

American Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives

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An unknown number of American children claim to remember previous lives. In this paper data of 79 such children are analyzed and compared with data from a larger number of cases in India.

Few American children of these cases make verifiable statements, and those who do nearly always speak about the lives of deceased members of their own families. In this feature, American cases differ from Indian ones, in which the children usually speak of the lives of deceased persons in another family and often in another community. Indian children also frequently make verifiable statements about the lives of such persons.

In some other respects, however, such as the age of first speaking about the previous lives, the content of the statements they make, and related unusual behavior, American subjects closely resemble ones in India.

Although many of the American cases may derive from fantasies, a wish-fulfilling motive or obvious gain for the child is not discernible in most of them. Nor do the cases resemble in their form fantasies of imaginary playmates.

Some American cases of this type occur in families already believing in reincarnation, but many others do not. In these families the child's statements about a previous life are often puzzling and even alarming to his or her parents. The child is sometimes involved in conflict over the apparent memories with members of his or her family. In turn, the family members immediately involved often fear that other members of the family or other persons in the community will consider the child abnormal.

Many American cases are first reported years after the child's first speaking about a previous life; and it seems probable that many other cases are never reported. One purpose of this paper is to alert psychiatrists and pediatricians to the occurrence of such cases and to encourage their reporting them for further study.

Children who say they remember previous lives can be found rather easily in many countries of Asia, especially India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand.² In a typical case, the child begins, soon after he³ first speaks coherently, to say that he remembers a life in another family. (The mean age for this event is 37 months.) He states various details, often giving proper names of persons and places figuring in the life apparently remembered. In most cases he describes the mode of death in that life. The child usually continues to make statements about the previous life until he is about 6 or 7 years old and then gradually ceases to

refer to it. Most children of this type have completely forgotten about these apparent memories by the time they are 8 to 10 years old.

If the child makes enough statements and if they are sufficiently precise, members of his family usually try to find a family that had in it a deceased person corresponding to the child's statements. In many cases this search is successful, and the two families meet and verify the child's statements, most of which are found to be correct.⁴

The child also nearly always shows some behavior that is unusual in his family but that is found to correspond with behavior either shown by or appropriate for the deceased person about whom the child has been talking. A common example of such unusual behavior is a phobia for the instrument of that person's death. Another is cross-dressing by children who claim to have lived as a person of the opposite sex (12).⁵

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² These cases are variously referred to as "cases suggestive of reincarnation" or "cases of the reincarnation type"; these phrases describe what the cases appear to be without commitment to any interpretation of them.

³ For easier reading I have described a male child, but it should be understood that almost as many females as males are the subjects of these cases. The reasons for the preponderance of male subjects lie outside the scope of the present paper.

⁴ For convenience I often refer to the deceased person of whom the child speaks by the phrase "previous personality." I use this designation both when the child's statements have been verified and found correct with regard to a particular person and when they have not. I call the former type of case "solved" and the latter type "unsolved."

⁵ For other examples of unusual behavior related to apparent memories of previous lives, see Stevenson (11).

In cases of this type the child frequently makes correct statements about a deceased person living in an area remote from the child's home. Moreover, in some cases the parents report that they have never heard of the person about whom the child has been speaking. These cases raise the question of how such children obtained knowledge concerning a person with whom they (and their families) have had absolutely no previous acquaintance.

Approximately 2000 cases of the reincarnation type from many different cultures have been studied in an ongoing research project. To date data from 10 different cultures have been analyzed.

The cases vary greatly in the abundance and specificity of detail included in the child's statements. Some children state 50 or more details, including numerous proper names, and many of these have been verified. Other children state few details, and these may be fragmentary, vague, and unverifiable. Such imprecise statements may apply to numerous persons and are insufficient to permit tracing any deceased person whose life is the only one that could correspond to them. In other respects, however, the cases with few details closely resemble those in which the child made more abundant and specific statements. Both types may be examples of the same phenomenon, although lying at opposite ends of a range in the amount of detail included in the apparent memories.

Previous articles and books have included detailed reports of 65 cases of this type, nearly all from Asia (6-9, 13). In addition, data from nearly 800 other cases have been partially analyzed and examined for recurrent characteristics in the cases (3).

The cases from all these cultures so far examined have several features in common. However, other features of the cases vary from one culture to another and appear to be culture bound. The differences can often be related to other features of the cultures in which the cases developed. For example, in some cultures, certain features of the cases seem to reflect the different roles of men and women in these cultures. Some features of the cases seem to vary according to the beliefs about reincarnation held by different groups of people.

