

# Persistence of “Past-Life” Memories in Adults Who, in Their Childhood, Claimed Memories of a Past Life

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**Abstract:** This article tests the consistency and the continuation of alleged “past-life” memories from childhood into adulthood and the possible detrimental effects of such childhood memories on the development into adult life. Twenty-eight adults aged 28 to 56 years who had claimed to have memories of a past life when they were children were interviewed in Lebanon. Their memories had been recorded when they were children, at the mean age of 6 years. Of the 28 participants, 24 still reported some past-life memories, whereas 4 had forgotten everything. Twenty-one were sure that their memories were a continuation of their past-life memories in childhood, whereas three were unsure about it. For those who were sure of still having genuine past-life memories, the mean number of statements about the past life fell from 30, as children, to 4, as adults. Only half of the currently reported statements were reported when the participants were interviewed as children, raising the question of false and distorted memories. There were no indications that the past-life memories had a detrimental effect on the participants’ development into adulthood. They were all leading normal active lives.

**Key Words:** Memory, false memories, past-life memories, reincarnation, Lebanon, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

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At first glance, memory seems to be a fairly straightforward function. However, there are some puzzling facets or anomalies of memory. Well known are *déjà vu experiences*, which have been defined as “any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience with an undefined past” (Neppe, 1983; cited from Brown [2004]) and as “illusions of falsely perceiving a new scene or experience as a familiar one,” namely, as genuine memory (Wilkinson, 1973). Surveys have shown that *déjà vu experiences* are widely reported in the population, as high as more than 40% (Greeley, 1975).

Another example is that, in some countries, we find children who claim to have memories of a “past life.” French (2003) has referred to these alleged memories as “fantastic memories.” Compared with *déjà vu experiences*, fantastic memories are very rare and are primarily found in cultures with a widespread belief in reincarnation, thus suggesting a strong cultural component (Littlewood, 2001; Mills and Lynn, 2000; Stevenson, 2001; Tucker, 2005).

Research on past-life memories was pioneered by the late Ian Stevenson of University of Virginia. He investigated more than a thousand cases in Asia, America, Africa, and Europe and found them in almost every country where he looked. He published numerous papers and several volumes on his meticulous and thorough studies of individual cases (*e.g.*, Stevenson, 1974, 1975, 1977b, 1980, 1983a). The children generally start to speak spontaneously about their past-life memories, almost as soon as they can speak, at the mean age between 2 and 3 years.

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Stevenson’s emphasis was on the veridical aspect, namely, whether some of the alleged memories could be verified, and he found some to be verifiable and was able to solve them, whereas others proved to be unsolvable. He also found some research subjects in families that did not believe in reincarnation and some in American and European countries (Stevenson, 1983b, 2003). The percentage of unsolved cases varies among countries. In Sri Lanka, for example, these comprise about two thirds of the cases, which is unusually high but lower than the 80% of American cases (Haraldsson, 2012). The author cannot recall any case in which all statements made by a child have been verified, but one case he investigated came close (Haraldsson and Abu-Izzedin, 2002).

Despite the rarity of cases of past-life memories, their study is important because it may increase our understanding of early child development. Stevenson argued that past-life memories may have an explanatory value for some aspects of human behavior that have proven hard to explain, such as the etiology of some phobias, strong likes and dislikes, and homosexuality (Stevenson, 1977a, 1990). Furthermore, these are a potential contribution to the question of the mind-brain relationship (Haraldsson, 2012).

Independent researchers have followed up Stevenson’s research and found the same basic features of the cases, which not only consist of verbal statements about memories but also have behavioral and somatic components (Haraldsson, 1991; Keil and Tucker, 2005; Mills, 1988, 2006; Mills et al., 1994; Pasricha and Stevenson, 1987; Tucker, 2008).

Some persistent patterns are found across cultures, such as a high percentage claiming to have memories of how they died, that the death was usually violent through accidents or warlike activities, murders, and suicides. Stevenson (2001a) found, in 725 cases from six different cultures, that 61% of the subjects reported violent death. In the 32 cases we have investigated in Lebanon, 28 (88%) participants remembered experiencing a violent death; 3, a natural death; only 1 did not recall the mode of death. Of the 64 cases that the first author has investigated in Sri Lanka, 49 (77%) participants remembered having a violent death; 3, a natural death; 12 did not recall how they had died.

