

Phobias in Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives

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Abstract—In a series of 387 children who claimed to remember a previous life phobias occurred in 141 (36%). The phobias nearly always corresponded to the mode of death in the life of the deceased person the child claimed to remember. They usually manifested between the ages of 2 and 5, and sometimes the child showed the phobia in early infancy before it had begun to speak about a previous life. The phobias did not derive from imitating another member of the family or from any postnatal traumatic experience. They seem to require some paranormal explanation of which, however, reincarnation is only one.

Introduction

Phobias are irrational fears or fears the magnitude of which far exceeds the strength of the observable stimulus. Agras, Sylvester, and Oliveau (1969) distinguished phobias from fears by the magnitude of the experience and associated disability; however, a continuous gradation occurs between mild fears and extreme ones that we may designate as phobias.

Strong fears occur frequently in children. Macfarlane, Allen, and Honzik (1954) found that 90% of children (between the ages of 2 and 14) surveyed in Berkeley, California, had experienced at least one specific fear. The peak incidence occurred between the ages of 3 and 4, when 67% of the girls and 56% of the boys showed such fears. Other surveys have also shown high incidences of fears in children. For example, Lapouse and Monk (1959) found that 58% of 482 children between the ages of 6 and 12 who were surveyed in Buffalo, New York, had at least one notable fear, and 42% had seven or more fears. Cummings (1944), in a survey of 239 English school children between the ages of 2 and 7, found that 22% of the children showed specific fears.

As long ago as the 1890s Hall (1897) noted that the fears of infancy and childhood were often focused on dangers that, although prevalent during

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former centuries, no longer presented any important threat: thunderstorms, snakes, drowning, nighttime. Hall commented about such fears that:

their relative intensity fits past conditions far better than it does present ones. Night is now the safest time, serpents are no longer among our most fatal foes. . . . The weather fears and the incessant talk about weather . . . fits [sic] a condition of life in trees, caves or tents, or at least of far greater exposure . . . than present houses, carriages, and even dress afford. . . . The first experiences with water, the moderate noise of the wind, or distant thunder, etc., might excite faint fear, but why does it sometimes make children on the instant frantic with panic? (pp. 246-247)

These reflections led Hall to suggest that humans of his time had somehow inherited from ancestors the fears they exhibited. He wrote of this that:

the human instinct-feelings, incalculably more ancient than the intellect, have been felt and macerated into their present general form very gradually by social telluric and cosmic influences, some of which still persist unchanged, but more of which have been modified or are now extinct. (p. 247)

Hall believed that "the experience of the individual, and even that of his nearer forebears, while it can explain many of the fear phenomena . . . cannot explain all" (p. 244). He was thus led to posit some kind of remote origin for these fears of childhood. He referred to the Platonic idea of metempsychosis (what today we should call reincarnation), but pulled back from endorsing that concept and seemed to favor instead some kind of genetic memory.

Other authors, notably Valentine (1930), also observed that fears in childhood seem to arise without any observable stimulus or without any stimulus of sufficient strength to account for the strong fear apparently evoked. Hall obtained his information from questionnaires given to adults, but Valentine directly observed the development of fears in his own five children. Later, support for the idea of a genetic transmission of a capacity for fearful responses came from experiments with animals. For example, Lorenz (1939) found that newly hatched geese showed a reaction of fear when they were exposed to a silhouette resembling that of a hawk. Similarly, Gibson and Walk (1960) observed that newborn kids and chickens showed reactions of fear when they perceived a simulated cliff over the edge of which they thought that they might fall.

Children who claim to remember a previous life frequently manifest phobias concordant with the lives they say they remember. Before describing their phobias I shall briefly summarize the cases of these children and their investigation.

Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives

With colleagues I have now investigated about 2,500 cases of children who say that they remember a previous life. Such children usually begin speaking

about the claimed previous life between the ages of 2 and 4. They continue speaking about it, on average, until the ages of 5 to 7. At that time a gradual fading of memories begins, and in most cases an apparently complete amnesia has occurred by the ages of 8 to 10. The children make a variety of different statements about the claimed previous life. Among 856 cases, in 576 a deceased person was identified whose life was judged to correspond to statements the subject had made or (sometimes) to other features of a case, such as dreams, unusual behavior, and birthmarks (Cook, Pasricha, Samararatne, Win Maung, & Stevenson, 1983). My colleagues and I refer to these cases as "solved" and to the other third of the cases (in which no satisfactorily corresponding deceased person was identified) as "unsolved."

