the feature of the age at first speaking about the previous life, which we discuss further below.

We ourselves cannot think of any plausible normal hypothesis to account for our data on the intermission period, and so we provisionally interpret it to mean that, if reincarnation occurs, persons dying violently tend to be reborn more quickly than those dying naturally. This accords with traditions of Hinduism, according to which, every action in our lives, both of body and mind, is stored in the form of a *Samskara* or impression in our minds. Desires persist after death as strongly as before and ultimately lead to a new birth. The stronger the desires the greater the tendency to an early rebirth. A violent death, even in an old person, is by definition a premature one, so that the person thus dying has not lived the 'normal' course of his life; and the soul of that individual is thought to have stronger desires for life than the soul of a person who died a natural death after fulfilling more of the desires for the life that ended. Accordingly, persons dying violently are expected, in Hinduism, to be reborn more quickly than persons dying naturally.²

A somewhat similar belief—that a violent death leads to a quicker rebirth than a natural death—occurs among the Tlingit of Alaska (Stevenson, 1966).

² Here we should say that although the idea of violent death leading to earlier rebirth than natural death is implicit in Hinduism (and widely believed among the informants with whom we have talked in India), we have not yet found an explicit statement about the connection in any published work. We should be grateful to readers who can guide us to one.

We think our second result—about the age of first speaking—also suggests some paranormal process. We mentioned above that an earlier report by our colleagues and I. S. (Cook *et al.*, 1983) showed that the mode of death figured much more often among the subject's statements when the death was violent than when it was natural. This suggests that a violent death is more memorable than a natural one. The data of the present analysis give further support to this interpretation, because we have found that children remembering violent deaths in a previous life begin speaking earlier about the previous lives they remember than do children who remember lives ending naturally. These findings are only indirect evidence of a greater memorability of violent death compared with natural death; perhaps therefore we should say only that violent death appears to generate a greater pressure to communicate than does a natural death.

However, the earlier age of first speaking about the previous life may not be independent of the shorter intermission period. When the intermission period is shorter, the presumably reincarnating personality would have had less time (before, in the new incarnation, he became able to speak) in which to forget all memories of the previous life than when the intermission period is longer. The memories being fresher, a person benefiting, so to say, from a shorter intermission would have more accessible memories of the previous life than would a person 'emerging' from a longer intermission, and he would begin talking about them sooner. This is a hypothesis that we can test in a further analysis of whether subjects in cases with shorter intermission periods have more abundant memories (that is, are credited with making more different statements about the previous life) than are subjects with longer intermission periods.

This is the first internal analysis of the data from cases suggestive of reincarnation providing information about factors that may affect the process of reincarnation, if it occurs. We plan to undertake other analyses in the future, such as the one mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

We hope also to examine more explicitly the possibility that our series includes a distorting number of cases that are best explained along normal lines. This we can do eventually by analyzing, for example, a group of cases in which the families concerned had no prior acquaintance and in which someone made a written record of what the subject said before the two families met. (As mentioned, these cases are not the only ones that, in our view, provide evidence of paranormal processes; but they are an extremely important group.) Unfortunately, we still have only 24 cases in this group, which is less than 1 per cent of the total number of cases in our collection. If we can increase the size of this group, say to 50 cases, or even to 30, the subgroups would perhaps be large enough to permit the kinds of analyses we have presented here. And from such analyses we could naturally draw firmer conclusions than the present ones permit.

N. K. CHADHA
Department of Psychology
University of Delhi
Delhi 110 007
India

IAN STEVENSON
Division of Personality Studies
Department of Behavioral Medicine and Psychiatry
Box 152, Medical Center
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia
22908 U.S.A.

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