

The Similarity of Features of Reincarnation Type Cases over Many Years: A Third Study

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Abstract—The principal features of two series of cases suggestive of reincarnation in Lebanon were compared. The series were investigated about a generation apart by two different investigators. In three important features, the two series were closely similar; in other features they were not similar, probably because of differences in the thoroughness of investigation in the two series.

Keywords: reincarnation cases—stability of features

Introduction

Children who claim to remember a previous life (PL) occur in many different countries and cultures. Investigators can find them most readily in South Asia and western Asia, but they occur also in Europe and North America (Stevenson, 1987/2001). In many cases, inquiries have shown that the child's statements correspond to facts and events in the life of a particular deceased person. In many of these verified or "solved" cases, investigators have found no normal means whereby information about the concerned deceased person could have reached the subject of the case. In other cases, however, careful inquiries have failed to verify the child's statements; such cases remain "unsolved" (Cook et al, 1983). In addition to the child's statements, many cases include behavior by the child that is unusual in the child's family but that corresponds to the child's statements or to the life and death of the deceased person. For example, among 47 cases in which the child described a previous life that ended in death by drowning, 30 (64%) subjects had a phobia of being immersed in water (Stevenson, 1990). In many other cases the subject has birthmarks or birth defects that correspond closely in location and shape to wounds or other marks on the concerned deceased person (Stevenson, 1997).

Despite the evidence supporting a paranormal interpretation of some of these cases, some critics have attributed them to a combination of normal (but

unnoticed) communications, fantasies (deriving in large part from the belief in reincarnation in the cultures where most of the cases are found), and coincidence. A condensed name for this interpretation is the “socio-psychological hypothesis” (Brody, 1979; Littlewood, 2001; Schouten & Stevenson, 1998). We believe that the stability of some features of cases of the reincarnation type weighs against the view that they derive from fantasies; we remain fully aware, however, that the cases minimally require evidence of a paranormal process before we can invoke reincarnation as their best interpretation.

Two previous examinations of the stability of features of these cases over time, in India (Pasricha & Stevenson, 1987) and in Turkey (Keil & Stevenson, 1999), have shown such stability. In India, the stability occurred in cases two generations apart; in Turkey, the compared series of cases were one generation apart.

This article reports a third study of the stability of features of cases of the reincarnation type, this one concerning cases among the Druses of Lebanon. The Druses (sometimes spelled Druzes) form a fairly compact and substantial religious group in Lebanon and neighboring countries. Although their religion originally derived from Islam, the Druses now regard it as separate from Islam. Reincarnation is a central tenet of their beliefs. They have numerous cases of children who claim to remember previous lives (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1980). One of us (I.S.) investigated Druse cases of the reincarnation type between 1964 and 1981. The civil wars in Lebanon then interrupted investigations there. E.H. resumed the investigations in 1998–2001. The median year of investigation for the I.S. cases was 1972 and that for the E.H. cases was 1999. The two series, therefore, occurred about a generation apart.

Methods of Investigation

Interviews with firsthand witnesses of the child’s statements and of any unusual behavior on the part of the child formed the principal method of investigation. In solved cases, qualified informants for the life of the identified deceased person, such as a widow or widower, were interviewed. When feasible, we checked dates provided by informants’ memories against Identity Cards or other records. (Identity Cards, however, were often unreliable in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s.) Relevant medical records were also sought and copied.

We made notes as the informants talked. Skilled interpreters assisted us in most cases. We recorded demographic data on a Registration Form. A checklist (on the Form) of salient features permitted us to conduct somewhat systematic interviews, so that, in general, we elicited similar information about the different cases. Nevertheless, the emphases of our investigations differed to some extent. In his investigations, I.S. concentrated on examining the evidence for or against paranormal interpretations of the case. In contrast, E.H. concentrated on psychological characteristics of the subjects. He satisfied himself concerning the authenticity of the cases he wished to include in a program of psychological testing, which would be similar to one he had conducted for cases in Sri Lanka

(Haraldsson, 1995, 1997; Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai, 2000; Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin, 2002). Therefore, with a few exceptions, he did not investigate the cases of his series in as much detail as I.S. had for his series. Coders, examining the array of details in the case notes, judged the “thoroughness” of each investigation. They judged 29 (more than half) of the I.S.’s cases to have been “thoroughly” or “fairly thoroughly” investigated, whereas only 4 (13%) of E.H.’s cases were so judged. Nevertheless, E.H. obtained sufficient data about the cases he studied for the purposes of the present comparisons. For some other comparisons the data from the E.H. series were insufficient.

