

THE SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION OF REBIRTH CASES: PROBLEMS OF FIELD WORK AND IN THE ANALYSIS OF DATA

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The subject of reincarnation* has been dealt with in various ways since the beginning of civilization. Claims to remember a previous life, like those of other alleged paranormal events, have occurred all through the ages and in nearly every part of the world. Memories attributed to previous lives have occurred and been investigated under a variety of conditions, including the normal waking state and altered states of consciousness. The latter conditions can increase the difficulty in discriminating between abnormal and paranormal experiences. A justified claim of having paranormal powers may be dismissed as only a part of the patient's delusions or hallucinations. Much experience is needed to distinguish between parapsychological and pathological conditions.

Approaches to the Evidence of Rebirth: The phenomenon of rebirth has been investigated under controlled situations by inducing altered states of consciousness (as in hypnosis) and studying the evidence manifested spontaneously.

Techniques Used for Controlled Experimental Study of Reincarnation.

Use of Drugs: Memories of previous lives have sometimes been reported during intoxication with certain drugs, such as LSD.

Experiments with drugs, however, suffer from important weaknesses. Individuals under the influence of drugs respond to

suggestions, whether implicit or explicit. A subject's experiences may therefore correspond only to his expectations, not to actual events. These experiences may be helpful to an individual in, for example, preparing him to accept death more calmly; but they add little to the evidence for reincarnation, since the subject rarely gives any verifiable details about a previous life.

Life Readings by Yogis: Yogis sometimes claim not only to recall their own previous lives, but also to "read" those of other persons.

The difficulty with studying such claims is that of finding suitable subjects. Those who are "true yogis" do not like to indulge in practices that may induce paranormal powers, because they consider them an interference in their spiritual progress; and other less well qualified yogis may make claims that they cannot justify, even if they are willing to be tested. Consequently, no formal investigations to verify the assertions about reincarnation made by some yogis have been reported.

Use of Hypnosis: Research in reincarnation by the use of hypnotic regression was begun accidentally by de Rochas in the late nineteenth century. Many years later, in the 1950s, Bernstein was successful in regressing a subject to the apparent previous life of one Bridey Murphy (Bernstein, 1956). No one corresponding to Bridey

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*Except among Theravadin Buddhists, the words "reincarnation" and "rebirth" are used interchangeably and will be so used in this paper.

Theravadin Buddhists prefer the word "rebirth" because it does not imply the persistence of a continuing soul as does "reincarnation."

Murphy was ever found. Nevertheless, the the Bridey Murphy personality made statements during the hypnotic experiments that included numerous details—many of them quite obscure—about life in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century. It seems most unlikely (although not impossible) that the subject could have acquired in a normal manner all the information shown by “Bridey Murphy.” Other, later experiments along this line have usually been much less successful than those during which “Bridey Murphy” emerged. Either the experimenters could not verify the details mentioned by their subjects or it was likely that the subjects had learned normally about the persons with whom they identified themselves. The subjects, however, usually have no conscious memory of having done this and hence cannot be accused of deliberate deception or fraud.

In two cases investigated by Stevenson (1974b, 1976), subjects who were hypnotized and ostensibly regressed to previous lives spoke foreign languages of which the subjects had no knowledge in their ordinary waking states. Although most experiments with hypnotic regression have been unsuccessful, occasional positive results such as these justify more research with hypnosis.

Techniques Used to Study Claims of Spontaneous Memories of Previous Lives: The first systematic approach to the study of these cases was made in India in the 1920s (Sahay, 1927; Sunderlal, 1924). These early investigators studied only a few cases, but for several of these cases a written record of the subject’s statements was made before their verification.

Ian Stevenson has adopted a systematic and objective approach, which includes recording in detail and independently verifying the statements of the subjects (Stevenson, 1974a, 1975, 1977, 1980). Due to lack of “controlled experimental studies,” we decided to investigate claims of remembering a past life spontaneously by using Stevenson’s methods, as one of us (S. P.)

was trained by him.