The children's statements usually include a reference to the mode of death in the claimed previous life. Among 684 subjects¹ of these cases, 494 (72%) mentioned the mode of death. Among 536 solved cases the mode of death had been violent in 274 (51%) and natural in 262 (49%) (Cook et al., 1983).

Cases of this type have been found in every country where they have been looked for. However, they occur with greater frequency (or are easier to find) in cultures having a strong belief in reincarnation. This is perhaps partly because such a belief allows a child to speak about a previous life, if he² thinks he remembers one, without being ignored, rebuked or suppressed more actively. Most of the cases to be considered in this report occurred in countries of Southeast Asia, but it is important to note that many cases occur also in Western Europe and North America (Stevenson, 1983a, 1987).

In solved cases, the important question arises of whether the child could have obtained the information in his statements about a previous life through some normal means. In the many cases in which the child and concerned deceased person belonged to the same family or even the same village the child may have learned normally about the deceased person. Cases of these kinds form the majority in Burma and in the tribes of northwest North America (two areas where cases occur frequently). On the other hand, in many cases of India and in most of those in Sri Lanka, the families concerned lived in different communities, were unrelated, and had no previous acquaintance before the case developed. I have given details of the investigations of some such cases elsewhere (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1975, 1977a). In many such cases normal transmission of information to the child seems extremely unlikely.

In addition to making statements about the claimed previous life, nearly all the subjects show behavior that is unusual in their family but that accords with what can be known or reasonably conjectured about the deceased person of whom the child is speaking. Such behavior includes phobias (and aversions), phobias, untaught skills, the reenactment in play of the deceased person's professional activity or mode of death, and strong attachment to the family of the deceased person. I have discussed these aspects of the cases elsewhere (Stevenson, 1977b, 1987) and given details in numerous case reports (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1975, 1977a, 1977c, 1980, 1983b). Mills

(1989) has published reports of similar cases. In the present paper I wish to direct attention to the phobias that often figure in these cases.

Methods of Investigation

The interview is the principal method of investigation of these cases. The child, if he will talk with us, and the parents are always interviewed. Older siblings, grandparents, and other informants (provided they are firsthand witnesses) are also interviewed. In many cases the subject's family is visited twice or several times: to fill in missing information, to check the consistency of informants, to meet informants who were absent earlier, and to observe the child's further development.

The accuracy of the child's statements is always verified independently with surviving members of the family of the deceased person whose life the child claims to remember, if such a person has been identified or can be found by us.

When obtainable, written and printed documents, such as birth and death certificates, hospital records, and reports of postmortem examinations are obtained. Such documents are particularly important in verifying the mode of death in the claimed previous life.

Interpreters have usually been needed in Asia, but most of them have worked on the investigative team for many years, and some have become valuable collaborators. It is unlikely that many important errors have occurred due to mistakes in translation.

I have published elsewhere further details about the methods of investigation (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1975, 1987).

Features of Phobias in Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives

Conditions Here Included as Phobias

Although most of the children having the fears being considered here had strong reactions that would warrant use of the word *phobia*, I have also included some milder fears and aversions. In each case the child's parents or other informants regarded the child's reaction to the stimulus as excessive and not attributable to any known cause in the child's experience.

Prevalence

Among 387 subjects who claimed to remember a previous life phobias occurred in 141 (36%) (Cook et al., 1983). Phobias occurred with almost exactly the same frequency in unsolved cases as in solved ones. They occurred (but with varying frequencies) in the cases of all cultures so far examined. Among solved cases the lowest incidence was 26% in the cases of India and the highest was 51% in those of the Druses of Lebanon (Cook et al., 1983). Among 42 (nontribal) cases in the United States phobias occurred in 13 (31%) of the subjects (Cook et al., 1983).

Correspondence to Claimed Mode of Death in the Previous Life

The phobias nearly always accord with the claimed mode of death in the previous life. A child who claims to remember a life that ended in drowning may have a phobia of being immersed in water, one who claims to remember a life that ended in stabbing may have a fear of bladed weapons, and so on.