The children frequently have phobias, which they relate to the way they died, and a few have birthmarks or deformities, which they also relate to their mode of death (Haraldsson, 2000; Pasricha et al., 2005; Stevenson 1997a, 1997b).

Psychological studies reveal that these children differ from their peers in certain aspects. Generally speaking, they have significantly more psychological problems or tendencies toward such problems than do their peers. Elevated scores on the Child Dissociation Checklist and the Child Behavior Checklist show this clearly. Certain fears and phobias and outbursts of anger are common. Analyses of the psychological data reveal a tendency toward posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A potential cause of the PTSD is dwelling on the memories/imagery the children have about how they experienced a violent death (Haraldsson, 2003).

It is common for these children to claim that their parents are not their real parents, to demand to go back to their true home and family, and to request their parents to help them to do so (Stevenson, 2001).

On the cognitive side, children with past-life memories in Sri Lanka have, from an early age, a larger vocabulary than their peers, do better in school, and work harder for their studies and tend to be

argumentative and perfectionistic. However, this finding was not confirmed in a study in Lebanon (Haraldsson, 2003).

In Lebanon as well as in Sri Lanka, the children tend to be preoccupied with their thoughts or with daydreaming, prefer playing with older kids, and are fearful and anxious, and some refer to themselves in the third person, usually their name in the previous life (Haraldsson, 1995, 1997, 2003; Haraldsson et al., 2000).

The present study was conducted to answer two basic questions. First, how long do these past-life memories of childhood persist? Second, what are the long-term effects in adult life? As the children get older, they talk less about these memories, especially if an alleged previous family has not been identified, which is not uncommon. Usually, they stop speaking spontaneously about their past-life memories around the time they go to school, although some may do so when asked. How long do these fantastic memories last? How many children continue to have past-life memories after they have grown up? A comparison with an earlier study conducted in Sri Lanka will be made (Haraldsson, 2008).

The second basic question of this study is the long-term effect of past-life memories. How do these persons fare in life as they become adults? Do they, as grown-ups, lead productive normal lives? Do their psychological problems and signs of PTSD have a detrimental effect on their development into adult life? We expected the present data to confirm the earlier findings in Sri Lanka (Haraldsson, 2008), and thus, we hypothesized that past-life memories in childhood have no detrimental effects on development into adulthood.

To answer these questions, we conducted this study in Lebanon, which is one of the countries where cases are rare but are relatively easy to find in the Druze community, where belief in reincarnation is common. In the 1960s to the early 1980s, Stevenson (1980) and his associates interviewed in Lebanon a sizable number of children and investigated their claims. The authors investigated many cases in Lebanon from 1998 to 2001 (not included in this study) and are thus familiar with the cultural setting and the characteristics of Lebanese cases (e.g., Haraldsson and Abu-Izzedin, 2004).

**METHODS**

**Participants**

There were 28 participants, 19 men and 9 women aged 28 to 56 years (mean, 40.32 years). They had been interviewed by Stevenson and his associates when they were children, aged 3 to 9 years (mean, 6.16 years). The participants were interviewed by the authors on the average of 34 years after they were interviewed as children. A data file exists on each of them at the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, with a listing of the statements they gave of their alleged past-life memories (Stevenson, 1974, 1980).

The participants were drawn from a pool of 50 individuals whose cases Stevenson had investigated. Sixteen persons had moved to other countries because of the civil war in the 1980s or to seek employment.

Four were untraceable, and two had died. None refused participation. We thus obtained 28 participants. Most of them lived in the mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. Twenty-seven were Druze, and one was Christian. A sample of 28 is small, but it is representative insofar as we were able to interview all subjects on our list who were available because there were no rejections for participation.

**Relatives**

A close relative of each participant was interviewed whenever possible: 18 mothers, 4 fathers and 3 other close relatives. In three instances, no close relatives were available because they had either died or lived too far way to be reached. The mean age of these relatives was 71.48 years, ranging from 44 to 89 years. Many of the relatives were presumably interviewed by Stevenson, but we have no listings from that time of their recall of the past-life memories of the participants.