When we learn about a case, we investigate it as soon as possible, realizing that with the passage of time some important memories of subjects and other informants tend to fade or become distorted. In order to reconstruct the substance and chronology of events as precisely as we can, we interview several informants who qualify as firsthand witnesses to the subject’s statements or who have some other firsthand knowledge of the case. We use standard methods for case studies, and, depending upon the demands of the situation, we conduct unstructured, semistructured, or structured interviews. Whenever we have an opportunity to do so, we also directly observe the subject’s behaviour.

Our investigations usually begin with the family of the subject of a case, although for practical reasons we occasionally approach the family of the concerned previous personality first. The subject’s parents and other relatives who had an opportunity to observe him closely when he communicated memories of his presumed previous life are the primary informants for the subject’s side of the case. We first allow informants to give their information spontaneously, and we then question them for necessary data not mentioned spontaneously. We also try to interview informants separately (although this is not always possible) so that they would not influence each other’s testimony, contaminate each other’s memories, or harmonize their narrations with each other. For the same reasons, we give them no prior notice of our arrival, even at the risk of not finding an informant available. Each informant is asked to tell only what he (or she) has heard from the subject at *first hand* or has personally witnessed. We also note the reaction, response, and attitude of the informant toward the claims of the subject, particularly as to whether he (or she) regards these claims as healthy, harmless or undesirable. (Sometimes an informant’s atti-

tude toward a case changes with time, and we try to discover such changes and the reasons for them.)

For the subject's side of the case, we obtain information from as many of the following as possible :

The subject, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings, and neighbours. Municipal records of births, diaries, horoscopes, or any other document pertaining to the precise dates of birth or other important events in the subject's life.

In addition to the testimony of the subject's immediate family, we also seek that of other, more neutral informants, such as schoolteachers, headmen, neighbours, and Block Development Officers, who are available for interviewing.

We make every effort to listen to and record the statements of the subjects whenever they themselves are still talking about the events of their claimed past lives. The adult informants may provide distorted reports of these statements ; since the two families concerned have usually met before our investigation starts, there may have been some mingling of informants' memories of what the subject said about the previous life and what the concerned previous personality did or how he behaved.

Observing the nonverbal behaviour of the witnesses and the subjects during the interviews is useful in establishing their reliability ; and it can also reveal emotions of the subjects that relate to the memories he is narrating. We also cross-question informants, depending on the time available and the informants' level of cooperation and tolerance for such questioning. To further assess the reliability of the informants, we try to determine the accuracy of their observations and memories for the events they describe and to evaluate their motives for exaggerating or suppressing information.

Methods of Recording Information : We make a written verbatim record of the statements of each informant. Furthermore,

we always (with rare exceptions) conduct the investigations in a team of two or three persons to ensure the precision and accuracy of information required for an unbiased study. Investigators working in a culture different from their own are especially likely to miss the significance of details that affect the evaluation of a statement and of the person who made it. We have found that discussing the validity of the testimony with a colleague reduces errors of these types, although naturally it cannot eliminate them all.

Difficulties Encountered before a case is traced :

- (1) Inadequate knowledge on part of first informants for a new case.
- (2) Inaccessibility of some places.
- (3) Long distances and dacoit infested areas.

Problems after Tracing a Case : Problems do not cease after a case has been reached. First, we have to spend time introducing ourselves to the informants. We must explain the purpose of our visit and convince the persons concerned that we are harmless. Indian villagers often associate investigations of any kind with police inquiries or Family Planning.

Lack of Understanding of Research : Many informants are completely unaware of the value of research—ours or any other—and this often hinders the investigation.

Informants' Inability to Understand the Importance of First hand Testimony. Persons who know nothing of the value of research also cannot be expected to know how to cooperate in it without some guidance. Many informants are unable to distinguish first hand observations from what they have learned at second and third hand.

Uneducated Women : Since some women in the villages have less freedom than men and little or no experience in communicating with strangers, they often refuse to give any information in the absence of male members of their families.

