

Do Cases of the Reincarnation Type Show Similar Features Over Many Years? A Study of Turkish Cases a Generation Apart

JÜRGEN KEIL

*Department of Psychology, University of Tasmania
Box 252C GPO, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia
E-mail: hkeil@tussie.net.au*

IAN STEVENSON

*Division of Personality Studies, University of Virginia School of Medicine
Health Sci. Cntr. Box 152, Charlottesville, VA 22908
E-mail: ips6r@virginia.edu*

Abstract — In order to examine stability over time in the features of cases of the reincarnation type in Turkey, 45 cases studied by one investigator were compared with 45 later cases studied by another investigator. The two sets of cases occurred about a generation apart. On the side of the subject 9 features were compared; on the side of the concerned deceased person (the “previous personality”) 3 features were compared. Overall, the two groups of cases showed closely similar features. Three differences appear due to dissimilar emphases on the part of the investigators when they interviewed informants. A fourth difference — a lower incidence of homicide in the later series — reflects increased peacefulness among the Alevi of south central Turkey in the last few decades.

Keywords: reincarnation — rebirth

Introduction

Children who claim to remember previous lives have been found and their cases investigated in numerous countries and cultures. Although certain features occur in the cases of all cultures so far investigated (Stevenson, 1987), other features show a wide variation in their incidence from one culture to another (Cook *et al.*, 1983; Stevenson, 1986). A high incidence of violent death in the claimed previous life is an example of a “universal” feature, which means that it has been found in the cases of all cultures so far investigated; and the claim to remember a life as a person of the opposite sex is an example of a culture-bound feature.

Little is known about the stability of the features of these cases within a given culture over a period of time. Pasricha and Stevenson (1987) compared 54 variables in two groups of Indian cases two generations apart. They found

only five significant differences in the features of the two groups of cases. They concluded that three of these differences probably derived from differences in the thoroughness of the investigations of the two groups of cases. The other two differences were probably due to the inclusion of a number of unverified cases in one group; such cases were not included in the other group. In sum, cases in India two generations apart had closely similar features.

We decided to investigate the stability of the features of two groups of Turkish cases investigated about one generation apart. This became possible because one of us, Ian Stevenson (IS), investigated a large number of cases in Turkey between 1964 and 1976. In 1977 his longtime Turkish interpreter and associate, Resat Bayer, unexpectedly died. In the following years IS tried to find another qualified assistant in Turkey. Dr. Can Polat investigated 48 cases, but could not continue in the research. In 1988 Jürgen Keil (JK) resumed the study of cases in Turkey and has continued investigating them to the present.

It is important to note here that two different investigators studied the two groups of cases that we are comparing. We shall have to consider therefore the extent to which any important differences between the features of the two groups derive from differences in their investigation or from other factors. It is clear that although both investigators wished to elicit similar, if not exactly the same information, they differed in their methods for achieving this.

Methods

Discernment of Cases

Although we have no data about the exact incidence of cases of the reincarnation type in Turkey, we can say that they occur frequently among the Alevis of the south central region of the country. The files of cases at the University of Virginia now include 301 cases in Turkey. Of those, IS investigated 125 cases and JK investigated 113 cases. Between 1978 and 1987, 63 cases were investigated by Dr. Can Polat, Mr. Ertan Kura, and Mr. Resat Bayer.

We learned of a few cases through publicity about them in newspapers. Most of our preliminary information about the cases, however, came from local persons who became familiar with our research and from informants for a case already known; these latter persons would sometimes mention another case and give us the address of one of the families concerned.

Resat Bayer lived in Istanbul. He went to the area of the cases — the provinces of Adana and Hatay — with IS and occasionally by himself. Taxi drivers and other persons who became familiar with the research would notify us of new cases that had come to their attention when we were not in the area. IS and Resat Bayer, however, never found a local person qualified and willing to discern new cases more or less systematically. In contrast, JK was able to find a succession of such persons; and they have been helpful, not only in iden-

tifying new cases, but in obtaining information missed during initial interviews.