Most of the phobias occurred in relation to violent deaths of all kinds. They occurred much less frequently in the cases of children who remembered natural deaths. In a series of 240 cases in India phobias occurred in 53 (39%) of the 135 cases with violent death, but in only 3 (3%) of the 105 cases having a natural death (Stevenson, 1983a). Nevertheless, noteworthy phobias do sometimes occur in the latter type of case. One child who remembered the life of a man who had gorged himself on yogurt that had evidently been contaminated and then had died of severe gastroenteritis (perhaps with peritonitis) showed a marked aversion for yogurt (Stevenson, 1966/1974). Another example occurred in a child who remembered the life of a young woman who died after a prolonged illness due to congenital heart disease; the child had a severe phobia of drugs, injections, and blood.³

The incidence of phobias varied in cases having different modes of violent death. For example, among 47 cases in which the subject remembered a life that ended in drowning, a phobia of being immersed in water occurred in 30 (64%). Among 30 cases in which the deceased person had died of snakebite, phobias of snakes were reported in only 13 (43%) (Stevenson, 1987).⁴

Generalization and Sensory Association

The phobias often show generalization or transfer (Shepard, 1987; Watson and Rayner, 1920) and sensory association (Lief, 1955), two features that commonly occur with phobias recognized to have followed a traumatic experience. An example of generalization occurred in a subject (in India) who remembered the previous life of a caste-conscious Brahmin and had an aversion for all men with beards. This dislike apparently derived from the fact that in the period of the life remembered (the 1920s) Moslems (and Sikhs) wore beards, but few Hindus did so (Stevenson, 1975). Another example of generalization occurred in the case of a child of Lebanon who remembered the life of a man who was fatally injured by a truck; the child had a phobia not only of trucks, but of all motor vehicles (Stevenson, 1966/1974). Still another example of this feature occurred in a child of Turkey who said that he remembered the life of a man who had been murdered by a man called Hasan; the subject of the case had a phobia of all persons called "Hasan."

An example of sensory association occurred in the case of a young boy (of Turkey) who said that he remembered a previous life that ended when a van in which he was riding crashed against the abutment of a narrow bridge. He showed a phobia of automobiles and also a marked phobia of the bridge where the accident had occurred, which was not far from his birthplace (Stevenson, 1980). Another example of sensory association occurred in the case of a child (also of Turkey) who remembered the life of a man who had

drowned in a river; the river flowed near the subject's village, and he was noticed to avoid going near the part of the river where the drowning had occurred (Stevenson, 1980).

A child of India showed both generalization and sensory association in his phobias. He remembered the previous life of a child who had been murdered near a temple by a barber and a washerman. He had a generalized fear of all barbers and washermen, and he showed marked fear when taken to the area of the temple where the murder had occurred (Stevenson, 1966/1974).

Early Expression of the Phobias

In numerous instances the child has manifested the phobia before it has spoken about the previous life from which the phobia seemed to derive. One baby of Sri Lanka struggled so much against being bathed that it took three adults to hold her down for this. Also, before she could speak she had manifested (at the age of 6 months) a marked phobia of buses and cried when transported in one. The life she later described was that of a young girl (of another village) who had been walking on a narrow road that crossed flooded paddy fields. A bus had come along, and this girl, stepping back to avoid it, had fallen into the flood water and drowned (Stevenson, 1977a). A boy of Turkey showed a marked fear of airplanes before he could even speak; when he saw or heard one, he would run to his mother and cower or hide under a bed. Later, he described the previous life of a man who had been killed in an airplane crash (Stevenson, 1980).

The subject of another (unsolved) case, a boy of Sri Lanka, showed a phobia of policemen when he was just beginning to speak at the age of 1½ years. If he saw a policeman or police vehicle, he would say "Police" and run inside the house. When he was about 4 years old, he gave details of a previous life that corresponded closely to events in Sri Lanka in April 1971, when the police and army suppressed a serious insurgency during which they killed hundreds of the insurgents. His parents believed that their child was describing the life of one of the insurgents killed in the uprising.

Phobias as Parts of Syndromes of Unusual Behaviors

The phobias of these children were often only one feature among a group of unusual behaviors that corresponded to behavior and circumstances in the life of the person the child claimed to remember. For example, the mother of a child in Sri Lanka accidentally discovered that he responded obediently whenever she happened to mention the word *lorry*. (The Sinhalese have assimilated this word in their language.) The same child showed a notable circumspection in the presence of policemen, and when he saw them, he would sometimes go inside the house, afterwards asking an adult whether they had passed. In addition, he showed a craving for tobacco and alcohol that was quite foreign in his family. This child remembered the life of a distiller of illicit alcohol whose premises the police had frequently raided.

He was a heavy smoker and an even heavier drinker of alcohol. He died one day when, being drunk, he stepped into the path of a speeding lorry (Stevenson, 1977a). Another child, the subject of an unsolved case in Burma, was observed (at the age of 4) to cringe with fear whenever airplanes flew over. Her father asked her what was frightening her, and she said that she was afraid the airplanes would shoot her. She gradually explained that she had been a Japanese soldier (presumably in World War II) and had been shot and killed by a strafing airplane. In addition to the phobia of airplanes, this child liked to play at being a soldier, and she was markedly masculine in her behavior; her refusal to wear girls' clothes eventually led to her being expelled from her school (Stevenson, 1977c, 1983b).

