

# Chapter 11

## Cases of the Reincarnation Type and the Mind–Brain Relationship

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**Abstract** Children who claim to have memories of a previous life are sometimes found, particularly in countries with widespread belief in reincarnation. Over 2500 such cases have been investigated in many countries, including some in the USA and Europe. Analysis of the contents of these alleged memories reveals interesting features, such as frequent images/memories of the mode of death which in most cases is due to accidents or other violent means. Phobias related to the mode of death are common and birthmarks and deformities are sometimes found that the child relates to the way he or she died. Children start to speak about these images/memories almost as soon they can speak, usually around two and half to three years. Psychological studies reveal interesting differences between them and their peers. Attempts to verify these memories have had some degree of success as a deceased person has in some instances been found whose life events correspond to the child's statements. In other instances verification has failed. Four cases are presented from Lebanon and Sri Lanka. If these alleged memories are genuine they have great implications for the mind-brain relationship.

### 11.1 Introduction

Children who claim to remember episodes from a past life have been found in many countries. The genuineness of their alleged memories has been a matter of considerable discussion as they are potentially highly relevant for the question of the mind–brain relationship. If these are real memories from a past life they indicate that memory is not only stored in the brain but also that mind can exist without a brain and still retain some of its memories. These possibilities are radically contrary to what is presently known about memory and its dependence on brain functioning,

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and hence meet with extreme skepticism by the scientific community. This chapter will describe the main characteristics of these cases, how they are investigated, and four cases will be presented to reveal to the reader their strengths and weaknesses. For a general introduction to past-life memories see Haraldsson (2001), Stevenson (2001), and Tucker (2005).

Cases of children claiming past-life memories are sometimes discovered by the media and lead to headlines, particularly in countries where belief in reincarnation is widespread, but most of them remain unknown to the public. Often the parents of the child make an effort to keep the case within the family and only some relative or researcher is allowed to examine the case. Half a century ago, Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, United States, conducted the first systematic study of *cases of the reincarnation type* as termed them (Stevenson 1960, 1997a, b, 2001). Since then over 2,500 cases have been recorded and investigated worldwide, most of them by Stevenson. Files on the cases are kept at the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia.

At the end of the 1980s, Stevenson asked the author if he would be willing to make an independent study of such cases. Would a study of new cases by an independent researcher reveal findings comparable to those of Stevenson? Since that time the author has investigated over 60 cases in Sri Lanka (Haraldsson 1991, 2000a, b; Haraldsson and Samararatne 1999), 30 in Lebanon (Haraldsson and Abu-Izzedin 2002, 2004) and a handful in other countries, among them one in Iceland. He has conducted three psychological studies comparing these children with peers with no claims of past-life memories (Haraldsson 1997, 2003; Haraldsson et al. 2000).

Cases of the reincarnation type are rare. In Sri Lanka, the author was able to find about five per year in a population of 18 millions. Most of them were among Buddhist families and a few in Christian (6) and Muslim families (3). In Lebanon, the cases are somewhat easier to find but practically only within the Druze community where belief in reincarnation is widespread. However, even there the author learned of two cases in the Christian community, one of them investigated by Stevenson in the 1970s.

Regarding the content of these alleged memories (for brevity sake from now on referred to as memories only), most children speak of how they died, which is in most cases violently through accidents, murder, or acts of war. They speak of events that lead to their death, of people they knew, and where they had lived. They speak of recent events occurring in or near the area where they lived. There is also a behavioral aspect as many suffer from phobias, which they associate with the mode of death they described.

In most cases, children start to speak of a past life around the age of two and half to 3, or almost as soon as they can speak. The numbers of statements they make varies considerably and are on the average around 20. These children commonly request that their parents find their previous home, and say that their present mother is not their real mother. In most instances, the children stop to talk about their past life around the time they go to school. Occasionally, they reveal knowledge or skills that they were not known to have learnt, and some have birthmarks or deformities that they relate to the mode of death in the previous life. Psychological studies show characteristics that reveal phobias related to their memories, and symptoms of a

posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in these children as a group, but not necessarily in each one of them (Haraldsson 2003). The most likely explanation for the PTSD symptoms is the memories of a violent death that up to 75% of these children report in early childhood. Any explanatory theory about the nature of these cases has to accommodate not only the memory aspect but also the birthmarks, the psychological characteristics, and the PTSD.

## 11.2 Methods of Investigation

The first step is to interview the child, his/her parents, siblings, and other persons who may have observed the child talking about the previous life. This is to ascertain what statements the child has made and if s/he has done that consistently on several occasions. The second step is to rule out that the child is talking about events that s/he has learned about from his/her environment. Only if that is not the case and there is reasonable consensus about the statements made by the child, will the case be considered worthy of further investigation. It is important to interview the principal witnesses again after some time to test the reliability of their testimony.

