

A search for the truth of past life regression

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Introduction

The theory of reincarnation may offer an insight into several features of human personality and biology that contemporary theories do not clarify adequately. Past life regression (PLR) is a posited journeying into past lives, undertaken while the individual is subjected to hypnosis. The late Professor Ian Stevenson's book *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Aetiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* has become a classic in the parasciences and has a worldwide readership.¹ It has resulted in a resurgence of interest in PLR. Alternate explanations proposed for previous life memories include wishful thinking, cultural construction, deception, self deception and paranormal explanations other than reincarnation.

The dichotomy between scientists and practitioners is ever widening, as is that between evidence obtained by research and the outcomes of clinical work. Mental health professionals are commonly consulted about the efficacy of complementary therapies, and they need an informed awareness of the merits and demerits of these therapies. Professionals in psychiatry and psychology must address the dangers posed by the application of questionable mental health techniques, but at the same time they need to be receptive to their potential. Paying more attention to research in PLR would be more to their advantage than dismissing it in its entirety.

Previous life memories

Proponents of PLR who cite the works of Stevenson tend to ignore the fact that he made no claim to have proved the incidence of reincarnation. He simply discerned and reported evidence that seemed to make it possible that it happens. PLR has indisputable value only if reincarnation is objectively demonstrated to exist. The scientific evidence that Stevenson presented justifies a suspension of disbelief in the occurrence – albeit rare – of reincarnation, but the evidence for it does not have its foundation in PLR. If reincarnation does take place, it is only one manifestation of survival after physical extinction, and it makes other forms of survival scientific possibilities also. The existence of reincarnation is not inconsistent with early Christian teachings.^{2,3}

With regard to the various categories of scientific evidence that support reincarnation, Stevenson attaches maximum credibility to spontaneous utterances made by young children about previous lives. It is noteworthy that these children reveal their apparent recollections of their own volition. The information that they give has the appearance of verisimilitude, and it is easy to determine whether any suspect channels of communication have been brought to bear on young people.

In his recent publication, Stevenson has opened his commodious file of cases of people who have birthmarks and birth defects corresponding to the wounds of people of whom they are hypothesized to be reincarnations.¹ About 35 per cent of children who claim to remember previous lives have birthmarks or defects that they attribute to wounds suffered by a person whom they represented in an earlier existence. A total of 210 such children have been investigated by Stevenson's research team. In those instances in which it was possible to identify a deceased person the details of whose life reliably matched the child's statements, a close correspondence was nearly always found between the child's birthmarks and defects and wounds known to have been inflicted on the deceased person's body. This is currently the only objective evidence in favour of the hypothesis of reincarnation. A less tangible kind of evidence occurs: remembering a previous life may have a specific positive outcome in adulthood, and conversely children who recall a previous life may become neurotic as a direct result of the circumstances. Many child subjects may experience turmoil of conflicting personal loyalties between their present and previous families.

Stevenson was not a fanatical advocate of PLR.⁴ His scepticism is demonstrated by his pointing out that if the memories of all the hypnotically regressed subjects claiming to have been present at the Crucifixion of Christ were true, there would have been no room for Roman soldiers to be in attendance on Golgotha.¹ Many PLR studies inevitably lack the scientific discipline of Stevenson's work. Opening the box that constitutes the previous life of an individual is not always beneficial to them; memories remembered may multiply when transported into the conscious mind, and they may never be eradicated. From a clinical perspective, however, investigation of the putative undesirable effects of the therapy is potentially as valuable as an appraisal of its benefits.

Trans-century cases

In their spontaneous experiences, children who make reincarnation-type revelations remember a previous life that ended only a few years before their birth (the average period is two years). Conversely, in hypnotic PLR the interval between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the living person is sometimes longer, a century or more. There are a few remarkable instances. Edward Ryall of Essex remembered a previous life in Somerset in the seventeenth century.⁵ Stevenson attaches some credence to Ryall's claims to have had previous life memories. A.J. Stewart recalls a previous life as King James IV of Scotland in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶ She never surrendered her royal memories to investigators of reincarnation, but published them independently. It would have been appropriate for her to have subjected her experiences to investigation in the light of the eminence of her supposed earlier persona. These two cases were not products of PLR, but natural recollections of previous lives.

It is reasonable to make the assumption that in instances that bridge the centuries, previous life memories do not readily or spontaneously appear in the conscious mind and that they become clearer in a hypnotic state. The time lag is a convincing explanation of the apparent blockage of the free flow of distant life memories, very different from the experience of children who are remembering recent past lives.