The last mentioned observations led me to study the variety of beliefs in reincarnation parallel to my investigation of the cases suggestive of it. Most educated Westerners have some familiarity with the Hindu and Buddhist concepts of reincarnation. They are likely to know that in both systems of belief human beings are said to be reborn as nonhuman animals, but they may not know that Hindus believe in an enduring soul (*atman*) that reincarnates in successive bodies, whereas Buddhists do not. According to the Buddhist doctrine of no soul (*anatta*), the death of a

person (or animal) initiates the birth of a new entity and has some influence on it; but no enduring soul passes from one body to the next in a series of rebirths.

Most Western readers are even less familiar with the existence of important cultures having beliefs in reincarnation markedly different from those of Hindus and Buddhists.⁶ For example, large Islamic groups in western Asia (such as the Alevis and the Druses) believe in reincarnation, but do not believe that one can change sex from one life to another, as Hindus and Buddhists do. The Tlingit of Alaska, who have a matrilinear society, think it important to be reborn in the family of one's mother. On the other hand, the Igbo of Nigeria, who have a patrilinear society, think it important to be reborn in the family of one's father.

The cases of the various cultures reflect, to some extent, the variations in the beliefs about reincarnation. We cannot yet explain these correlations. Two interpretations are obvious: first, the beliefs may influence the development of the cases; and second, if reincarnation occurs, the beliefs may influence what actually happens from one life to another. But there may be other explanations also.

This is the first report of cases of the reincarnation type in the United States. I cannot here offer a systematic account of the belief in reincarnation among Americans. In this connection the most important fact is that most Americans do not believe in reincarnation. A recent survey showed that only 23 per cent of Americans believe in it (4).

Data from 79 American cases have been analyzed. This paper will summarize the main features of these American cases and compare them with those of 266 cases of the same general type in India. The cases of India offer the best available comparison for American cases, because I have a larger number of adequately investigated cases in India than in any other country.

Sources of Information about American Cases

Of the 79 subjects, 43 were male and 36 were female. The first informant for the cases was usually a parent of the child but sometimes another relative or a friend of the family. In about half the cases, I do not know how the informant learned about my research. However, in 29 cases (37 per cent) the informant communicated with me after reading an article about the research in a magazine or newspaper. (Such articles sometimes gave my address and invited readers knowing of cases to inform me about new cases.) Colleagues familiar with the research referred several cases to

⁶ I have published accounts of the more important variations in the beliefs in reincarnation in introductory chapters to my volumes of case reports (6-9, 13) and in two separate articles (5, 10). In addition, I have prepared for publication a paper reporting the belief in reincarnation among the Igbo of Nigeria.

me. In three instances, I read an account of a case published in a magazine and approached the persons concerned.

Methods of Investigation

The first information obtained about most cases came in a letter in which the informant summarized the case as it had developed up to that point. Occasionally the first information came in a telephone call. The investigation was then usually continued in an exchange of letters. In a few cases either the principal informant for the case discontinued the investigation or I decided that the case was too insubstantial to warrant further study. In nearly three quarters of the cases I interviewed the child and his or her parents, usually at their home or a nearby hotel. Interviews with some parents were infeasible; interviews with others are still pending.

Information obtained during the interviews was recorded almost verbatim in handwritten notes or with a tape recorder. Much of this information was later transferred to a computer codebook listing 61 variables; the data could then be entered and analyzed for frequency and correlations of the variables.

Backgrounds of the American Children

In the early years of these investigations I emphasized recording of the informants' reports of the children's statements and of their related unusual behavior. Subsequently, I have also given attention to demographic data. Despite the deficiencies in the data of demographic features, the following can be said with confidence.

Some American cases have occurred among children whose parents believed in reincarnation. On the other hand, many other American cases occurred in families whose members did not believe in reincarnation and were perhaps even unfamiliar with the idea except (sometimes) as a belief held by Asian Indians. Some of the informants had read or had otherwise learned something about reincarnation *after* the child known to them had spoken about a previous life; it was difficult for me to ascertain later how much, if anything, they had known before. For 23 cases (29 per cent) I had insufficient information for a judgment on this point. The remaining 56 cases fell into four groups. In nine cases (16 per cent of these 56) the informant believed in reincarnation before the case known to him or her developed. In 21 cases (37 per cent) the informant had heard of reincarnation and had at least some interest in it. In 11 cases (20 per cent) the informant had an interest in parapsychology and, broadly, the occult; but I did not learn whether this interest extended to reincarnation. In the remain-

ing 15 cases (27 per cent) the informant had little or no knowledge about reincarnation.