Methods of Investigation

The principal method of investigation was the interview with firsthand informants. These were, on the side of the subject, the subject himself or herself, the subject's parents, and sometimes older siblings and other persons, such as village headmen or schoolteachers, always provided that they had firsthand knowledge of the case. On the side of the concerned deceased person (for convenience referred to as the "previous personality") the informants were that person's parents, siblings, and perhaps spouse and children.

Birthmarks and, to a lesser extent, birth defects occur frequently in cases suggestive of reincarnation (Stevenson, 1997). Our investigations therefore included the examination of any physical abnormalities drawn to our attention. We sketched and photographed these and made independent inquiries about the correspondence of such abnormalities to wounds or other marks on the previous personality.

Written documentation was sought whenever possible. Identity cards are often inaccurate in Turkey. We obtained medical records, particularly post-mortem reports, whenever possible. These gave accurate dates of death; for dates of birth we usually had to rely on the informants' memories.

In the course of the investigations we tried to learn about any connections between the families concerned before the case developed. In some cases the subject and previous personality belonged to the same family; in other instances they were remotely related or lived in the same community and had some acquaintance; in still others the two families were complete strangers.

Our inquiries also extended to observations of any unusual behavior on the part of the subject and its correspondence to behavior that was reported for the previous personality or could be conjectured about him or her. Phobias, phobias, unusual play, and premature social development (sometimes associated with a so-called "adult attitude") are among the more common unusual behaviors noted.

One of us has elsewhere published fuller details about methods of investigation and discussed some of their limitations (Stevenson, 1975, 1987, 1997).

Selection of Cases to Be Compared

In selecting the JK cases we chose, in alphabetical order (by subjects' family names), the first 45 cases that had sufficient data for the proposed analysis. This means sufficient data for a comparison of the twelve features of the cases, mentioned below, that we evaluated. (On later rechecking the selected cases we found that three had not been selected alphabetically; but the assistants making this mistake had no knowledge of the cases that could have influenced the analysis.) Copies of JK's notes were always brought or sent to the

University of Virginia, where IS read and sometimes commented on them. This raised the possibility of bias on his part if he selected the cases for comparison from his group. We avoided this by asking an assistant to choose the IS cases in the same manner as the JK cases, by taking alphabetically the first 45 cases that had sufficient data for analysis.

Although the IS cases had been coded in the 1980s, improvements in the investigation of the cases and increased attention to some features previously neglected led to a revision of the codebook. The data from the earlier codebooks of the IS cases were transferred to the new codebook. In some instances IS examined the field notes and other documents in the case folder in order to allow for coding of features not included in the earlier codebook. The JK cases were all coded into the new codebook.

One type of case was excluded from both series. It happens not uncommonly among the Alevis that adults identify a baby as a deceased person reincarnated soon after its birth. They make this assumption on the basis of dreams (called by us "announcing dreams" because the deceased person appearing in the dream is said to foretell his forthcoming reincarnation) and birthmarks or birth defects that seem to correspond to wounds or other marks on the concerned deceased person. Most such children later speak about the previous life of the person the adults have thus identified. A few, however, do not; although given opportunities to speak about a previous life if they wish to do so, they remain silent (Keil, 1996). Because the children's statements are important features of the cases, we omitted "silent cases" during our selection of cases for this comparison.

Data Analyses

As will be seen, some features have missing data, and we were unable to compare a few features for which there were insufficient data.

The data from the 90 codebooks were entered in a computer and frequencies of features were derived as well as intervals between significant dates, utilizing SPSS 7.0 for Windows.

Demographic Features of the Cases in the Two Groups

Sex of the Subject. In the IS group 37 of the subjects were males and 8 were females. In the JK group 30 subjects were males and 15 females.