The data from the Registration Forms, field notes, and any printed records were entered in a codebook and then into SPSS Ver. 10.1 so that we could make the comparisons we wished.

Results

The I.S. series had 55 cases; 39 (71%) of the subjects were male and 16 (29%) female. The E.H. series had 30 cases; 19 (63%) of the subjects were male and 11 (37%) female. (Other series of cases have usually shown a preponderance of male subjects the reasons for which need not detain us here [Stevenson, 1987/2001].) In every case, the past lives to which the subjects referred were those of Druse persons.

The birth years of the I.S. cases ranged between 1907 and 1974 with a mean of 1952. The birth years of the E.H. cases ranged between 1984 and 1993 with a mean of 1989. The means of the subjects’ ages when their cases were first investigated were 20 years for the I.S. series and 10.5 years for the E.H. series. As mentioned, E.H. was primarily interested in finding young subjects who could be given psychological tests. His assistant, who was ascertaining cases for him, directed him only toward cases of which the subjects were still children. The oldest subject in his series was 13 years old, whereas 30 (more than half) of the subjects in the IS series were more than 13 years old when their cases were first investigated.

Features of Cases on Side of the Subject

Subject’s Age When First Speaking about Previous Life. In the I.S. series, the mean age of first instance of speaking about the previous life was 31 months (range: 12–66). In the E.H. series, the mean age of first instance of speaking about the previous life was 32 months (range: 18–48).

Subject’s Age When Stopped Speaking about Previous Life. In the I.S. series the mean age when the subject stopped speaking spontaneously about the previous life was 161 months (13 years) (range: 102–336 months). For the E.H. series, the mean age for no longer speaking spontaneously about the previous life was 67 months (5.6 years) (range: 60–74 months).

Number and Kind of Statements Subjects Made about Previous Life. In the I.S. series, the mean number of statements about the previous life the subjects made

was 23 (range: 3–74). For the E.H. series the mean number of statements about the previous life was 10.3 (range: 3–23). In the I.S. series, the subject mentioned the mode of death in 42 (82%) cases. In the E.H. series, 25 subjects (83%) mentioned the mode of death. In the I.S. series, 43 (88%) subjects mentioned the previous personality's name. In the E.H. series, 19 (63%) of the subjects mentioned the previous personality's name. In the I.S. series, 31 (56%) of the subjects mentioned or otherwise indicated the previous personality's place of residence. In the E.H. series, 16 (53%) of the subjects did this.

Unusual Behavior on the Part of the Subject. Phobias related to the previous life (usually to the mode of death) occurred frequently in both series. Phobias occurred in 77% of the I.S. cases and in 42% of the E.H. cases. These incidences of phobias exceed those found in the cases of other cultures. Among 179 solved cases of five other cultures (Burma [now Myanmar], India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the United States [nontribal cases]), phobias occurred in 60 (33%) cases.

Many children who say they remember a previous life behave as if they were still adults. For example, they may assume a parental role toward the previous personality's children; they may address adults familiarly instead of deferentially as most children would; and they may be capable of assuming greater responsibilities than the usual child of the same age. We classify such behavior as "adult attitude." We observed some examples of "adult attitude" among the Druse cases. Suleyman Andary, for example, showed it to such an extent that he was nicknamed "mukhtar" (Arabic for headman) (Stevenson, 1980). Nevertheless, we also found the trait difficult to appraise because of the tendency of the subjects' parents in Lebanon (and elsewhere) to think of the subjects as superior persons with consequential effects on the children's behavior. Accordingly, we do not include here any figure for the incidence of "adult attitude."

Identification and Features of Previous Personality

For convenience only and without commitment to any interpretation of the cases, we refer to the concerned deceased person in a case as the "previous personality." The term is useful whether or not the families concerned or the investigators have identified a deceased person correctly corresponding to the subject's statements. Cases with and without the identification of such a person are regarded respectively as "solved" and "unsolved." For the reasons stated, I.S. and E.H. dealt with the verification of the subjects' statements differently. By conducting independent verifications, I.S. classified 41 (74%) of his cases as solved. E.H., however, investigated only four of his cases thoroughly. He did not consider the other cases in his series necessarily solved, although 93% of the subjects' families in his series believed that they were solved.

Mode of Death. In both series, a high incidence of violent mode of death occurred. In the I.S. series, the previous personality died violently in 36 (73%) of cases. In the E.H. series, violent death occurred in 24 (80%) of cases.