**Questionnaires**

We used a slightly modified form of two questionnaires that were used in a comparable study in Sri Lanka (Haraldsson, 2008). A 50-item questionnaire was used for the participants, and a 35-item questionnaire, for the relatives. The emphasis was on questions regarding past-life memories. Questions were also asked about normal memories from early childhood, phobias in early life, and visits to the family associated with the previous life, if such family had been identified. Other items included whether gifts were exchanged between the two families and how widely known locally the case had become. There were also questions about the participants' thoughts regarding the positive and negative value of having past-life memories and the impact it had on their lives. There were questions about health and happiness, occupation, and marital status and whether the participants had met someone who claimed to remember a previous life. Further questions will become evident in the *Results* section. The interviews were conducted in April 2009.

**RESULTS**

**How Common is It to Retain Past-Life Memories Into Adult Life?**

Twelve (43%) of the participants are sure that they still have clear memories of their past life, and an additional 12 believe that they still have some of their childhood memories. These percentages combined reveal that 86% of our sample still report some memories of a past life. Further probing revealed that one man was not sure about the source of the memories, two remembered speaking of past-life memories as a child but do not have these memories now, and one thought she might only remember something of her past life because these memories were much talked about in her family. For further details, see Table 1.

Accounts that children give of their past-life memories are usually broken down into individual statements to have a measure of

**TABLE 1.** Number of Adults Reporting Past-Life Memories That They Had When They Were Children

	Do You Still Have Memories of a Past Life or Have These Faded Away?			Total
	Clear Memories	Some Memories	These Faded Away	
If you still have memories:				
Are these a true continuation of childhood memories?	12	9	0	21
Not sure about the source of memories	0	1	0	1
Only have memories because I remember what I said	0	2	0	2
Only have memories because my family talked about them	0	0	1	1
Not applicable (no memories)	0	0	3	3
Total	12	12	4	28

Cross tabulation.

**TABLE 2.** Mean Number and Standard Deviation of Past-Life Memories Reported as Adults (*N* = 28) and When These Adults Were Children

	As a Child		As an Adult		<i>n</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Continuation of childhood memories	29.71	18.41	8.76	4.05	21
Unsure of source of memories	24.25	9.90	6.00	1.00	4
Have no memories	6.00	1.00	0		3
Clear memories	34.17	19.64	9.40	3.78	12
Some memories	22.08	14.39	7.42	4.50	12
No memories	16.09	20.17	0		4
Total	26.39	18.36	7.14	4.89	28

the number of details (memories) in each account. Those adults who claim to still have clear memories of their past life remembered a mean of 9.40 statements, whereas those who claim to have only some memories remembered slightly fewer statements (mean, 7.42), the difference between the two groups not being significant (*t* = 1.17; *df* = 22; see further details in Table 2).

We have 21 (75%) of 28 persons who unreservedly affirm that they still retained some of their past-life memories. They remember a mean of 8.76 statements. Three persons claimed to have memories but expressed doubt about the source of the memories that they still possessed (mean remembered statements, 6.00), and four stated that all of their memories had faded away.

At the time of the interview, the authors did not know the contents or the number of statements that each participant had reported as a child. This was to avoid the possibility that we might influence them during the interviews.

### How Do Adult Past-Life Memories Compare With the Original Childhood Memories?

Let us look at those 21 participants who affirmed that their present past-life memories were a true continuation of their past-life memories when they were children (Table 3). We must bear in mind that they were now interviewed on only one occasion, whereas many of them may have been interviewed on more than one occasion as children, and a second or more interviews tend to increase the number of remembered statements.

Let us now consider only those 21 participants who reported that they had some memories of their past life and felt that these were a true continuation of their childhood memories (Table 3). The mean number of statements that they remembered as children was 29.71, and now, as adults, they remembered a mean of 8.76 statements, which is significantly lower (Wilcoxon’s signed-rank test, *T* = 3.73; *p* < 0.001). This shows that a large part of the past-life memories of childhood have been forgotten.

The question arises: how many of the present-day statements are the same as that in childhood, namely, those correctly remembered? We compared the presently remembered statements with the original

list of statements. The mean number dropped from 8.76 to 4.48 original statements, namely, by almost a half (*T* = 3.93, *p* < 0.001). This indicates that half of the statements remembered today are either fictional or distortions of the original childhood memories or that the old lists of statements might have been incomplete.

Furthermore, we should keep in mind that about one fourth of the participants had forgotten all of their past-life memories or were unsure of the source of their memories, namely, if these were “genuine” past-life memories from childhood.