There are two main criticisms that may be levelled at trans-century cases that are revealed through PLR. One is financial: therapists charge their clients by the hour, and the exploration of centuries instead of years greatly extends the length of time a patient will need to be treated, thereby making therapy more lucrative for the practitioner. Secondly, in trans-century cases both therapist and patient are usually free to speculate wildly without much fear of being contradicted by the facts – usually no one bothers to investigate the accuracy of the detail.

A historical case of PLR

The most famous case of PLR is undoubtedly that of Bridey Murphy. In the mid-twentieth century Morey Bernstein, a Colorado businessman who had practised hypnotism for ten years with hundreds of different persons, decided to attempt to regress someone to one or more past lives. He chose as his subject a woman called Virginia Tighe, knowing that she had the ability to go into a deep trance with ease. Between 29 November 1952 and 29 August 1953 Bernstein made six attempts to facilitate the regression of Virginia. During those sessions she recalled one brief life as a baby who died. After that there emerged the figure of Bridey Murphy – more formally Bridget Kathleen Murphy.

Following her first experience as Bridey, Virginia mutated into her *alter ego* whenever invited to do so in a trance state. She proffered a significant amount of information about Ireland, none of which she had any explicable way of knowing as Virginia Tighe. She said she had been born in Cork in 1798, the daughter of a Protestant barrister called Duncan Murphy and his wife Kathleen. She had a brother named Duncan Blaine Murphy, who had married Aimee Strayne. Another brother had died in infancy. At the age of twenty, Bridey said, she was married in a Protestant ceremony to a Catholic, Brian Joseph McCarthy, the son of another Cork barrister. Brian and Bridey moved to Belfast, where he attended school and eventually progressed to teach law at Queen's University. They had no children, and Bridey lived until she was sixty-six.

No record of any of these facts has been identified in Ireland. However, during her narration of her experiences as Bridey, Virginia mentioned the names of two Belfast grocers, Farr's and John Carrigan. It proved possible to verify that two grocers with those names did operate retail enterprises in the city at the appropriate time. She said that her address in Cork was The Meadows, and it was established that there is an area in that town named Mardike Meadows.

Queen's University in Belfast is of course a renowned educational establishment. Virginia used certain distinctive words that on investigation proved to be in use in Ireland at Bridey's time, such as 'ditched' for 'buried', a 'linen' to mean a handkerchief, and 'lough' for river or lake. It was pointed out by those convinced of the veracity of Virginia's recollections that a girl born and raised in the United States, as Virginia was, would be unlikely to have been acquainted with these terms. Investigative reporters concluded that there was some evidence for 'something', as yet unexplained. Credible hypnosis experts claim to have debunked this case,⁷ but Stevenson considered it worthy of closer scrutiny.⁸ The Bridey Murphy phenomenon promoted PLR hype in the United States, and several famous post-Bridey Murphy cases have been reported.

A Modern Case

One of the recent self published cases is interesting.⁹ Carroll Beckwith was a minor portrait painter who had lived and worked in New York city in the late 19th and early 20th century. He had never done anything outstanding that would make him immortal as an artist. Captain Robert L. Snow is a commander of the homicide branch at the Indianapolis Police department. He discovered while under hypnosis that he was Carroll Beckwith in a previous life. Snow wanted to disprove the images he had experienced while under hypnosis as a form of cryptomnesia. Snow was already disenchanted with hypnotherapeutic procedures in child sex abuse cases. The regression took place in 1992 and Snow was able to find 28 details to his regression that could be proven or disproven.

Instead of disproving the veracity of his images, Snow proved that most every recollection he had while hypnotised actually took place nearly 100 years earlier. While holidaying in New Orleans, he entered an art gallery in an obscure side street where he encountered the painting of his memory: the hunchbacked woman. He learnt that Beckwith's personal diaries and an unpublished autobiography existed in a local library in New York. For a detective this was a definitive piece of evidence to close or prove the case. From Beckwith's diaries, he found that 26 points of 28 matched with the life of Carroll Beckwith. His recollections included that Beckwith used a walking stick even though he was not disabled, visited France, drunk wine (whisky was the popular drink in US), disliked painting portraits, was upset over bad picture hangings and lighting in art shows, painted the portrait of a hunchbacked woman, his mother died of blood clot, his wife Berth was childless, and that Berth used to play piano or sing for friends. Snow got the name of the previous personality's wife incorrect but his frank admittance of it adds to his credibility. Snow claims that he has more proof of his previous life existence than most murder cases and is convinced that he carries some of the memories of Carroll Beckwith. Parapsychologists could offer alternative explanations even for such apparently true memories. A sceptic of PLR could argue that his experiences are the outcome of 'walk-in phenomenon' or spirit attachment. Captain Snow simply concludes : 'I cannot accept that with the

billions of people who have inhabited the Earth, my case is unique, that mine would be the only case since John the Baptist - who some say that Jesus describes in the Gospel of Matthew as being Elijah reborn'.