The next question is if a deceased person can be traced whose life events correspond to the statements made by the child. Often a person has been found who the child is believed to be referring to. Such a correspondence has to be checked to see if it does in fact exist. The family of that person has to be interviewed and relevant documents obtained, such as birth and death certificates, postmortem reports, etc. as the case may be. There follows a detailed review of four cases that were investigated by the author.

### 11.2.1 *The Case of Purnima Ekanayaka*

Later visit to the temple, she claimed that she had lived on the other side of the Kelaniya Purnima Ekanayaka was 9 years old when we met her in 1996. She was still speaking of her previous life and made a fairly large number of statements about it. She had been talking about her previous life since she was 3 years old. Her case had been *solved*, that is, a deceased person had been identified and accepted as her previous personality. Her case had the weakness that it had been published in the newspapers, so it was difficult to know for sure what Purnima's original statements were. In Table 11.1 are listed statements which, according her and her parents, she made before she met the family that came to be accepted as her previous family.

One of Purnima's first statements was that she had died in a traffic accident and "came here," namely was reborn in her present family. "My family was making incense," and she stated. The brands were "Ambika" and "Gita Pichcha." Their incense factory was near a brick factory and near a pond. Furthermore, she stated that first only the family worked in the incense business, and then some people were employed. She had two vans, and a car, was the best manufacturer of the incense sticks, was married and had a sister-in-law. She spoke of herself as a man in her previous life and he/she had two wives. She said that the previous father had not

**Table 11.1** Statements made by Purnima (according to her parents) before first contact with her alleged previous family

I died in a traffic accident and came here	+
My family was making incense and had no other job	+
We were making Ambiga incense	+
We were making Geta Pichcha incense	+
The incense factory is near a brick factory and near a pond	+
First only our family worked and then two people were employed	?
We had two vans	
We had a car	
I was the best manufacturer of incense sticks	?
In earlier birth I was married to a sister-in-law, Kusumi	+
The owner of the incense factory (I) had two wives	+
My previous father was bad (present father is good)	?
Previous father was not a teacher as present father	+
I had two younger brothers (who were better than present brothers)	+
My mother's name was Simona	+
Simona was very fair	-
I attended Rahula School	+
Rahula School had a two storied building (not like in Bakamuna)	-
My father said, you need not go to school, you can make money making incense	
I studied only up to fifth grade	+

+, Verified (14); -, incorrect (3); ?, indeterminate (3)

been as good as the present one, and was not a teacher like he is (he is a principal of a secondary school). One evening when the family saw a documentary on the famous Kelaniya temple on television, she said that she recognized the temple. During a River which flows alongside the temple.

In January 1993, a graduate of Kelaniya University, W.G. Sumanasiri, was appointed a teacher in Bakamuna, but spent the weekends with his wife in Kelaniya which is 145 miles away. Sumanasiri and Purnima's father agreed that he would make inquiries across the Kelaniya River. The principal gave him the following items to check:

- She had lived on the other side of the river from Kelaniya temple.
- She had been making Ambika and Gita Pichcha incense sticks.
- She was selling incense sticks on a bicycle.
- She had a fatal accident with a big vehicle.

Sumanasiri and his brother-in-law inquired about incense makers in the area, and were told of L.A. Wijesiri who named his brands Ambika and Gita Pichcha. His brother-in-law and associate, Jinadasa Perera, had died in an accident with a bus as he was bringing incense to the market on a bicycle in September 1985. This was about 2 years prior to Purnima's birth. Wijesiri's and Jinadasa's home and factory had been 5–10 min walking distance from the Kelaniya River, and 2.4 miles away from the temple. Wijesiri's wife is the sister of Jinadasa who died in the accident. Earlier Wijesiri and Jinadasa had run this business together.

Of the 20 statements listed in Table 11.1, there are 14 that correctly fit the life of Jinadasa. Among them the circumstances and mode of death, occupation, and names of

the brands of incense that they and only they produced, and description of the vicinity of their factory. Three statements were incorrect. The school that Jinadasa attended did not have two stories until after Jinadasa had left school. Also, it cannot be correct that Jinadasa's father had said that Jinadasa should not continue to go to school in order to make incense because Jinadasa did not start to make incense until his sister married Wijesiri and he got involved with the family around the age of 20. Three statements are indeterminate, and of little relevance. Witnesses claim that when Purnima visited the family of Wijesiri for the first time she recognized two old friends.