Previous Personality's Age at Death. In keeping with the high incidence of violent death, both series showed a young age of the previous personality at

TABLE 1
Features of Subject's Side of Case

Variable	I.S. Series (N = 55)	E.H. Series (N = 30)
Mean age of first speaking of PL	31 months (n = 37) ^a	32 months (n = 29)
Mean age when stopped speaking of PL	161 months (n = 29)	67 months (n = 4)
Mean number of statements subject made	23 (n = 51)	10.3 (n = 30)
Mention of mode of death	82% (n = 51)	83% (n = 30)
Mention of previous personality's name	88% (n = 49)	63% (n = 30)
Mention or correct indication of previous personality's residence	56% (n = 55)	53% (n = 30)
Phobia	77% (n = 30)	42% (n = 24)

^a Lower case "n" indicates number of cases furnishing information for this item.

the time of death. In the I.S. series, the mean age at death of the previous personalities was 34 years; in the E.H. series, it was 38 years.

Interval between Previous Personality's Death and Subject's Birth. The mean interval between the previous personality's death and the subject's birth was 23 months in the I.S. series and 46 months in the E.H. series.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the results of the principal comparisons between the series. They provide for each variable the number of cases from which the data derived.

Discussion

Before discussing the similarities and differences between the two series of cases, we will mention that some demographic features of the cases in both series are not representative of the general population in Lebanon. Unfortunately, we have few data to support this statement. We have not learned of any accurate vital statistics about the population of Lebanon for the years of the I.S. series. The collection of such statistics was at first inhibited for political reasons and then made impossible during the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s. For 1999, the life expectancy in Lebanon was 68 years for men and 72 years for women (United Nations, 2001). The mean age at death of the previous personalities was 34 in the I.S. series and 38 in the E.H. series. We have not obtained any figures for the incidence of violent death in the general population of Lebanon. Nevertheless, we believe the incidence of violent death in both series far exceeds that in the general population.

We should mention that the cases among the Druses differ from those of many other cultures (but not all) in the absence of claims to remember the life of a person of the opposite sex. Also, birthmarks and birth defects rarely occur in cases among the Druses.

The features of the two series were similar in some important respects, but differed in others. They were similar in such salient features as the age of first

TABLE 2
Identification and Features of Previous Personality

Variable	I.S. Series (N = 55)	E.H. Series (N = 30)
Considered solved ^a	74% (n = 55) ^b	93% (n = 30)
Mode of death violent	73% (n = 49)	80% (n = 30)
Mean age at death (in years)	34 (n = 36)	38 (n = 14)
Mean interval between previous personality's death and subject's birth (in months)	23 (n = 51)	46 (n = 12)

^a See text for different criteria for judging a case solved in the two series.

^b Lower case "n" indicates number of cases furnishing information for this item.

speaking of the previous life, mention of the mode of death by the subject, and the high incidence of a violent mode of death.

A noteworthy difference between the two series occurred in the age when the subjects stopped speaking about the previous life. We may explain this difference by the different ages of the subjects at the time the cases of the two series were investigated. As mentioned, E.H. sought to study subjects who were children, and the oldest subject in his series was only 13 years old. I.S. included many subjects who were older children or even already adults. Only four of the children in E.H.'s series had stopped speaking spontaneously about the previous life at the time of his investigations.

I.S. required verification from the previous personality's family members before he considered a case solved. E.H. could not state how many of the cases in his series were solved. He only recorded that 93% of the subjects' families believed the case with which they were concerned had been solved. The difference in verification may explain the lower incidence of cases considered solved in the I.S. series.

Some other differences between the two series, such as the number of statements the subjects made and the incidence of phobias, may derive from the greater attention I.S. gave, both to the recording and independent verification of the subject's statements and to evaluating the appropriateness of any unusual behavior on the part of the subject to the life or behavior of the previous personality. Different informants often remember different statements they heard the subject make. Cases judged to have been investigated "thoroughly" or "fairly thoroughly" have more informants. For the four cases that E.H. investigated thoroughly, the mean number of statements was 18, which was almost twice as many as the mean for the 30 E.H. cases considered as a whole.

The similarities between the two series—the age of first speaking of the previous life, the mention of the mode of death by the subject, and the high incidence of a violent mode of death—show that the cases of children who claim to remember a previous life are a recurrent phenomenon. Although the stability of some features of the cases over many years seems important to us as weighing against their interpretation as fantasies, a judgment about reincarnation as a better interpretation depends on evidence of paranormal processes in individual cases.

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