PLR may be both an experimental technique and a form of therapy but it has scientific credibility only if reincarnation itself is proven scientifically to exist. The existence of reincarnation is not yet a scientific truth. Recent studies indicate that reincarnation merits acknowledgement as a scientific hypothesis because it can be falsified or confirmed through scientific investigation. For this reason Stevenson's international field studies are immensely important. Any idea that has clinical usefulness has clinical validity, but the clinical validity of PLR has yet to be convincingly demonstrated.

PLR – an experimental tool

Hypnotherapeutic PLR has experimental usefulness rather than being of therapeutic benefit. Yet the scientific validity of this form of investigation into previous lives has been under debate for a long time.

The following opinions have been promulgated about PLR. All need evaluation:

1. The ego-strengthening power of hypnosis may be inappropriately applied in PLR.
2. Hypnosis may increase the confidence with which a memory is held, while reducing the veracity of the memory.
3. Information obtained through PLR may be correlated to that emanating from a historical novel that constitutes a synthesis of fact and fiction: a few items of memory derived from a previous life arguably become dislodged and reattached to fantasies – rather as iron fillings become attached to a magnetic field.
4. In false memories of previous lives the imagination may run wild. We have our limitations when it comes to exaggerating truth, but we have apparently inexhaustible powers of imagination as far as stretching a lie is concerned. Dingwall recognized that individuals can fabricate narratives of imagined experiences in greater detail than may be accounted for by the application of conscious knowledge.¹⁰

Personification is an inherent weakness of PLR. In hypnosis the subject surrenders the direction of their thoughts to the hypnotherapist and their resistance to the therapist's instructions is diminished. The subject is told to remember something. When they have no accurate information to offer, they may proffer incorrect statements to please the therapist, without any awareness that they are mixing truth and falsehood (see Box 1). Hypnosis can release the dramatizing powers of the mind. When it involves PLR, it may make the previous personality inappropriately grandiose. It is well known that subjects have a tendency to assign to themselves a role of historical

importance in previous lives, or to identify themselves by connection with well-known people and places.

Box 1: Observations about PLR

- a. Information obtained through PLR is unreliable, and analogous to dream content.
- b. What is revealed may have affinities with the content of a historical novel: a combination of a great deal of fiction with a minimal amount of fact.
- c. The technique has significance for parapsychological research: responsive xenoglossy – the acquisition of language other than by natural means – is valuable in PLR.
- d. Suggested alternative explanations of PLR – such as personification, telepathy and spiritistic manipulation – still await refutation.

Hypnotherapists readily recognize that the mind may generate spectacular results at certain times, with PLR effectively filling in the blanks with fantasies. Cues to what the hypnotherapist is expecting to hear may be communicated unintentionally before or during the hypnotic process, either by the hypnotherapist or by someone else who is in attendance. Significantly the nature of these cues may be entirely obfuscated for the therapist and the subject. The attribution of apparent memories to a postulated previous existence is likely to be intensified if the therapist has particularly strong personal views about reincarnation. The ease with which the hypnotherapist can influence the features of a supposed previous personality, confirming their own suggestions, has been experimentally demonstrated.¹¹

According to Stevenson, actual life memories may need a vehicle in order to emerge into the conscious mind, and the mind with its enormous range of powers creates a fictitious previous life to enable the delivery of real memories. Such a procedure may to some extent be correlated with a dream process. A few items of memory from a real previous life may become separated in some way and attracted to a fictitious previous life that is created by the mind. The outcome is the narration of an apparently coherent previous life. As previously mentioned, Stevenson compares such a process to the writing of a historical novel incorporating both fiction and fact.⁸

After observing the exaggerated claims made on behalf of hypnotherapy, Stevenson has concluded that hypnotic regression to presumed previous lives rarely evokes any evidence of real memories. Most of the 'previous personalities' brought out during hypnosis are fantasies, the sources of which can occasionally be identified. PLR has its prime usefulness in recovering more detailed memories of a factual kind in cases of spontaneous recall.⁸ Apparently remembering a previous life in which the subject was an eminent

person leads to the inflation of ego and a kind of elitism. The behaviour of subjects under hypnotic regression has some similarity to the behaviour of patients with secondary personalities.