Purnima had from her birth a prominent birthmark, a cluster of hypopigmented spots over the ribs on the left side of her chest. Jinadasa had died in a traffic accident and the wheel of the bus had run over him and broke many of his ribs. The postmortem report for Jinadasa revealed that many of his ribs had broken on the left side of his chest. They penetrated the lungs and in this is the area he is likely to have suffered most. The spleen and the liver were ruptured. Purnima's birthmarks are on the left side of her chest and fit the location of the principal injuries on the body of Jinadasa. The birthmarks are an additional characteristic that falls in place with the life of Jinadasa. Cases of birthmarks that fit the wounds of the alleged previous person are particularly interesting as they are already formed when the child is born. The author has investigated another birthmark case in Sri Lanka, that of Chatura Karunaratne (Haraldsson 2000b). That case has the additional feature, like the case of Thusita Silva to be described below, that the statements by the boy were recorded and printed before a fitting previous person was found.

There is one rare characteristic of this case. Purnima spoke of her life between death in the accident and being born in Bakamuna. She claims to have observed what took place after she died, at the place of the accident and who was present at the funeral. Then she saw a light, went there, and was born in Bakamuna. Jinadasa Perera was born in 1949 and he died in April 1985. Purnima was born in August 1987 and the case is solved in 1993.

Purnima spoke quite vividly and in detail about her memories. Like many children who speak about a previous life, psychological tests administered to her, revealed that she had excellent memory, and scored high on a brief test of intelligence. She is on the top of a class of 23 pupils, a bright and gifted girl. For further details see the full report on the case (Haraldsson 2000a, b).

This case has weaknesses that are common among cases of this kind. We did not interview Purnima about her memories until after she had met the Wijisiri family. The question remains if some of her memories did not fit the life of Jinadasa and were consequently suppressed, forgotten, or distorted to better fit the life of Jinadasa. However, the fact remains that she spoke of being an incense maker, having died in an accident with a "big" vehicle and having lived across the Kelaniya River near the temple. There is also a remarkable fit between the mortal wounds of Jinadasa and the location of Purnima's extensive birthmarks. The two families were complete strangers and lived far apart. Of some interest fact that both families became convinced that Purnima was Jinadasa reborn, because they witnessed the verification of her memories and some recognition of persons Jinadasa had known.

The following case is free of the principal weaknesses of these cases that were described above.

### 11.2.2 *The Case of Thusita Silva*

This case concerns a girl we shall call Thusitha Silva (pseudonym). It is particularly interesting because the girl's statements were recorded by us before any person was found whose life events corresponded to the events that the girl had been talking about. When we met her in 1991 she was 8 years old and lived in poor conditions near the town of Panadura, which is south of Colombo in Sri Lanka. When Thusita had been talking about her previous life for a while her much older only brother went to Akuressa (population about 20,000) to check on her story, failed to verify it, and scolded the girl. No further attempts were made to solve the case. A few years had passed when we learned about the case and interviewed the girl, her mother, and grandmother. By this time she had forgotten some of her earlier memories.

According to her mother and grandmother, she had at the age of two and half claimed; "I am from Akuressa, my father's name is Jeedin Nanayakkara," furthermore that she had lived near a river, and when crossing a narrow footbridge she fell into the river and drowned, pregnant at the time. She had a husband and the house she had lived in was larger than the present house. A list of her statements is in Table 11.2.

During a visit to Akuressa we found a Nanayakkara family that lived near a hanging bridge for pedestrians. We met the family who told us that their daughter-in-law had been crossing the bridge in 1973 when she fell off the bridge and drowned. Her husband was with her and jumped into the river to save her but almost drowned himself. There was a file on the case in the coroner's office in Akuressa. Chandra Nanayakkara (born Abeygunasekera) had died in December 1973, by choking after swallowing water when the deceased fell into the River Nilwala from the suspension bridge. "She was at the age of 27, and 7 months pregnant. She had been with her husband when the accident occurred."

Seventeen of Thusitha's 28 statements fitted the life of Chandra Nanayakkara; seven were incorrect and four indeterminate. All of Thusita's statements relating to the mode of death fitted, namely, the hanging bridge, falling into the river, that she was pregnant, and that her husband was with her. The name of her father was not Jeedin Nanayakkara but her father-in-law was Edwin Nanayakkara. Women in Sri Lanka often refer to their father-in-law as father. The incorrect statements were about the color of her bicycle, that she had worked in a hospital (her best friend did) and that her husband was a postman (his brother was) but he was a bus driver. Other statements were too general to be of much value (Mills et al. 1994).

