

## **Ian Stevenson: Reminiscences and Observations**

JOHN PALMER

*Rhine Research Center  
Durham, NC  
e-mail: john@rhine.org*

If the reader will forgive a tired cliché, Ian Stevenson and I go way back. In 1971 Ian gave me my first job in parapsychology, a Research Associate position at what was then called the Division of Parapsychology at the University of Virginia Medical Center. In addition to Ian, my colleagues were Rex Stanford, later to become a major player in parapsychology, and J. G. Pratt, who was already a distinguished parapsychologist based on his pioneering ESP research with J. B. Rhine. Although the mission of the Division was research on the question of survival of death, neither Stanford, Pratt, nor I were primarily engaged in survival research during our years there. Although Ian later tightened the reins, he deserves great credit for allowing a broader research agenda in order to support parapsychologists who otherwise had little or no opportunity to continue in the field.

The focus of my research at the Division was out-of-body experiences (OBEs). Although this topic can be related to survival, my experiments were not designed to assess the externalization hypothesis but rather to explore the psychological correlates of the experience and its relation to ESP. In fact, while I was there I published a paper based on the premise that nothing leaves the body during an OBE (Palmer, 1978), although my theory did not preclude externalization outright.

One of the survival-related tasks to which I was assigned was screening mediums for possible extended research at the Division. I was to go to various places and pose as an ordinary visitor, not revealing that I was a researcher. One of my targets was a Spiritualist camp in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, I was by far the youngest visitor there and I suspect that aroused suspicion; at any rate, they were very guarded with me and I got no useful information. I was also sent to Chicago and London. The Chicago trip yielded one medium who impressed me (Deon Frye), and we subsequently invited her to Virginia for a taped session. We did not find good evidence for ESP, but we noticed a marked change in her face when she entered trance. I was also a co-author with Ian of a paper describing a rating scale to be used for testing the “authenticity” of spontaneous case reports (Stevenson et al., 1977). Authenticity is “the degree to which the information recorded about a case corresponds to the case as it actually happened” (Stevenson et al., 1977: 274).

After I left the Division, most of my contacts with Ian concerned the American Society for Psychical Research. Both of us were members of their Board and also past presidents. During the 1990s, we participated in an unsuccessful attempt to change the leadership and direction of the organization. The latter stages of this effort involved a lawsuit, which Ian largely paid for out of his own pocket.

Ian projected a calm, stately, gentlemanly demeanor that one is tempted to compare to the stereotype of the British upper class during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This of course was the heyday of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and of prominent psychical researchers such as F. W. H. Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Eleanor Sidgwick. Ian saw himself as very much in the mold of these early pioneers, especially in the importance they placed on the survival question and their appeal to well-documented spontaneous cases as evidence for survival. Thus, this perception was also the reality; during his professional career, Ian was the paramount personification of the classical SPR tradition, more so than the SPR itself at this time.

Although Ian delved into many areas of spontaneous case research (Alvarado et al., 2007), his primary research interest was reincarnation or, as he more objectively defined it, research on children who remember previous lives. He was careful to qualify his findings as only “suggestive” of reincarnation (e.g., Stevenson, 1974), although he would often make strong arguments in favor of the reincarnation interpretation of individual cases. His methods were in the best tradition of the SPR, featuring extensive documentation of the validity of the child’s statements and an exhaustive analysis of alternate interpretations. During his career he exhibited the patience to collect over 2500 cases (Stevenson, 2001), which have provided fertile ground for correlational research to uncover patterns in his sample. Ian did some analyses of this type himself (e.g., Stevenson, 2001), and this research hopefully will be carried on by his successors.

In my opinion, Ian’s most important intellectual contribution to survival research was the emphasis he placed on evidence for survival other than statements of fact (e.g., verbal memories in reincarnation cases). Because such classic examples of ESP are frequently demonstrated in non-survival contexts, the so-called super-psi hypothesis (ESP from sources other than the deceased) provides a very parsimonious alternate explanation. However, in his reincarnation cases Ian reported other kinds of evidence that have much fewer analogues in non-survival contexts. The most noteworthy of these are the demonstrations of precocious skills (e.g., playing musical instruments) and the presence of birthmarks (Stevenson, 1997). Although this type of evidence does not conclusively prove survival, it does increase the likelihood that we do survive death, and that is the most we can expect scientific research on the topic to achieve. Still, that is no mean achievement and a legacy of which any investigator or scholar could be proud.

### References

- Alvarado, C. S., Zingrone, N. L., Haraldsson, E., & Palmer, J. (2007). Ian Stevenson's work in parapsychology [Abstract]. *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 50th Annual Convention* (pp. 235–238).
- Palmer, J. (1978). The out-of-body experience: A psychological theory. *Parapsychology Review*, 9(5), 19–22.
- Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (rev. ed.). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Stevenson, I. (1997). *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Stevenson, I. (2001). *Children Who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation* (rev. ed.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Stevenson, I., Palmer, J., & Stanford, R. G. (1977). An authenticity rating scale for reports of spontaneous cases. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 273–288.