Several types of evidence showed that for many of the informants the idea of reincarnation was strange or uncongenial. First, the parents often acknowledged that reincarnation was not taught (and in some instances was specifically disapproved) in the religion in which they were brought up. Second, they frequently admitted that they had initially derided, scolded, and occasionally punished the child for claiming to remember a previous life. Third, years sometimes elapsed between the time of the child's speaking about the previous life and the informants' notifying me about the case. (There are several possible explanations for this delay, but one was failure to take the child's statements seriously.) Fourth, many informants did not wish other members of their family to know that they were communicating information about the case to me. Fifth, some parents wrote or telephoned in a state of bafflement, and occasionally alarm, concerning the child's statements, for which they obviously had no preparation in previous experience or religious instruction.

These observations (and sometimes more explicit statements by the parents) indicate that the children's statements often conflicted seriously with the beliefs of their parents and other members of their families. They also suggest that since some remain unreported for a time, other cases—the number of which we cannot even guess—may never become known to investigators.

Principal Features of American Cases

Compared with subjects of cases in India, American children who claim to remember previous lives make fewer specific statements, mentioning, for example, fewer names of persons figuring in the previous life. Consequently, although among 266 Indian cases it was possible to find in 204 cases (77 per cent) a deceased person to whose life the child's statements correctly corresponded, this could only be done in 16 (20 per cent) ($\chi^2 = 86.43$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) of the 79 American cases. Moreover, in all but one of these 16 cases, that person was a member of the child's family, such as an older sibling or a grandparent who had died before the subject's birth. And even in the exceptional case, the person whose life the child seemed to recall had been a close friend of his mother. Among Indian cases the two persons concerned (subject and deceased person) were related in only 29 (16 per cent) of 183⁷ cases for

⁷ My investigations of these cases began earlier in India than they did in the United States (with a few exceptions). In the early phases of the study of Indian cases, inquiries about certain variables were less systematic than they subsequently became. Data are therefore missing for some variables of some Indian cases.

which we had these data. In some other cases the two families concerned had been previously acquainted, but in almost half the cases they had had no prior acquaintance with each other.

The American children began speaking about their apparent memories at a mean age of almost 37 months, and their counterparts in India began at about 38 months. However, American children tended to stop speaking about the previous life at a somewhat younger age (mean 64 months) than Indian children (mean 79 months) ($t = 2.26$, $df = 143$, $p < .05$).

An analysis of the number of different statements made by Indian and American subjects showed no difference between them. Among 88 Indian cases for which this information was available, the mean number of statements the subject made was 18.2 and the median was 14. Among 68 American cases, the mean number of statements the subject made was 23.3 and the median 14. (These data give some measure of the variety of the children's statements, but not of their volubility. Some children may repeat a few statements many times, whereas others may mention each of many statements only once; and there are many variations between these extremes.)

Among 225 Indian cases, 169 (75 per cent) of the subjects mentioned the name of the person whose life they remembered; among the 79 American cases, the subject stated this name in only 27 (34 per cent) of the cases ($\chi^2 = 42.77$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). (Because proper names are almost essential to the identification of a person corresponding to the child's statements, the failure of the American children to state such names probably contributed greatly to the high proportion of unsolved American cases.)

Among 231 Indian cases the subjects mentioned the mode of death in the previous life in 180 cases (78 per cent); the American subjects mentioned the mode of death in only 34 (43 per cent) of the 79 cases ($\chi^2 = 33.5$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The mode of death was violent^a in 135 (56 per cent) of 240 Indian cases and in 35 (80 per cent) of 44 American ones ($\chi^2 = 8.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).

When the mode of death was violent, the subjects of both Indian and American cases tended to have phobias of the instrument or mode of death. Among 76 Indian cases in which violent death figured and in which we inquired about phobias, 30 (39 per cent) of the subjects had a phobia of the instrument or mode of death; among 23 American cases with violent death, a similar phobia occurred in 11 (48 per cent) ($\chi^2 = .508$, $df = 1$, $p < .48$). Phobias occurred much less frequently

among cases in which the mode of death was natural. Among nine American cases of this type a phobia occurred in only one (11 per cent); and among 105 Indian cases with natural death a phobia occurred in only three (3 per cent). A few children had a phobia that either was not related to the mode of death or was not known to be related to the previous life.