Thusita's family claimed to have no connection of any kind with Akuressa and none of them had been there when Thusita spoke most about her previous life. Akuressa is about 50 km away from Thusita's birthplace in Elpitiya from where she moved to Panadura where we met her.

Cases in which the child's statements were recorded before any previous person was identified are of great importance since we can then be sure that the child's statements are uncontaminated. Further recent cases of this kind are the cases of Chatura Karunaratne (Haraldsson 2000b), Dilukshi Nissanka (Haraldsson 1991),

**Table 11.2** Thusita Silva’s statements about her previous life

I lived in Akuressa	+
My father’s name was Jeedin	–
(my father’s name was) Nanayakkara	+
River or stream a little distance away	+
The hanging bridge (wel palama) broke down	+
I fell into the river	+
I drowned	+
I was pregnant when drowned	+
I had a husband	+
Our house was larger than present house	+
Walls were colored	+
I had a sister’s daughter	–
My former father was called appa (present father dada)	?
I had a bicycle	+
Bicycle was yellow	–
I went to work by bicycle	–
I rode the bicycle alone	+
I worked in a hospital	–
I wore a white uniform in hospital with cap and shoes	–
Hospital was some distance from home	+
Mother wore frocks	?
Mother had a sewing machine	+
I had two striped frocks	?
Items reported to T.J. but not E.H.	–
Big gate at former house	+
My husband jumped into the river to save me	+
My husband was a postman	–
We had a car	+
I had a brassiere	?
17 correct statements (+); 7 incorrect statements (–); 4 indeterminate (?)	
The statements that fit the life of Chandra Nanayakkara are marked with “+” those that do not fit with “–” and indeterminate statements with “?”	

and cases investigated by Keil and Tucker (2005), Stevenson and Schouten (1998), and Stevenson and Samararatne (1988).

### 11.2.3 *The Case of Prethiba Gunawardana*

Prethiba Gunawardana was born in 1985 and was 4 years old when we met him and his mother in 1989 at their home in one of the suburbs of Colombo. My interpreter had learned about this case from a friend. It was only after we convinced Prethiba’s mother that we would not publicize the case in Sri Lanka that she was willing to talk to us.

Prethiba had made his first statements about a previous life after he suffered high fever for a week when he was a little over 2 years old. After that he frequently spoke

about his memories. He spoke to us without shyness about his memories that he insists are from a previous life. Pretiba is strongly built and healthy looking.

Pretiba stated that he had lived in Kandy (using the Sinhalese name, Maha Nuwara), the main city of central Sri Lanka. He gave his former name as Santha Megahathenne, and said that he had lived at number 28 Pilagoda Road. His car had caught fire, he had been burnt on his right leg, hand, and mouth, had been taken to a hospital and then he “came here” (died). His mother told us that he mentioned especially often two names: an older brother Samantha and an older sister Seetha. His father later told us that Pretiba often said he wanted to see them. According to his mother, he talked more often about names than events. His 42 statements are listed in Table 11.3. Pretiba appears to have no unusual behavioral traits that seem related to his statements. When we asked the boy if he would like to go to Kandy, he was quick to say yes. He said he could find his house, but when we asked him if he knew its

Whereabouts he replied with no. His father had not been willing to search for the previous personality, and the mother shared the common fear of mothers of such children that she might lose her child to the previous family if they were found. The boy had also told his parents that he wanted to go to Kandy to collect his things.

In Kandy, we made inquiries about Pilagoda Road and names resembling it. Post office authorities told us that there was no such road in Kandy city nor any village or area by that name in the Kandy district. We also made inquiries about the name Megahathenne, which Pretiba gave as his former family name. Some Sri Lankans use the name of the village they come from as a family name. A village by the name of Megahathenne exists near Galagedara some 15 miles away from Kandy. Inquiries there yielded no information about any person having the characteristics described by Pretiba, and no Pilagoda Road was found in that village, nor was the name Megahathenne found in the 1975 telephone directory for Kandy. The parents accepted our proposal to take the boy and them to Kandy.

The 3-h drive up the scenic road leads through many villages and towns. As we were approaching the bridge over the Mahaveli river at the other side of which is Kandy city, and were driving through a busy street, the boy became quite animated. He spontaneously said, “There is Maha Nuwara,” (Sinhalese name for Kandy) and as we crossed the bridge (one of a few on the way) over the Mahaveli river, he correctly remarked, “This is Mahaveli Ganga” (Ganga=river). Neither we nor his parents had mentioned this name nor given any indication that we were about to enter Kandy city. Apart from these two statements, there was no response or comment from Pretiba to indicate any recognition or knowledge of the area. We drove for a while around Kandy but Pretiba could not tell us how to find his old home and expressed no wish to see a particular spot, although he definitely enjoyed the journey.

