

## Does the Socio-Psychological Hypothesis Explain Cases of the Reincarnation Type?

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*The investigation and analysis of the cases reported here have been supported by the Nagamasa Azuma Fund, The Lifebridge Foundation, the Bernstein Brothers Foundation, Richard Adams, and one anonymous donor. Thanks are due to Erlendur Haraldsson and Satwant Pasricha for contributing cases included in the analysis or participating in their investigation. Emily Cook and Dawn Hunt offered helpful comments for the improvement of this report.*

Since the 1960s, one of us (IS) and his collaborators have systematically collected and investigated hundreds of experiences of children who claim to recall events of a previous life as another person (Stevenson, 1974, 1975, 1997). It appears that these experiences, called "cases of the reincarnation type" (often shortened to "CORT"), show a number of recurrent characteristics (Cook et al., 1983) and that these characteristics remain rather stable over time (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1987). Hence, the occurrence of CORT can be considered as a distinguishable and established phenomenon.

CORT are most readily found in cultures in which the belief in reincarnation is taken for granted by many. (Instances also occur, less frequently, in other parts of the world.) Although the persons involved in CORT usually consider the experience as an instance of reincarnation, it is plausible to think that the nature and the reports of these cases are influenced, or perhaps can be entirely explained, by psychological and cultural processes. Examples of hypotheses based on such processes are the "socio-psychological" hypothesis (Brody, 1979; Chari, 1962, 1987; Stevenson and Samararatne 1988) and the "construction of an alternate personality" hypothesis of Mills (1989).

Stevenson and Samararatne (1988, p. 237) have expressed the explanation based on the "socio-psychological" hypothesis as follows: In a culture having a belief in reincarnation a child who seems to speak about a previous life will be encouraged to say more. What he says then leads his parents somehow to find another family whose members come to believe that the child has been speaking about a deceased member of their family. The two families exchange information about details, and they end by crediting the subject with having had much more knowledge about the identified deceased person than he really had had.

Because this explanation rests on established socio-psychological processes, it offers one of the best explanations for CORT in terms of known and nonparanormal processes. The present study was aimed at finding evidence for the validity of this explanation.

The socio-psychological hypothesis of cases of the reincarnation type suggests that a child's parents may elaborate, through questioning, guidance, and later modification, statements their child made about a deceased person. When no one made a written record of the child's statements before they were verified, the parents may thus believe that he or she made more, and more correct, statements than he or she did. One would expect that there would be fewer statements and fewer correct ones in the cases with written records made before verification (B cases) than in those with written records made afterward (A cases). To test this hypothesis, we compared a group of B cases and a group of A cases from India and Sri Lanka.

B cases are relatively rare and mainly from India and Sri Lanka. Examples of B cases may be found in Stevenson (1975), Stevenson and Samararatne (1988), Haraldsson (1991), and Mills et al. (1994). This type of case is rare because, if the child gives enough specifying detail about the claimed previous life and if the distances involved are not great, the parents will usually try to verify for themselves his or her statements. They

rarely make a written record of what the child has said before they do this. Investigators thus learn of most of these cases only after the families concerned have met and mingled their memories of what the child said and what was correct for the presumed deceased person to whose life the child seemed to refer.

## **Methods**

*Predictions:* The socio-psychological hypothesis assumes that after the families meet the interactions will have three effects. First, wrong statements might be given a new interpretation to make them fit with new information obtained about the assumed previous personality. Second, statements by the child initially not attributed as being related to the previous personality might be interpreted to fit details learned about that person and subsequently added to the set of statements, which the child is supposed to have made about his or her previous life. Third, after the families meet, informants may attribute to the child statements that he or she made only after learning the information normally. Hence, based on the socio-psychological hypothesis, one would expect a lower percentage of correct statements in cases in which the statements were recorded before the families met (the "before" or B cases) than in cases in which statements were recorded after the families had met (the "after" or A cases). In addition, one would expect the total number of statements-correct, incorrect, and unverified-to be, on average, higher for the A cases than for the B cases.

*Selection of Cases:* All thoroughly investigated cases of India and Sri Lanka, for which the number of correct and incorrect statements had been counted and recorded, were chosen. This yielded 9 B cases and 57 A cases from India and 12 B cases and 25 A cases from Sri Lanka, for a total of 21 B cases and 82 A cases.

*Statistics:* The two groups were compared using Student's t-tests.

## **Results**

Although the cultures of (mainly Hindu) India and (mainly Buddhist) Sri Lanka have important differences, we believe they are sufficiently similar to warrant our making, initially, an analysis of the cases of the two countries combined. The mean percentage of correct statements is 76.7% for the B cases and 78.4% for the A cases. Nevertheless, because culture might have an effect on the percentage of correct statements, the analysis was repeated for the two countries separately. For India, the percentage of correct statements is 80.7% ( $N = 9$ ;  $SD = 12.9$ , median = 80) for the B cases and 80.3% ( $N = 57$ ,  $SD = 16.8$ , median = 83.5) for the A cases. For Sri Lanka, these values are 73.8% ( $N = 12$ ,  $SD = 17.8$ , median = 77) and 74.2% ( $N = 25$ ,  $SD = 24.8$ , median = 84.5), respectively.

The average number of all statements turned out to be 18.5 for the A cases ( $SD = 12.0$ , median = 15) and 25.5 for the B cases ( $SD = 9.9$ , median = 24.5), a significant difference ( $t = 2.44$ ,  $df = 101$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This difference is observed in cases from India and Sri Lanka separately but reaches significance only for the cases from India.

We considered the possibility that if the families involved in the A cases had some knowledge of each other, however slight, before the case developed, the child, or parents, might have used whatever normal knowledge they had to augment the number of correct statements attributed to the child. We therefore made a separate analysis to examine such contamination. For 79 of the 82 A cases, we had information about prior knowledge (or its absence) on the part of the subject's family about the family of the concerned deceased person. We found that when the subject's family had such prior knowledge ( $N = 35$ ), the mean number of the subject's statements was 21.0 ( $SD = 14.9$ , median = 16); the mean percentage of correct statements for this subgroup was 76.1 ( $SD = 19.5$ , median = 83). When the subject's family had no prior knowledge of the other family ( $N = 24$ ), the mean number of the subject's statements was 16.6 ( $SD = 8.7$ , median

= 14); the percentage of correct statements for this group was 78.9 (SD = 20.4, median = 85). These differences were not significant. Although the subgroup with some prior knowledge of the other family had a slightly higher total number of statements, the percentage of correct statements in this subgroup was lower than in the group in which the subject's family had no prior knowledge of the other family.

### **Discussion**

Contrary to expectation, B and A cases of India and Sri Lanka all yielded approximately equal percentages of correct statements and the average overall number of statements was lower for the A cases. These findings suggest that the sociopsychological process of "creating" more, and more correct, statements after the families meet does not take place or at least does not influence the data to a measurable degree. The very fact that B cases exist indicates that a meeting between families is not a necessary condition for the occurrence of CORT. Because the data appear not to confirm the essential predictions derived from the socio-psychological hypothesis, this hypothesis seems unable to explain CORT.

### **Conclusion**

No evidence was obtained to support the hypothesis that socio-psychological circumstances promote a false elaboration of apparent memories of previous lives.

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