In 60 of the American cases, the subject gave clear indications of the sex of the person about whom he was talking. In nine cases (15 per cent) the child referred to a life as a person of the opposite sex. Among these nine cases, eight female subjects referred to lives as males and one male subject referred to a life as a female. Among the nine subjects claiming sex change, three (all females) showed cross-dressing when young. The proportion of sex change cases was lower among Indian cases. In 262 Indian cases, nine (3 per cent) of the subjects claimed to remember a previous life as a person of the opposite sex: three were males who said they had been females and six were females who said they had been males. Of these, five (four females, one male) showed cross-dressing when young.

The occupations and socioeconomic statuses of the deceased persons spoken about by the American children varied greatly. Some of the children talked about previous lives in more affluent circumstances than those of their parents, but others spoke of living in much less comfortable conditions, with few or no modern conveniences. No child included in this analysis claimed to recall the life of a famous person, and only a few children talked about lives that might be regarded as heroic, such as those of fighter pilots or soldiers killed in action. Most of the lives were (or seemed to be) those of ordinary, undistinguished persons. In these respects the American children resembled the Indian ones; many of the Indian children also talked of a previous life in socioeconomic circumstances different from those of their families, and only one of them claimed to have been a notable person.

Table 1 provides a synoptic view of all the main features of the American and Indian cases that I have compared.

Discussion

In several main features American cases closely resemble Indian ones. These features include: the age of the child's first speaking about the previous life; a high incidence of violent death in the previous life (much higher than the incidence of violent death in the general populations of both India and the United States); the average number of statements made; and unusual behavior on the part of the child corresponding to the statements about apparent memories.

Although the numbers of cases of the "sex change"

^a The mode of death could not be verified in those cases in which a deceased person corresponding to the child's statements had not been traced (unsolved cases). For such cases, the child's statement about the mode of death, if he made one, was used in this analysis.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Principal Features of American and Indian Cases^a

Item	U. S. A.	India	<i>p</i>
1. Percentage of solved cases among all cases of country	20%	77%	.001
2. Percentage of "same family" cases among solved cases	94%	16%	— ^b
3. Age (in months) of subject's first speaking about the previous life (mean)	37	38	NS ^c
4. Age (in months) of subject's stopping speaking about the previous life (mean)	64	79	.05 ^c
5. Number of different statements made by subject			
Mean	23.3	18.2	NS ^c
Median	14	14	NS ^d
6. Subject mentioned previous personality's name	34%	75%	.001
7. Subject mentioned previous personality's mode of death	43%	78%	.001
8. Cases with violent mode of death	80%	56%	.01
9. Phobias in subject when previous personality died violently	48%	39%	NS
10. Phobias in subject when previous personality died naturally	11%	3%	— ^b
11. "Sex change" cases	15%	3%	.005

^a Unless otherwise stated, all statistical analyses were done with χ^2 tests of 1 *df*. As explained in the text and footnote 7, the number of cases for which information was available was not the same for all variables.

^b Analysis not done due to low frequency cells.

^c Independent means *t*-test, two-tailed.

^d Mann-Whitney *U*-test.

type are small in both the American and Indian series, a lopsided ratio of male-to-female cases compared with female-to-male ones occurs in both series. A similar lopsided ratio has been found among cases of the "sex change" type in three of four other countries where such cases have occurred.⁹ A discussion of the reasons for this ratio lies outside the scope of this paper¹⁰; but it deserves attention as another feature in which American cases resemble those of India (and some other countries).

The high incidence of violent death in the previous life found in the cases of India (56 per cent) and the

⁹ In Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand (as well as in India and the United States) appreciably more male-to-female than female-to-male cases of the "sex change" type have occurred. This lopsided ratio has not been found in a recently analyzed series of Igbo (Nigeria) cases.

¹⁰ The number of "sex change" cases in Burma is sufficiently large so that it has been possible to analyze the cases of that country with regard to the higher incidence of violent death among males as a factor in producing the lopsided ratio of female *vs.* male subjects in cases of this type (9).

United States (80 per cent) has also occurred in the cases of all other cultures (eight) so far analyzed (3, 8). It far exceeds the incidence of violent death in the general populations of the countries where these cases have been investigated. For example, the incidence of violent death in the general population of India is 7.2 per cent (14, p. 699),¹¹ and it is 8 per cent in the United States (14, p. 705). Some excess of violent deaths in the case material may derive from informants' remembering cases with violent deaths better than ones with natural deaths; this could lead to artifactual biases in the sample of cases presented to me for investigation. However, there are grounds for thinking that the high incidence of violent death is not solely an artifact of the haphazard method by which cases are reported for investigation. One item of evidence to the contrary comes from a survey of reincarnation type cases in a district of northern India; among the cases found in this survey violent death occurred in 37 per cent, an incidence appreciably below that (56 per cent) in the larger series of selected cases in India, but still far higher than that in the general population (1).