Duration of the Phobias

Among 693 children who claimed to remember previous lives the mean age when they began to speak about the lives was 37 months and the mean age (of a smaller sample; $N = 236$) when they stopped speaking spontaneously was 81 months (Cook et al., 1983). The phobias related to the mode of death in the previous life occur most prominently during the period when the children are talking about the previous life most frequently.

The phobias tend to recede as the memories (and related verbal statements) diminish. However, in some cases the phobia persists after the subject has lost the imaged memories of the previous life. For example, the child of India (mentioned above) who remembered the life of another child who had been brutally murdered by a barber and washerman showed a marked fear when he recognized one of the murderers (who was then still living in the same community). At the age of 11 this child was still afraid of the murderer, whom he occasionally saw, but he could no longer explain why he was afraid of him. Two years later he had lost his fear of this man, but he remembered that he had earlier been afraid of him (Stevenson, 1966/1974).

Absence of Evidence of Postnatal Traumatic Experiences or Models for the Phobias

In investigating these cases I never learned about any traumatic experience the subjects had had since their birth that could account for the phobia. Also, there were no other members of the family with the same phobia whom the child might have imitated. Occasionally, informants mentioned that other members of the family had some fear of water or snakes or whatever it was that the child greatly feared; but they always stated that the child's phobia exceeded in intensity any similar fear another member of the family showed.

Discussion

For this paper I have isolated the phobias from the other features of the cases of children who remember previous lives. However, I need to empha-

size at the outset of this discussion that the phobias occur in the context of cases that nearly always contain numerous other features. The adequate appraisal of a case requires evaluation of all its data, not those of the phobia alone. I believe that readers can judge the value of the cases—with regard to evidence of paranormal processes—only by studying the detailed reports of the cases from which I have drawn examples to illustrate the points I wish to make in this paper.

This reservation stated, however, I shall now review several alternative interpretations of the cases that bear particularly on the phobias that figure so prominently in them.

MaEobservation

It is possible that in some instances the parents or other adult informants have not been present when a child has undergone some traumatic experience that has generated a phobia. Moreover, a single traumatic experience may generate a phobia: "The burned child dreads the fire." I cannot deny that unnoticed traumatic experiences may have occasionally happened in these cases. However, I also cannot believe that such unobserved events could account for more than a small fraction of the phobias in these numerous cases. Two aspects of the cases support this conclusion. First, as I mentioned earlier, the child often first expresses the phobia during early infancy, perhaps at a time when it could never have been outside its house. Second, the children of Asia and Africa, where most of my examples occurred, remain under fairly close surveillance during infancy and early childhood; the generally large, extended families in these parts of the world entail that a child is rarely alone, unobserved by adults and older siblings.

Imposed Identification

In the cases in which the child and the deceased person concerned belong to the same family or village, expectations that the deceased person will reincarnate in the family or village may lead a child's parents to promote its identification with that person. If the child accepts such an assigned role, it may manifest the fears that person had or might be expected to have had; for example, if the deceased person died of snakebite, the child may show a phobia of snakes. However, such imposed identification could not be the correct explanation of phobias in unsolved cases and in cases in which the families concerned had no prior acquaintance and no opportunities for normal communication. In cases of these two types there was no person known to the child or its parents with the phobia it showed. In some of the stronger of the cases, for example those in which the two families were strangers, our team has made written records of what the child said (and of any corresponding phobias) before the child's statements were verified (Stevenson & Samararatne, 1988a, 1988b).

Spontaneous Impersonation

Children sometimes spontaneously impersonate other persons, usually imaginary ones. Conceivably, however, a child might impersonate a deceased person of whom it had some knowledge, and this could happen without encouragement from the child's parents. If the child knew about the impersonated person's death, it might assume a phobia plausibly related to the mode of death. This interpretation may be the correct one for many unsolved cases; but for solved ones it does not explain the frequent extensive knowledge the child shows about the person identified with, which knowledge it could not have obtained (in most cases) without this knowledge having been transmitted by adults who would be aware (again, in most cases) that they had the knowledge and might have communicated it to the child.