Comment. We believe the larger number of female subjects in the JK group reflects advances in the status of women in Turkey during the last 25 years. IS learned of one female subject whose father suppressed her case and would not allow it to be investigated, possibly fearing that local publicity would jeopardize the girl's chances of marriage. We think it possible that other cases with a female subject were withheld from both of us.

Religion of the Subjects. All the subjects were members of the Alevi sect, which is ultimately derived from the Shiite branch of Islam (Stevenson, 1980).

Among the deceased persons concerned in the cases, all but two were Alevites. One person in the IS group was a Christian (Greek Orthodox), and one in the JK group was a Sunni Moslem.

Socioeconomic Status. Nearly all the persons immediately concerned with the cases were peasant villagers, shopkeepers, mechanics, or other workers. With a few exceptions they belonged to the lower middle class of Turkish society. A wide gulf in socioeconomic circumstances between the families concerned in a case, which occurs not infrequently in Indian cases, rarely complicates cases in Turkey.

Verification of Subject's Statements. Among the 45 IS cases we judged 36 to be "solved," by which we mean that a deceased person was identified whose life corresponded significantly to the subject's statements and sometimes also to other indices of identification, such as dreams and birthmarks. Among the 45 JK cases we judged 40 as similarly solved.

Previous Acquaintance between Families Concerned. In 9 of the 36 solved IS cases the subject and previous personality belonged to the same family, in 11 there was some acquaintance between the two families or they knew about each other, and in 12 cases the families had been strangers before the case developed. The exact relationship or acquaintance was not learned in 4 of the IS cases. In 6 of the 40 solved JK cases, the subject and previous personality belonged to the same family, in 15 cases the two families had some acquaintance or knew about each other, and in 11 cases the families were strangers. In 8 of the solved JK cases the relationship was not learned.

Subject's Year of Birth. The mean year of birth in the IS group was 1950 (median 1956). The mean year of birth for the JK group was 1977 (median 1982). The two groups were thus almost a generation apart, which is usually reckoned as about 30 years.

Subject's Age When the Case Was Investigated. The mean age of the subjects when the cases of the IS group were investigated was 19 years (median 13 years). The mean age of the subjects when the cases of the JK group were investigated was 13.5 years (median 9 years). It follows from these data that many of the cases were old when we first investigated them. For the IS cases the mean interval between the development of a case (which usually occurred when the subject was 2 or 3 years old) and its investigation was 17 years and for the JK cases it was 10.5 years. The median of this feature for the IS cases was 12 years and for the JK cases 8.0 years.

Comment. We believe the presence in Hatay of JK's local assistants enabled him to learn about cases sooner after their development than was possible for IS when he worked with Resat Bayer, who lived in Istanbul.

Results

We will present the results from the comparison of the two groups in three tables, first with regard to features on the subject's side of the case and then with regard to features on the previous personality's side. In all three tables the

column of (*n*) indicates the number of cases for which the information was actually sought. The percentages given are for the proportion of positive responses among those for which the information was sought.

Features on the subject's side were divided into two groups. In the first group both the investigators intended, and with few exceptions succeeded, in obtaining the information desired. These are summarized in Table 1.

For three features the two investigators asked for the information in only a minority of cases; this was also true for the feature of announcing dreams in the IS series. (JK inquired about announcing dreams in 42 of 45 cases.) These results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 3 summarizes the results for the features on the side of the previous personality.

Features on the Subject's Side: Frequently Asked Questions

Incidence of Birthmarks. Among the IS cases informants reported that the subject had one or more birthmarks in 27 (60%) of the cases. For the JK case informants reported birthmarks in 28 (62%) of the cases.

Incidence of Birth Defects. Birth defects were reported in 3 (7%) of the IS cases and in 7 (16%) of the JK cases.