Enquiries in Kandy and Megahathenne failed to trace a person that fitted Pretiba’s statements. It was impossible for us to go through the thousands of admissions every year to the Kandy hospital in the hope of finding the name of Santha Megahathenne. Without revealing the boy’s name or address the main features of the case were publicized with the parent’s permission in an interview with the author on December 11, 1990, in the widely circulated Sinhalese *Dinamina* and its English edition *Daily News*.

**Table 11.3** Statements made by Pretiba Gunawardana about his previous life

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Often mentions Samantha aya (elder brother)
Often mentions Seetha akka (elder sister)
Elder sister was married
Mentions Loku aya and Loku akka (big/elder)
Mentioned Dhamman Sadhu, a relative of father's brother
They had a car and a bus
His car had been burned (with much smoke) with him in it
Right hand, leg, and mouth had been burned
Admitted to Nuwara hospital, plaster placed on his body
After that he came to this place (died and was born here)
He had been to India and to a Hindu temple (kovil)
He had a passport
Mentioned name of Natapati (Nathapathi), visited Natapati Devalaya (kovil) while in India
Brought from India some items for his mother (saris and buttons)
He lived at number 28 Pilagoda Road in Nuwara (Kandy)
He lived upstairs in a house
His father was old
His father had a car
His father wore eyeglasses
Father had gone abroad and returned
Mentions a fight between snake and katussa
He had a girlfriend but did not like to marry that girl
They had a house with land around it
He had an uncle
They had paddyfields
Balansena worked in the paddyfields
There was a temple near the house
Artworks of elephants at the temple
He went to Sunday temple school
They had a refrigerator
They had a pettagama (large wooden box)
He had a good wristwatch
Mentions punchi amma (mother's younger sister)
Punchi amma's husband had a lorry and was a businessman
His name was Santha Megahathenne
He had a friend called Asanga
Bandara also lived there
He wore trousers
He was attending school
They had a bank account
His (former) brother looked like the brother of his (present) mother
Attanayake lived close to our house and had a lorry

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No response came from readers. Despite these efforts to solve the case no person was found corresponding to Pretiba's statements. This case remains unsolved.

The last case to be described here is from Lebanon (Haraldsson and Abu-Izzedin 2004). It has some of the common weaknesses of these case but also contains some

**Table 11.4** Statements made by Wael Kiwan according to his parents

My name was Rabih	+
I was big (not small)	+
I have parents. They are not here. They are in Beirut	+
My house is in Beirut near the sea	+
My house is near the house of Allah Wa Akbar (mosque)	+
There is a house with a red roof	+
It was sunset and I saw people coming and they shot me	-
A group of people hit me and kicked me until I did not feel anything	+
I was often on a boat out at sea	+
I used to stand and steer the boat with a wheel	?
I would walk from my house to the sea	+
My house is in Jal al Bahr	+
I had two homes, one in Beirut and one to which I go with an airplane	+
We had a balcony	+
I used to jump from the balcony to the street	+
I used to throw an "iron" to stop the boat (only reported by his aunt)	?
My (previous) mother is prettier than you	?
Twelve verified statements, two incorrect and three indeterminate	
The statements that fit the life of Rabih are marked with "+" those that do not with "-" and indeterminate statements with "?"	

highly specific statements made by the subject that made it possible to identify a deceased person whose life events closely resembled those that the child had described.

### 11.2.4 *The Case of Wael Kiwan*

Wael Kiwan lived in a village 70 km east of Beirut. He looked a healthy and mature boy when we met. His parents reported that at a young age he started to say that his name was Rabih, that he had been a grown-up person, had other parents in Beirut and wanted to find them. There were further statements: "There was a house with a red brick roof," and he lived in the Jal al Bahr section of Beirut (that is by the sea) and near a house of Allah Wa Akbar [i. e., a mosque], spoke much about the sea and a boat. He would draw a wheel of a boat on paper and say: "I used to stand," and he did a circular movement of his hands to show how he moved the steering wheel. He said that they had a balcony, from which he used to jump to the street. He made the highly specific statement that he had two homes, one in Beirut, and another one to which he had to travel by airplane.

He did what many children who speak of a previous life do; he said to his mother: "My [previous] mother is prettier than you." He often repeated the story about his death; it was sunset; he saw people coming towards him, and they shot him. When his father went on business to Beirut Wael would ask him to find his home. Wael would also tell him: "If you find it, don't tell them that Rabih has died, because they will cry." His statements are listed in Table 11.4. Listed in Table 11.4 are the statements

that he, according to his parents, made before they started to seriously look for a deceased person that fitted his account.