Therapeutic claims

Patients with neurotic conditions such as phobias gain immediate relief from tension when they are enabled to recall a traumatic event that is implicated in its causation. When the patient is assisted in bringing such a forgotten event into their consciousness, they are able to associate it with other, later experiences. This process effectively neutralizes the disabling influence of the original trauma. Strong emotions are released during the breaking down of such dissociation, leading to the isolation of different memories within the mind. These emotions are a by-product of the recovery of forgotten memory.

It is postulated that the meeting of a child with the family of a personality that they themselves once had may contribute to the breaking down of disassociation in spontaneous cases of reincarnation. The meeting then leads to the integration of memories of the previous life with the child's current personality. Similarly, hypnotic life regression may act as a catalyst in the process of integration.¹²

Advocates of this procedure are able to identify patients who have improved after experiencing hypnotic therapy.¹³ Bringing the partial or full memory of a previous life into a current situation in isolation from other interventions may not lead to any amelioration, even though there is evidence that remembering traumatic events from a supposed past life has some beneficial effects. As pointed out earlier, memories that are repeated have also a concomitant risk, that of multiplication in the unconscious level – this may be understood by allusion to a metaphorical network of psychic computers. In that eventuality, preoccupation with previous life memories has a counter-therapeutic effect. Memories may be tyrannical, even overwhelming.

Most previous life memories are focused on unhappy events.¹ Murders and other crimes dominate memories to such an extent that the mind of the subject may be likened to a burial ground. The immature brains of children who remember previous lives often cannot synthesize such experiences. Conversely, adult subjects who experience PLR are sufficiently robust psychologically to accommodate them as a learning experience, so that they are enabled to use their memories to adjust their current behaviour. For the more mature subjects the experience is analogous to re-sitting an examination after learning from the mistakes of a previous test.

The beneficial psychological effects of PLR are perhaps connected to its enhancing effects on transcendental beliefs.¹⁴ PLR, by offering an insight into past existence, may assist people in reverting to a form of consciousness of enhanced awareness, one in which there is a deeper commitment to live out life's purpose (Box 2). Disciples of this procedure advocate that it is an

effective means for personality modification and self-development.^{15,16} PLR may transmogrify hypnosis into a guided self-exploratory pilgrimage, but in a self-exploratory examination PLR should be regarded as positioned on the lowest step of the ladder of spiritual illumination. The idea of reincarnation invokes a sense of mysticism with a religious context and has a colourful semantic halo. I want to suggest that restraint is a desideratum when making an appeal to personal spiritual insight in psychiatry.

Box 2: PLR therapy

- a. The therapeutic value of PLR is no different from that of other forms of psychotherapy.
- b. The therapeutic effect may be due to its enhancing effect on transcendental beliefs.
- c. PLR can be beneficial for personal development.
- d. PLR is useful in identifying the source of information in instances of cryptomnesia.
- e. Hypnotically regressed subjects have been known to remain in an altered state of personality for a long time, without responding to dehypnotizing suggestions.

Therapeutic benefits alone do not validate the particular technique that a therapist employs. PLR should be used only when it is unavoidable and it should be conducted only with informed consent. Again to use an analogy, every case of headache does not need to be investigated with a brain scan. The therapist ought to be discriminating when selecting patients. Unfortunately there are no set guidelines for referring patients to hypnotherapy, which is effectively outside the boundaries of designated areas of therapy. Patients should be encouraged to evaluate for themselves what benefit they would gain by remembering the traumatic events of an alleged previous existence.

Psychological well-being may be attributed to the healing of previous life traumas, or alternatively the imagined past life may be a catalyst that enables the alteration of perceptions and the improvement of self-image.¹⁷⁶ It is the writer's personal view that in the majority of cases of PLR with a successful outcome, the therapeutic effect may be owing to patients who are dissatisfied with their current circumstances gaining an artificial identity that motivates them to seek new goals. The new identity may be interwoven with existing memories – the procedure has some analogy to performing an organ transplant. Where the previous life memories are either fully or partially genuine, the therapeutic effect may be the result of the reintegration of the hidden identity with the functional identity.