Subject's Age When First Speaking about a Previous Life. Among the IS

TABLE 1
Features on Subject's Side of Case: Frequently Asked Questions

	IS Cases (<i>n</i>)	Results	JK Cases (<i>n</i>)	Results
Birthmarks	45	27 (60%)	45	28 (62%)
Birth Defects	44	3 (7%)	45	7 (16%)
Age of First Speaking About Previous Life (mean)	35	37 months	36	30 months
Mention of Previous Personality's Mode of Death	38	33 (87%)	39	28 (72%)
Phobias	44	9 (20%)	45	5 (11%)

TABLE 2
Features on Subject's Side of Case: Questions Asked Less Frequently

	IS Cases (<i>n</i>)	Results	JK Cases (<i>n</i>)	Results
Announcing Dreams	30	23 (77%)	42	31 (74%)
Mention of Previous Personality's Name	31	28 (90%)	31	24 (77%)
Adult Attitude	13 ¹	10 (77%)	18	7 (39%)
Desire to Go to Previous Family	16 ²	14 (88%)	31 ³	31 (100%)

¹ Two of the (mild to moderate) affirmatives were for PPs who died at 12 ¹/₂ and 17 years old respectively.

² An additional 9 cases were in the same family.

³ An additional 6 cases were in the same family.

TABLE 3
Features on Previous Personality's Side of Case

	IS Cases (n)	Results	JK Cases (n)	Results
Age at Death (mean)	39	27 years	35	30 years
Violent Mode of Death,				
General	40	33 (83%)	41	35 (85%)
Homicide	40	18 (45%)	41	10 (24%)
Interval Between Previous Personality's Death and Subject's Birth (mean)	33	17.6 months	36	22.7 months

cases the mean age when the subject first spoke about a previous life was 37 months (median 36 months). In the JK group the mean age for such first speaking was 30 months (median 24 months).

Subject's Mention of Previous Personality's Mode of Death. Among the IS cases 33 (87%) of the subjects gave information about how the previous personality had died. Among the JK cases 28 (72%) gave this information.

Phobias. Among the IS cases 9 (20%) of the subjects were reported to have phobias apparently related to the previous life. Only 5 (11%) of the JK cases had this feature.

Features on the Subject's Side: Questions Asked Less Frequently

Announcing Dreams. Announcing dreams occurred in 23 of 30 (77%) of the IS cases and in 31 of 42 (74%) of the JK cases. IS's notes for 15 cases showed no record of a question about announcing dreams having been asked; but JK asked this question in all but 3 of his cases.

Subject's Mention of Previous Personality's Name. Among the IS cases 28 (90%) mentioned the previous personality's name or nickname. Among the JK cases 24 (77%) of the subjects mentioned the previous personality's name.

Manifestation of an Adult Attitude on the Part of the Subject. Our notes show that IS enquired about this feature in only 13 of his cases and JK enquired about it in only 18 of his. Informants reported a noticeably adult attitude on the part of the subject in 10 of 13 (77%) of the IS cases and in 7 of 18 (39%) of the JK cases.

Subject's Desire to Go to Previous Family or Previous Community. As mentioned, the subject and previous personality sometimes belonged to the same family or were close neighbors. This was true in 9 of the IS cases and in 6 of the JK cases. No inquiry about the child's desire to go to the other family or place where the previous personality had lived was made in 8 of the JK cases and in 20 of the IS ones. Among the remaining cases in the IS group 14 (88%) of 16 subjects about whom this question was asked showed a strong or moderate desire to go to the previous family or place. Among the JK cases such a desire was shown by all 31 (100%) of the cases for which information about this feature was relevant and available.

Features on the Previous Personality's Side

Previous Personality's Age at Death. We obtained information about the age of the previous personality at death for 39 of the IS cases and for 35 of the JK cases. The mean age at death among the IS cases was 328 months or a little over 27 years. The corresponding figure for the JK cases was 362 months or a little over 30 years.