Once his father, wife, and children sat down with Wael and listed many family names in the hope that he might recognize one of them. When they mentioned the name Assaf he said that was his previous family name. Assaf is carried by Druze, Christians, and Muslims alike and is a rather common name.

In vain Wael often asked his father to find his previous home when he went to Beirut on business. The boy would get upset when he returned and had not tried. Finally, he told a Druze friend in Beirut, Sami Zhairi, what Wael was saying and he promised to ask around. He found out that there had been a Rabih Assaf living close to the sea in the Jal-al-Bahr district whose life seemed to fit Wael's statements.

Wael was taken by his father to Beirut. Accompanied by Sami Zhairi they went to the house in the Jal al Bahr section. Wael ran into the house ahead of the group, into the apartment on the ground floor, where he saw a picture on the wall and said, "This is my picture." It was a picture of Rabih Assaf. In the apartment was Raja Assaf, the brother of the deceased Rabih (their mother, Munira, was not at home). Raja brought out a photo album and asked Wael to identify people. According to Wael's father, he recognized Rabin's father, sister, and a paternal aunt. When they left the house and were driving back home Wael told his father that now he was relaxed that he had found his previous home. Occasional visits followed and the families kept in contact over the years. After the meeting with the Assaf family, Wael spoke less about his former life.

Munira Assaf was at home when Wael came the second time. He seemed happy to be there but did not recognize Rabin's mother, his twin sister, or brother. Munira did not recall that he recognized any photographs, only that he said: "Yes, yes." She took this to mean that he might know the people in the photographs.

When Wael first visited the home of the Assaf family, he went to the backdoor and asked about the house with a red roof. This more than anything else made the family believe Wael was Rabih reborn; Rabih had grown up seeing this house from the kitchen and backyard of the apartment but it had been torn down when Wael visited them.

Munira Assaf's apartment is on the ground floor and has a balcony from which it is easy for a boy to jump to the street. She verified that Rabih had often done that. Wael had repeatedly mentioned a boat. Some 30 m down and near the end of the short street a small harbor is now crammed between houses and a huge high-rise apartment building. Munira's husband and sons had no boat but friends, relatives and neighbors did, and Rabih used to go to sea with them. Most of the boats were rowing boats, and a few had motors and had a tiller. These small boats did not have steering wheels. However, Rabih might have gotten a ride on a boat with a steering wheel. An old mosque is approximately 100 m away from Rabin's house on the same street as the harbor, and is the only mosque in the Jal al Bahr area.

The statement that Rabih had two homes, one of which you had to go to with an airplane, fits the fact that Rabih also lived in the United States. Item 16, "I used to

throw an iron to stop the boat” was only reported to us by Weal’s aunt Fadia. By iron (“hadideh” in Arabic) Wael probably meant an anchor, a word unlikely to be known by someone living far from the sea.

Rabin’s mother expected to learn more from him about his life as Rabih but she did not. However, she was still convinced and accepted him, but also said: “Nothing will bring my son back.”

Weal’s mother told us that Wael had given two accounts of his death. The first was that “they” shot him in his head. The second version was that a group of people kicked him and hit him until he did not feel anything (hence his parents assumed that he had been killed that way).

Rabih died in South Pasadena, California in 1988. He had moved to the USA when he was 21 years old, and studied electrical engineering for 2 years. During the 3rd year, he wanted to return to Beirut, but was unable to do so because of the civil war in Lebanon, nor did he have enough money to either stay in California, or to return to Beirut. He was depressed, attempted suicide by swallowing pills, and was brought to a hospital and survived. Rabih moved to distant relatives. On January 9, 1988 his paternal cousin, Abboud Assaf, found him dead in his garage. He had hanged himself. This was verified in a telephone interview with him, nor was he aware of that a group of people kicked him and hit him until he did not feel anything. Also Rabin’s mother did not know of any such incident.

One of the merits of the case is that the two families lived far apart and were complete strangers. The principal weakness is that the subject’s statements were not recorded until after the two families had met. Twelve of the 17 statements Wael made correspond to events in the life of Rabih Assaf. Four items could neither be confirmed nor refuted. The statement that Rabih would stand in the boat holding a steering wheel, may have happened, but was certainly not the rule because the small boats on which he often went to sea would most likely not have had steering wheels.

One crucial item does not fit, namely the mode of death. This is the only major discrepancy between Weal’s statements and the life of Rabih. Rabih committed suicide, whereas Wael speaks of being shot. If we allow some speculation and fantasy, then the following statement by Wael may carry some significance, “If you find my family, do not tell them that Rabih has died. They will cry.” Could it possibly mean that he had some guilt about his mode of death or that he did not want it to be known? In view of the hanging the “announcing dream” of Wael’s mother is also interesting, as she dreamt before Wael’s birth a grown boy who was sweating, and breathing rapidly with difficulty. Could this be related to Rabih’s hanging?