Future research in PLR

Research in PLR should be aimed in two directions: towards proving the authenticity of the recollection under regressive hypnosis, and towards the evaluation of the therapeutic benefits of PLR. From the research viewpoint, hypnotic life regression experiments need to be repeated and extended, encompassing more young subjects – for instance, seven- or eight-year-old children. If children of this age have real previous life memories, the memories may be closer to their conscious mind than such memories are in adult subjects and therefore easier to elicit.

PLR has the advantage of tracing non-intentional information transfer among the living. In adult subjects, who have had longer life exposure involving a multitude of different sources of information, there is more risk that supposed previous life scenes are fictitious. There are some instances of PLR in which the client demonstrates emotions appropriate to the supposed previous life memories that they are attempting to recapture. Cases of mood-congruent recounting of past life events are particularly worthy of further scientific evaluation, as are instances of responsive xenoglossy, in which an individual is able to hold a two-way conversation in a foreign language that they do not consciously speak.¹⁸

Where the source of a past life remains obscure, it could perhaps be argued that some of the ingredients may be historical facts gathered by the subject from reading, or from the radio or TV. Some of them may even be obtained paranormally, by extra-sensory perception. In such cases the subject does not remember the source of information, but sometimes the source can be elicited in other sessions in which hypnosis is designed to search for the sources of the information making up the 'previous personality'.¹⁹

Also warranted are studies to ascertain whether the presence of past life imagery can contribute to the abatement of psychological problems such as phobias, addictions and other compulsive behaviours,¹⁴ given that children in Stevenson's study group claimed carry-over of such memories and behaviours from previous lives. PLR investigators claim that patients benefit more when this procedure is directed towards tackling individual symptoms rather than towards attempting to achieve random psychological well-being. It is the depth of trance that is significant for better recall in past life regressive hypnosis rather than a prior belief in reincarnation, and yet the subject ventilates less when in deep trance, an observation that is yet to be fully researched.²⁰ Future PLR investigators may pay attention to these inadequately researched areas.

Conclusion

Parapsychology is notoriously subject to the allegation that it attempts to prove the existence of things that do not exist. For this reason it perhaps warrants an intellectual health warning. Given the multifarious nature of times

and places that relate to past existence, why a PLR subject recalls a particular time and place in connection with a previous life drama is a matter for investigation. It is arguable that previous life memories constitute an indication of a past life existence and that not all represent actual memories. It is possible that in many claimed occurrences of PLR, the past life memories may be metaphysical stories promulgated by the unconscious as a form of self-education and personal development. Recounting past life events and experiencing past lives are different; the former may be a psychic fraud.

PLR techniques, with all their pitfalls, may be useful in gaining a deeper understanding of mind, an entity that is still shrouded in mystery. Experimental testing of the possible therapeutic benefits of PLR is overdue. The potential psychological value of PLR is evident, and further serious attention to this activity is merited, particularly in the light of its potential for ameliorating hurt and distress in those who experience it.

PLR requires sophisticated therapeutic procedures. It is unsafe in the hands of marginally trained therapists. These are comparable with the surgeons who pre-date modern knowledge of anatomy and physiology, who functioned in the absence of knowledge of the human form and of antiseptic procedures. Recently, the notion that health professionals can help adults recover totally forgotten memories of childhood, in particular of sexual abuse, has been strongly refuted by a working party of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.²¹ PLR therapy is undoubtedly running the risk of misuse and misinterpretation. This form of hypnotherapy needs close scrutiny and the application of a strict code of practice. Stage hypnotic life regression has endemic fallacies, and the procedure itself needs to be evaluated more rigorously and protected from charlatanism.

PLR presupposes a belief in some form of reincarnation. Stevenson believed that the physical marks offer strong evidence. Today's PLR practitioners tend to found their therapy on Stevenson's scientific studies. Many observers of Stevenson's research works considered him to be the Galileo of modern times. As with Galileo, science's ultimate verdict on his work may come long after the end of his life. Stevenson's books on reincarnation have become somewhat analogous to a Hindu mythological yagam horse: they are set free by a king and allowed to wander unbridled in other kingdoms, but the lands into which they have ventured belong to the king until another monarch restrains them. So far nobody has been able to debunk Stevenson's scientific works. Irrefutably, if reincarnation were to become generally accepted in the future it would be untenable to regard PLR as a pseudo-therapy. Reincarnation is not yet a scientific truth, yet PLR may be considered a useful form of psychotherapy in the appropriate culture when applied correctly, but damaging when abused and misapplied.

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