Previous Personality's Mode of Death. We learned the mode of death in the presumed previous life in 40 of the 45 IS cases and in 41 of the 45 JK cases. The death was natural in 7 of the IS cases and in 6 of the JK cases. All the other deaths, that is approximately 84%, were violent. In the IS group 18 of the 33 violent deaths — almost half — were homicidal. Although the JK group had a slightly higher overall incidence of violent death than the IS group (due to an increase in vehicular accidents), it had a lower incidence of homicidal death; only 10 of the 35 JK cases with violent death had this feature.

Interval between Previous Personality's Death and Subject's Birth. There were sufficiently adequate data to calculate this interval for 33 of the IS cases and 36 of the JK cases. The range for the IS cases varied between 0 (which means less than one month) and 144 months; the mean was 17.6 months and the median was 5 months. The range for the JK cases was 0 to 204 months; the mean was 22.7 months and the median was 8.5 months. In both groups the median was much lower than the mean because of a large number of cases in which the interval was extremely short. For example, in 7 IS and 6 JK cases the interval was less than a month.

Discussion

We believe the data show important similarities in the features of the two groups of cases. We cannot explain all the differences between the features of the two series, but will offer conjectures about four of them. We will also comment on one feature in which the two series were similar.

The discrepancy in the reports of announcing dreams between the two series derives from IS's failure to inquire about these dreams during the first years of his investigations in Turkey. He first learned about announcing dreams from the Tlingit of Alaska (Stevenson, 1966) and then began — too slowly — to ask about them in other countries, such as Turkey. In his first years of working in Turkey he only learned about these dreams when informants mentioned them spontaneously. By the time of JK's research, questions about announcing dreams had become part of the interviewing routine.

The different incidence of phobias in the two groups (20% in the IS group compared with only 11% in the JK series) may derive from a greater interest in phobias on the part of IS, a psychiatrist, compared with JK. IS published a paper on phobias in children who claim to remember a previous life (Stevenson, 1990). Also, IS perhaps recorded as phobias milder fears that JK did not rate as such. For instance, if a subject was somewhat afraid of the dark but

could be persuaded to go to sleep without emotional outbursts, JK did not list this behavior under the heading of phobias.

Similarly IS, having a special interest in personality traits, may have “pushed” questions about “adult attitude” on the part of the subjects more than did JK. If so, this could account for the higher frequency of this trait recorded for his cases compared with those of JK. Also, rating subjects as “more adult” without additional detailed criteria occurred on a rather subjective basis. JK was probably more reluctant to include subjects in this group unless their adult behavior was pronounced. This may have contributed to the difference between the two series in regard to this question.

The low age at death in both series reflects the high incidence of violent death among the cases. Young persons are more prone to die violently than older ones.

The lower incidence of homicidal deaths in the JK series compared with the IS series may reflect some general increase in calmness among the Alevi people during the past two decades, which may have resulted from an increase in the standard of living.

In summary, we have found a close similarity in most of the features of cases of the reincarnation type in Turkey studied over a period of 30 years (1964 to 1995). One explanation of this result could propose that JK, being familiar as he was with IS’s methods, slavishly followed them to assure that he obtained data similar to those already in IS’s files. This seems improbable for two reasons. First, JK’s notes show that he followed a line of inquiry that differed somewhat from that of IS, even though it was similarly intended to elicit information about the details of the cases. IS had the habit of listening to the informants and recording what they said; afterward he usually went through the checklist of the Registration Form we use and completed it on the scene. JK was more inclined to obtain and record all the information he could without taking time to complete the Registration Form until later. Second, we did not conceive the plan for the comparison of the IS and JK groups until JK had almost completed his investigations of the 45 cases included in his group. This was not a prospective study.

The results — repeating what was earlier found in India — show that the features of the cases of children who claim to remember a previous life remain fairly stable over a long period. The interpretation of the cases is a matter for other inquiries.

Acknowledgments

The research of the Division of Personality Studies is supported by the Lifebridge Foundation, the Nagamasa Azuma Fund, Richard Adams, The Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, and several anonymous donors. The authors acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Patricia Estes, Dawn Hunt, and Emily W. Kelly.

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