What corresponds well is the name Rabih, the family name Assaf, that he lived close to the sea and went to sea on boat(s), that there was a mosque close to his home, that he would jump from his balcony to the street, had lived in two places, to one of which he had to travel by airplane, and the statement that he made when he first visited the Assaf family, namely that behind his home there had been a house with a red roof. Many of these statements are highly specific and unlikely to be due to chance.

### 11.3 Psychological Characteristics of Children with Past-Life Memories

Two studies in Sri Lanka (Haraldsson 1997; Haraldsson et al. 2000) and one in Lebanon (Haraldsson 2003) show that children claiming past-life memories differ psychologically from other children. Stevenson noticed early on that they frequently suffered from phobias that seemed related to their past-life memories. Psychological studies comparing them with peers of the same age and from the same social background verified his clinical observation in Sri Lanka as well as in Lebanon. Results from two items on the Child Behaviour Checklist can be seen in Table 11.5.

Findings from the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and the Child Dissociation Checklist (CDC) reveal symptoms that characterize PTSD patients with an identifiable trauma, such as phobias, fears, outbursts of anger, and nightmares. In both Sri Lanka and Lebanon, significant differences in the Problem score on the CBCL and an elevated CDC score indicate that children with past-life memories are often traumatized (see Table 11.6). Child abuse is one potential cause but there are no signs of abuse in their short life. Can the cause of the trauma be found in the images/

**Table 11.5** Phobias and fears in subjects and controls in two combined studies in Sri Lanka. Results of two items in the child behavior checklist

	Subjects ( $n=57$ )	Controls ( $n=57$ )
<i>Fear situations, places</i>		
Often	16	4
Sometimes	16	18
Never	21	33
<i>Too fearful or anxious</i>		
Often	12	2
Sometimes	14	8
Never	28	45

**Table 11.6** Psychological differences between subjects and controls in three studies in Sri Lanka and Lebanon

	Subjects	Controls	Z value
<i>Child Behaviour Checklist, Problem score</i>			
First Sri Lanka Study	41.33	26.77	3.73**
Second Sri Lanka Study	34.54	17.54	3.80**
Lebanon Study	45.10	27.70	3.73**
<i>Child Dissociation Checklist</i>			
Second Sri Lanka Study	6.59	1.69	3.80**
Lebanon Study	1.47	0.23	2.61*
Correlation between CBCL and CDC is 0.57 ( $p < 0.001$ )			
First Sri Lanka Study	Mean age, 9.39 years	12 boys	18 girls
Second Sri Lanka Study	Mean age, 7.83	14 boys	13 girls
Lebanon Study	Mean age, 10.62	19 boys	11 girls

memories of a past life that they report? That cause becomes more understandable when we consider that 77% of the Lebanon sample and 76% of the combined Sri Lanka samples speak of experiences of a sudden violent death. Further strengthening the PTSD argument is the finding that the Problem score for the CBCL is higher for children speaking of violent death (47.38,  $N=24$ ) than for those who do not (36.00,  $N=6$ ). The difference is significant ( $t=2.43$ ,  $p=0.03$ , two-tailed).

To recapitulate, a high percentage of children with past-life memories have images/memories of violent death, which preoccupies them for some period of time and is likely to cause a PTSD just as persons who are exposed to extremely life-threatening situations develop a PTSD.

What about other psychological characteristics? Tests and questionnaire data show that these children do not confabulate more than other children, are not highly suggestible, do not live in social isolation or in disturbed family relationships, and are apparently not attention-seeking (Haraldsson 1997, 2003). They daydream or get lost in their thoughts more often than other children, perhaps primarily because they are preoccupied with their last-life images.

## 11.4 Discussion

Any viable interpretation of cases of the reincarnation type has to be able to account for three findings: memories that have been verified as correct in the absence of a normal explanation, birthmarks that fit the wounds of an identified previous personality, and psychological characteristics such as phobias and PTSD. Cases differ greatly and different explanations may apply for different cases. Normal as well as transcendental/paranormal interpretations have been put forward to explain the most impressive cases. The normal explanations have ranged from criticism of the way the investigations have been conducted, namely that they are biased, not sufficiently objective, to failing to consider sufficiently how the cases are culturally molded. Published accounts by Stevenson and those associated with him reveal objective, detailed and thorough the investigations, for example the lengthy reports in Stevenson's four volumes on *Cases of the Reincarnation Type* (Stevenson 1975–1983). They are primarily reports of impressive solved cases whereas the great number of cases that have proved impossible to solve are meagerly dealt with or not all. Stevenson and associates have responded to such criticism (Cook et al. 1983a, b)

Some cases have remained unsolved because they lack verifiable details. Others have verifiable details but were proved wrong (falsified), or are not fitting the life of any potential previous personality that has been identified such as in the above case of Pretiba Gunawardane. The percentage of unsolved cases varies among countries, for example in Sri Lanka they comprise about two-thirds of the cases, which is unusually high, but still below the 80% of cases in the United States.