Is this a normal rate of forgetting childhood memories, beyond that or less? We have no data regarding forgetting normal childhood memories for comparison. We asked our participants what they remembered from their preschool years. We were surprised how little they remembered, and some could not remember anything. Our general impression is that past-life memories are better remembered into adult life than are normal memories from preschool years.

We asked the closest available relative of those 21 participants who were sure about the genuineness of their memories what past-life memories they recalled the participants talking about when they were children. The mean number of statements that the relatives could remember the child talking about was 7.55, which is not significantly lower than that of the participants (8.76; *T* = 1.13; *p* = 0.13, not significant). As with the participants, only about half of the statements by the relatives were found on the original lists of childhood memories, as can be seen in Table 3. We found false and distorted memories among the relatives to a similar extent as among the participants, and these tend to be similar in content.

### What is Remembered?

We asked our participants what they remembered most clearly. The most common they remembered was persons who were known in the previous life, and the second most common was how they had died. After that was what they used to do and the places where they had previously lived. Some memories did not fit these categories (see Table 4).

### Long-term Effects of Past-Life Memories

#### Childhood Fears and Phobias

Phobias are a common characteristic of children with past-life memories, and they often associate these with memories of how their previous life came to an end (Stevenson, 1990). Of our 28 participants, 9 reported having particular fears when they were children. Seven of these nine participants believed that their fears were related to their past life, in particular, how they had died. Five of the seven still had these fears.

#### What Other Long-term Impact Did the Memories Have on the Participants?

Fifteen of the 28 participants stated that their memories had been helpful and had had a positive impact on them. For three, the impact had been negative, and for nine, it was neither positive nor negative. A related question was about the value of remembering the

**TABLE 3.** Number of Statements Remembered by Participants Who, as Adults, Claimed Past-Life Memories From Their Childhood

	No.	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Statements remembered as a child	21	9	67	29.71	18.41
Statements remembered as an adult	21	3	17	8.76	4.05
Correct statements remembered as an adult	21	1	10	4.48	2.32
Statements remembered by relative	20	5	15	7.55	2.46
Correct statements remembered by relative	19	0	8	3.53	2.12

Comparison of the number of memories they had as children and how many statements they correctly remember now and what their closest available relative remembers of what they reported as children.

**TABLE 4.** What Participants Primarily Remembered of Their Past-Life Memories

	Most Clearly	Second Most Clearly
Persons they knew	11	10
How they died	5	9
What they used to do	4	2
The place where they lived	2	1
Other	1	1

Values are presented as number of participants.

previous life. For 13, it had been helpful; for 3, unpleasant; for 4, harmful; and for 8, it made no difference in their life.

For half of the participants, the memories brought some extra difficulties. The most common was missing the previous family and “living two lives.” One complained about being big in a small body; one, about getting too much attention; and one, about being teased by other children because of his past-life memories. The close relatives expressed the view that the memories had brought some difficulties to 16% of the participants when they were children. About half of the participants had received a great deal of attention, although these cases are almost never written about in the Lebanese press.

In retrospect, did the participants prefer the present or the previous life? Two thirds preferred the present life; 21%, the previous life; the rest expressed no preference.

### How Did Persons With Past-Life Memories in Childhood Fare in Later Life?

Most of the participants (25) expressed general happiness with how their life had developed, two were rather unhappy with their situation, and one was neither happy nor unhappy. How these figures compare with that of their peers in Lebanon is not possible to assess. There is substantial consistency between the participants' and their close relatives' estimates of the participants' happiness with their life ( $r_s = 0.53$ ,  $n = 24$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ). Generally, their health had been good, and one fifth of them had been hospitalized two times or more.

Four participants had only completed compulsory primary education, 12 received some training or schooling beyond that, and 11 had some college or university education.

The participants seemed to be living normal productive lives. They were in many professions: two teachers, two housewives, two sales representatives, two saleswomen, two building contractors, two car dealers, an engineer, an accountant, a truck driver, a driver, a sculptor, an inspector, a painter, a nurse, a magician, an internal police officer, a taxi driver, and two shopkeepers. None were unemployed. Eighty-nine percent were reasonably satisfied with their occupation. Most of them were married, three were single, and one was divorced. On the whole, our data indicate that the participants have fared reasonably well in life, perhaps even somewhat higher than the average for their age group among the Druze in Lebanon.