I shall next consider the several features in which American cases differ from Indian ones. The American children made as many statements about the previous lives as the Indian children did; but their statements lacked specifying detail, especially of proper names. This deficiency contributed importantly to the paucity among American cases of solved ones. This in turn probably accounts for the younger age at which American children ceased to speak about the previous lives compared with Indian subjects. My colleagues and I have found that the subjects of solved cases (of six different cultures examined) tend to continue speaking about the lives they claim to remember, on average, for 20 months longer than do the subjects of unsolved cases (2, 3). Subjects whose statements are verified probably receive more attention and more encouragement to speak about the previous lives than do those who give little detail about someone who cannot be traced; and when adults lose interest in what a child says, or have none to begin with, the child himself may stop talking about the memories and forget them earlier than he would if he received more attention.

The difference between the incidence of violent death in American cases (80 per cent) and that in Indian cases (56 per cent) probably reflects the much higher proportion of unsolved cases among the American ones compared with the Indian ones. We have found that the subjects of unsolved cases refer to a

¹¹ In an earlier publication (8) I incorrectly gave the incidence of violent death in India as 6.7 per cent. This resulted from a slip in calculation; the correct figure for the period considered is 7.2 per cent.

violent mode of death more often than do subjects of solved ones (3). Analysis of a small series of solved cases in India has indicated that a violent death is more memorable than a natural one and that the mode of death is more memorable than names.¹² Therefore, some cases may remain unsolved because the subject has not stated enough proper names to permit verification of the statements, even though he or she may have accurately remembered the mode of death (usually violent). Other unsolved cases may contain real memories of a previous life to which the subject has attached an imaginary (usually violent) mode of death; and still others may be pure fantasies.

The American subjects of these cases either do not remember any verifiable details whatever or they remember details about the life of a member or close friend of their own family. In the first type of case the statements about the previous life may derive from fantasies. In the second type, it is difficult to exclude the possibility that the child learned normally about the deceased person concerned and then used that information in the elaboration of a fantasy about a previous life.

However, another possible explanation should also be considered. In some Indian cases the child has made verified statements about a previous life in a family remote geographically from his own. Although most of these cases were not investigated until after the families concerned had met, many were studied within a few weeks or months of their meeting, and in a small number a written record of what the child had said about the previous life had been made before his statements were verified (6, 7, 13). In many such cases the normal transmission of information has been excluded, or seems improbable, and so it is possible that these Indian children have had genuine memories of a previous life. In view of the similarity of the American cases to the Indian ones in several of their main features, it also seems arguable that some American subjects have had memories of previous lives, but ones that, on the whole, are less abundant and less precise than those occurring among many Indian children.

It is also possible that only some of the American cases derive from real memories of previous lives whereas others are fantasies. Many of them have been expressed against the wishes of the child's parents and have frequently involved the child in conflict with his parents. It is also not easy to discern a wish-fulfilling motive in the particular details of most of the previous lives spoken about by these children. As mentioned above, these lives are usually commonplace ones,

sometimes lived in less comfortable circumstances than those of the child's family.

These cases invite comparisons with the better known ones of imaginary playmates. In their main contents, however, they differ markedly from cases of imaginary playmates. A child with an imaginary playmate regards the playmate as living contemporaneously with himself and as being a different person. In contrast, children who claim to remember previous lives believe that they were another person—a deceased one, not a living one—in another life. They identify themselves with that deceased person and, to a certain extent, believe themselves to be that same person, although in a new physical body. These remarks are not intended to foreclose further comparisons between children who have imaginary playmates and children who claim to remember previous lives; but in the present state of knowledge we can certainly not subsume the latter type of case under the former one.

More definite conclusions about American cases suggestive of reincarnation must await further research. The number of American cases available for study is small compared with the samples from India and several other cultures. The smallness of the American sample is due, at least in part, I believe, to underreporting of cases in the United States, and I have presented evidence supporting this conclusion. One motive for presenting this paper is to draw attention to this type of case and encourage the reporting of new cases. These will enlarge the sample that can be analyzed and, ultimately, will permit a firmer or different conclusion about these cases.

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