Cases of the reincarnation type are primarily found in cultures with a overwhelming belief in reincarnation, such as Burma, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, and Brazil, a Christian country, where over half of the population believes in reincarnation.

However, cases have also been found in the United States (Pasricha et al. 2005; Stevenson 1983; Tucker 2005) and in several countries of Europe (Stevenson 2003). European and United States cases tend to be less impressive and harder to solve than cases found in cultures with high belief in reincarnation. Stevenson's analysis of European cases reveals that their principal characteristics are similar, such as the mean age of first speaking of a previous life, mean age of ceasing to speak spontaneously about it, mentioning the mode of death, and the frequency of violent death.

Birthmarks that correspond to wounds inflicted on an identified previous personality are found in some case, such as in the case of Purnima Ekanayake. It is hard to imagine how cultural influences can cause birthmarks as they are formed in the embryo before the child is born. Stevenson (1997a, b) has written two lengthy volumes about cases with birthmarks and deformities, richly documented with photographs and medical details.

Another criticism concerns the possibility that the correspondence found between statements made by the children of their previous life and events in the life of certain deceased persons may be accidental or due to chance. This is a serious criticism in view of the many cases that remain unsolved. On the contrary, the chance interpretation is made doubtful for the most impressive cases because of the highly specific nature of some of the verified statements made by the children. This interpretation runs into further difficulties when applied to birthmark cases, the phobias and the PTSD, which is found in many children who are not known to have been exposed to life-threatening situations.

Are these children psychically gifted and able to zoom in on facts in the life of a person that lived before they were born? This interpretation runs into difficulty when attempting to explain the psychological aspects and the birthmark cases. And why do these children, zoom back on one particular deceased person, as most show no other psychic abilities?

There are also transcendental interpretations. Possession is sometimes mentioned, also in countries where belief in reincarnation is dominant. Here it is assumed that a deceased person somehow influences a child's behavior and memories.

Another transcendental interpretation is the reincarnation hypothesis, which is commonly accepted in countries with widespread belief in reincarnation. It seems to explain rather easily phobias, PTSD, and the birthmark cases. There is, however, a serious stumbling block. It runs contrary to our present knowledge of memory's dependence on brain functioning. It is hard to see how the reincarnation concept can be accommodated within the current scientific framework without a radical change. That change would have to accept that mind is an independent reality, which could exist without a brain, and which would be the vehicle for the transmission of memory from one brain (which belonged to a deceased person) to another (the child claiming memories).

We have two opposing explanatory models to explain cases of the reincarnation type. On the one side, we have primarily the chance hypothesis, cultural influences and biased reporting. On the other side, we have the transcendental interpretations, primarily reincarnation. The transcendental models seem irreconcilable without a radical change of the present scientific view of the mind–brain relationship.

The evidence supporting the reincarnation hypothesis has been accumulating over the last half of a century. A renowned skeptic like the popular astronomer Carl Sagan wrote: “At the time of writing there are three claims in the (paranormal) field, which in my opinion, deserve serious study” the third being “that young children sometimes report details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation” (1996, p. 302).

It has great implications for any theory of the mind–brain relationship if the most impressive cases reveal genuine past-life memories. The present view would have to be revised or extended to incorporate the fact that in rare instances memories/experiences of a person whose brain no longer exists can appear in the brain of a young child. We would have to assume that mind and body are two separate entities, which are only combined for a certain period of time. Furthermore, that, at least for some individuals, some memories that are stored in the mind survive the disintegration of the brain and appear in a new brain that is still developing.

Studies of “reincarnation cases” also indicate that human personality is not only formed by genetics and environmental influences. On the basis of his data, Stevenson (2001) has written at length about the explanatory value of the idea of reincarnation and how it may help us understand some unsolved problems in psychology, biology, and medicine. These include phobias of infancy and early childhood, unusual interests and types of play, unusual aptitudes and skills in early childhood, addictions and cravings in early childhood, gender-identity confusion, differences between one-egg twin pairs, and some birthmarks and birth defects.

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