Symbolism

Many psychiatrists have interpreted the ostensible stimulus of a phobia as a symbol for some other stimulus, which is then said to be the "real" occasion of the child's fear. Freud (1909/1946) provided an early example of such an interpretation in his report of the case of the phobia of horses exhibited by the patient known as "little Hans." However, Freud's interpretation involved many conjectures based on his theories and supported, as Wolpe and Rachman (1960) showed, with no evidence. It is more likely that little Hans's phobia of horses derived from a fright he experienced on seeing a horse fall down.

The interpretation of symbolism (or at any rate of displacement) is often offered also when young children refuse to go to school. A "school phobia" is sometimes interpreted as a fear of being separated from the child's mother. This may indeed be the explanation in many instances of school refusal. Nevertheless, Hersov (1960) found in a study of school refusal that in 22% of the cases the child's fear was clearly focused on the school, not on the mother.

It is difficult to deny an interpretation of symbolism, if someone insists that a phobia "must" be symbolic; this is because in the conjectures of some theorists almost any stimulus may be declared a symbol for something else. However, psychiatrists favoring interpretations of symbolism in phobias should offer better evidence for the derivation of the ostensible fear from the alleged "real stimulus" than such case histories as those of Freud provide. Interpretations with symbolism for the phobias of children who remember previous lives seem to require a series of tortuous explanations that fail to address the question of how close correspondences between so many children's phobias and the modes of death in the claimed previous lives arose.

Genetic Memory

The animal experiments of Lorenz (1939) and of Gibson and Walk (1960) that I cited earlier (as well as others) leave no doubt that animals sometimes

inherit a capacity to respond with fear to highly specific stimuli, such as the silhouette of a raptor shown to newly hatched geese. Indeed, much of the timidity of birds toward humans may be inherited, as Charles Darwin (1839/1959) suggested in remarking on the extraordinary tameness of birds on the Galapagos Islands, where birds had (up to the early 19th century) been little molested by man. However, three reasons oppose our accepting genetic memory as an adequate explanation for most of the phobias occurring in children who remember previous lives. The first is the extreme unlikelihood that phobias for destructive instruments of recent origin could be inherited. Thunderstorms and snakes have frightened humans for centuries, as Hall (1897) correctly stated; but motor vehicles and even firearms are still, rare in Asian villages, and a fear of them cannot have affected more than one or two generations of their inhabitants and most of the inhabitants not at all. A second objection is even weightier. I refer to the impossibility of a person's transmitting genetically to his or her offspring any information—either of the details of the event or of fears arising from it—of the mode of his or her death. He or she must have had their children, if any, before they faced death. Hence, their genes could not convey information about their deaths. Third, the subjects of these cases are almost never the direct descendants of the persons whose lives they remember. Instead they are born, usually within a few years at most of the deceased person's death, in another line of descent (although sometimes in the same extended family). Thus, in most cases the memory generating a phobia could not have derived from the person whose life the child claims to remember.

Paranormal Interpretations

Each of the five normal interpretations that I have discussed may apply to a few of the cases; however, even altogether they cannot account for most of the phobias in children who claim to remember previous lives. For these, I believe we need some paranormal explanation.

Among paranormal interpretations, reincarnation, although the most obvious explanation to the informants for the cases, is by no means the only plausible one. I have elsewhere (Stevenson, 1966/1974, 1987) discussed the merits of other interpretations, such as a secondary personality endowed with paranormal cognition and "possession" of a living child by a discarnate mind. Space for this article precludes a discussion of these and other paranormal interpretations. I do not by any means insist on reincarnation as the best interpretation for these cases. If I am correct in concluding that some childhood phobias may require some paranormal process for their satisfactory explanation, future investigations may help us to decide whether, among paranormal interpretations, reincarnation is the best one.

Endnotes

¹ Figures given for the number of cases included in different analyses vary, because in some cases the necessary information for a particular feature is missing or judged unreliable.

² The use of the masculine pronoun to designate the subjects in general is not intended to diminish the importance of female subjects. It happens, however, that in 1,095 cases 62% of the subjects were male, 38% female. I discuss possible reasons for this lopsided ratio elsewhere (Stevenson, 1987).

³ Where I give no reference for an example, I have not yet published a detailed report of the case in which the example occurred.

⁴ Variations in the incidences reported for different kinds of phobias may reflect different possibilities for exposure to a stimulus of the phobia. For example, nearly all children would be exposed to water, if not in lakes and rivers then in wells and baths. Fewer children would be exposed to poisonous snakes, although these are familiar to villagers in Asia and Africa. Fewer still, in many parts of Asia and Africa, would be exposed to airplanes.

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