Reactions of Persons Connected with a Murder

Case : Serious problems sometimes arise when we study cases in which the previous personality had been murdered. First, members of the concerned previous personality's family may expect us to intervene in some legal procedure, such as to reopen the trial of the accused murderer. Secondly, the persons implicated in the murder may fear the outcome of our inquiries. Afraid that attention will again be given to them as suspects, they are understandably uncooperative as informants and sometimes rude. Just as members of the related previous personality's family do, they feel, quite unrealistically, that we have the power to revive a settled court case. No amount of argument can convince them of our inability to do so.

Attitudes and Cooperation of Persons Approached for Documents : Another difficulty—small but time-consuming—comes up quite often. When we approach police stations, hospitals, or municipality offices for information relevant to particular cases, the persons in charge of the records may hesitate or refuse to cooperate, even when we have obtained the necessary permission from higher authorities.

The Assessment of the Validity of the Data : We have already mentioned that we do not often reach the case before the two families concerned have met. Accordingly, we find that the informants may have forgotten important details ; furthermore, some may claim to remember events that did not in fact occur, that is, they embellish the case. Hence to discriminate invalid testimony, we have utilized following methods :

Since there are no infallible guides to truth in interviewing, the most reliable one remains the comparison of what one person says about an event with what others say about it. We may also compare what one informant says at one time with what he says on a later occasion.

First-hand testimony is strengthened by corroboration of other firsthand inform-

ants, but lack of corroboration because one informant did not observe a reported statement or recognition should not necessarily cancel a report of another informant who says that the particular statement or recognition did occur. We call this common type of disagreement in testimony an "omission discrepancy."

When two persons claim to have observed the same events but contradict each other in describing those events, we have a more serious discrepancy, which we call a "discordant discrepancy."

In evaluating testimony, we must consider whether personal interests may have motivated an informant to exaggerate or suppress details of the case. Some persons wish to exploit the case ; others prefer to have it hushed up ; and still others show the neutrality toward it that we find most valuable. Assessing motives for distorting information is never easy and should rarely be attempted on first meeting an informant. Only repeated interviews with that informant can sufficiently acquaint us with him and his attitude toward the case.

After discarding weak or irrelevant testimony, we review the accepted testimony and its bearing on the following hypotheses for interpreting a case.

Fantasy : Some critics have suggested that children may imagine a pleasanter previous life in order to compensate for unhappiness in the home, such as from feeling that parents treat them harshly or that a sibling is preferred in the family. In *verified* cases fantasy is not a relevant hypothesis. In *unverified* cases, however, we cannot exclude fantasy as a plausible explanation.

Fraud : This hypothesis assumes that someone—either the subject or a member of his family—has deliberately fabricated the case in order to achieve some personal gain.

Genetic Memory : This hypothesis suggests that the child has inherited the claimed memories of the previous life.

Cryptomnesia : In this hypothesis the subject's knowledge about a previous life is not in question, but his means of acquiring it is. The hypothesis proposes that he learned the information normally but subsequently forgot that he had done so.

Paramnesia : This is another disorder of memory and includes *dèjà vu*. A more important type of paramnesia in these cases is that in which informants misremember events and credit a subject with having had more knowledge about a deceased person than he really did have before acquiring normal knowledge about that person.

ESP with Personation : This hypothesis suggests that a subject is gifted with extra-sensory perception and paranormally obtains his correct information about the concerned deceased person from the latter's surviving relatives and friends.

Possession : This hypothesis supposes that the body of a person is occupied or possessed by a personality or spirit different from his own. Possession may be partial, the primary personality retaining some control of the physical body (Hyslop, 1909). It may also be complete, with the total suppression of the subject's normal personality, followed by restoration of the normal personality after some hours, weeks, or even longer (Stevens, 1887 ; James, 1890).

Reincarnation : For all the above mentioned normal and paranormal phenomena, there is some independent evidence, although of varying strength. On the other hand, evidence for reincarnation comes almost entirely from cases such as we have investigated. If other interpretations cannot adequately explain the data of a particular case, we are justified in considering the hypothesis of reincarnation.

As we have described in this paper, we

have used careful scientific methods to examine the claims of those persons who say that they recall previous lives, and in our opinion the data thus obtained justify further research. Only by a thorough investigation of the cases and a comprehensive analysis of the data will we be able to arrive at the best interpretation for this phenomenon.

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