We asked our participants if they would have liked their children to remember a past life. Of the 24 who had children, only 4 would have liked it, whereas 14 did not, and the rest were indifferent. Finally, we asked whether they had met anyone who claimed past-life memories. All but one had met such a person. This reveals how widespread such memories are among the Druze.

### Contacts With the Previous Family

All but 6 of our 28 cases were considered solved, namely, the person who the participant had presumably been in his previous life had been identified. In 19 instances, this was accepted by the previous family and led to visits to that family that continued for many years, and in 13 cases, up to adulthood. Gifts were frequently exchanged between the two families.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed at answering two questions: Do alleged past-life memories in childhood have a detrimental effect on the development into adult life? How consistent and continuous are past-life memories into adulthood? First, we would like to point out that the limitation of our data is that our sample consists of only 28 participants.

Let us first look at potential detrimental effects. Our data show that all participants were living normal and productive lives. Eighty-three percent were happy with how their lives had developed. We have no comparable data for the general adult population of Lebanon.

The obtained level of education—41% reporting some college or university education—seems at least average for Lebanon. These findings and our earlier findings in Sri Lanka show that past-life memories in childhood have no detrimental effect on educational achievement, again keeping the limitations that were already mentioned in mind (Haraldsson, 2008). Generally speaking, there were no indications that past-life experiences in childhood had detrimental effects into adult life, apart, perhaps, from persisting phobias, again lacking peer data for comparison.

Forty-one percent of our small sample had received some college or university education. It is not easy to assess how the educational level of our participants compares with that of their peers. The second author, a native Lebanese, considers the educational level of our participants about average without being able to consult reliable statistics. Lebanon is one of the best-educated Arab countries in the world, if not the best.

Ever since Stevenson started his investigations of children who claim to remember episodes from a past life, there has been uncertainty about how many of them retain their memories into adult life. Studies of individual cases have indicated that, in a large number of them, memories fade away around the time the children go to school or when they stop talking about them.

Of the 28 persons who spoke of past-life memories when they were children, the great majority (75%) reported having some past-life memories from the time they were interviewed in childhood. That time was, on average, 36 years ago. This reveals a rather striking difference to our earlier study in Sri Lanka ( $N = 42$ ), in which 38% recalled some of their past-life memories (Haraldsson, 2008). This is may in part be due to the fact that only one-third of Sri Lankan cases are solved whereas about two-thirds of cases in Lebanon are solved. Solved cases are more talked about within the family of the participant and often lead to lasting relationships with the previous family; hence, past-life memories will be better remembered.

Another unexpected finding emerged from this study. Many of the statements—about half of these—that the participants reported as past-life memories were not found among the statements that they had reported as children. Potential sources of error are that the lists of the original childhood memories may not have been complete and that, during the only interview we had with each adult, not all that was remembered might have come to mind.

The conclusions are not only that a large portion of the original childhood memories have been forgotten but also that these have been augmented and distorted by false memories. Only about 15% of the original past-life memories were correctly remembered. Perhaps, this percentage might have risen a little if we had had a chance to interview the participants a second time, and, possibly, the original list was not complete. If we treat the data liberally, it can be argued that this percentage of remembered original memories may, in fact, be a bit higher.

An attempt to compare normal childhood memories with past-life memories revealed very little because of the scarcity of preschool memories and the great difficulty in checking the correctness of such memories because events of early childhood are rarely recorded to the same extent as past-life memories are in investigated cases of the reincarnation type. It is the impression of the authors that past-life

memories may be relatively better retained than are other memories from the same age. However, solid evidence for this impression is lacking.

Two psychological studies in Sri Lanka have shown that children with past-life memories remember more of the content of a short story that was read to them than do their peers (Haraldsson, 1997; Haraldsson et al., 2000). Whether this difference is only a sign of early maturity or an indication of a better memory throughout life remains an open question. For the participants of this study, we have no memory test scores from childhood.

In other respects, the findings from the two countries are similar; for example, it was most common to remember best the persons who they had known, then, how they had died, what they used to do, and the place where they had lived. In both countries, some participants retained fears into adulthood that they attributed to events in their previous life: five (18%) in Lebanon and seven (17%) in Sri Lanka, where the sample was larger. How frequent phobias in childhood generally persist into adult life is not known to the authors.

In short, a fair number of past-life memories in childhood persist into adult life, and there is no indication that these have a detrimental effect into adulthood despite signs of PTSD during childhood.

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#### DISCLOSURES

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