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Past Lives and Xenoglossia

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Part 1 of this paper first appeared in the Summer issue of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer', 2021, pp 7-10.

In March this year, the website Vice.com featured an article by Rebecca Nathanson entitled ‘The Hard Science of Reincarnation’ (*note 1*) which summarises research that has been conducted on children who appear aware of having had a previous existence, along with two previously documented individual cases.

The most prominent amongst those who have seriously studied this phenomenon is the late Canadian-born American psychiatrist Professor Ian Stevenson, who is remembered for his prolific accounts of children from various parts of the world who demonstrated possible evidence of a past life. Amongst other things, he reported that some of the physical and psychological characteristics of these children were ‘inherited’ from their previous incarnation, thus providing, in addition to environment and genetics, a third factor contributing to individual differences. His critics considered that his findings were flawed on several counts. The Wikipedia entry for Professor Stevenson summarises these and Professor Christopher French provides his own comments in Ms Nathanson’s article.

For the purposes of furthering his work at the University of Virginia, Professor Stevenson established what eventually became the Division of Perceptual Studies, ‘a highly productive university-based research group devoted to the investigation of phenomena that challenge mainstream scientific paradigms regarding the nature of the mind/brain relationship’. Reports of children (and adults) claiming previous incarnations continue to be collected and investigated, as described by Ms Nathanson.

Chris French himself is well-known in the skeptical world and some readers may have seen him in a television documentary about reincarnation claims by children of Druse families in Lebanon in 1998. He has since given lectures on this topic at venues including Skeptics in the Pub—well worth attending. On the programme itself he gave a fair but skeptical assessment of what he had witnessed when visiting Lebanon, and those attending his lectures (which include sufficient video footage to enable the audience to arrive at their own conclusions) would probably be in agreement with his opinions.

Past-life regression

I am mainly familiar with the phenomenon of memories of previous existences from reports and publications concerning past-life regression, usually using hypnosis. I have done little work on this myself. I wrote about this topic in 2012 in Vol 15 (1) of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and what follows is a slightly amended version of what I said then.

The earliest example of this use of hypnosis of which skeptics may be aware is the case of ‘Bridey Murphy’ in the 1950s in Colorado (*The Search for Bridey Murphy* by Morey Bernstein, 1956). Housewife Virginia Tighe was hypnotically regressed to before her birth and gave a vivid account of life as a 19th century Irishwoman born ‘Bridey Murphy’ who, at the age of 17, married a barrister called Sean Brian McCarthy and moved from Cork to Belfast. No evidence was found that this woman actually existed, but Ms Tighe herself had Irish roots and an Irish immigrant named Bridie Murphy Corkell had lived across the street from her in her childhood. The most likely conclusion is that the ‘past life’ was a fantasy constructed by Ms Tighe, which incorporated material known to her in her existing life.

My earliest memory of encountering the subject of past-life regression is my reading about it in one of the Sunday newspapers (I think it was the *People*), around my early teens in the 1960s. The only thing I remember is that it was claimed that a woman was hypnotically regressed to a previous incarnation and started speaking perfect French, despite having never spoken the language in her existing life.

This stuck in my mind (for many years I was inclined to believe everything I read in the papers) until my next encounter with the phenomenon, which was an account of ‘the Bloxham tapes’ in the 1970s. Hypnotherapist Arnall Bloxham, who practised in Wales, made over 400 recordings of past-life hypnotic regressions. The *Sunday Times* did a series about this and a programme appeared on BBC television produced by Jeffrey Iverson, who also wrote a best-selling paperback called *More Lives than One? The Evidence of the Remarkable Bloxham Tapes* (1976). I recall watching the BBC programme and reading both the *Sunday Times* articles and Mr Iverson’s book with great interest. And it is indeed an interesting phenomenon, one certainly worthy of research, if only because of the profound experiences that some subjects do report. However, by that stage, while still wanting to believe in the authenticity of past-life regression, I was becoming more wary of paranormal explanations, and more interested in accounts grounded in mainstream cognitive and social psychology. One consideration, whose significance I did not fully grasp at the time, was the fact that Mr Iverson reported in detail only a handful of cases from over 400 of Mr Bloxham’s subjects whose regressions he recorded. These regressions were vivid, detailed, and full of historical information. In contrast, he observes that the lives described by many of the remaining subjects were mundane and unremarkable. If we merely assume some random distribution amongst the attributes that contribute to ‘a convincing case’, then chance alone may play a significant role in the remarkableness of the small fraction of cases deliberately selected (‘cherry-picked’) for having those attributes.

The late Nicholas Spanos, Professor of Psychology at Carlton University in Ottawa, reported that around 40% of hypnotically suggestible subjects could be induced to experience a ‘previous life’ (see *Multiple Identities & False Memories: A Sociocognitive Perspective*, Washington: American Psychological Association, 1996). Though often very vivid and elaborate, they are best described as constructed fantasies generated by the person’s expectations and beliefs and those conveyed by the experimenter, sometimes augmented by material to which the subject has had prior exposure (e.g. from historical books or films). It is likely, in my opinion, that extra credence is given to the authenticity of these fantasies by the commonly-held belief that past-lives arise because the person has been ‘put into a trance state’ that has some very unusual properties. It is in fact unnecessary to posit this special state of mind to explain or even elicit these supposed ‘past lives’. Equipped with the requisite imaginative skills, beliefs and expectations, and with sufficient preparation to feel committed to the task in hand and become absorbed in their inner world, a person is likely to have the experience of ‘reliving a past life’ without any of the trappings usually accompanying hypnosis.

But what about those reported incidents of subjects regressed to a previous life and being able to speak fluently in the language of that person? Linguistics expert Mark Newbrook has examined this claim and his comments follow.

Claims of xenoglossia

Mark Newbrook

One important empirically-testable alleged phenomenon relevant to reincarnation is xenoglossia: cases of humans supposedly speaking and/or understanding languages which they have never learned – not in a trance, as if channelling or experiencing glossolalia, but as a second personality which emerges in everyday situations (and usually does not appear to command the language used by the speaker’s main personality). The material apparently emanates from ‘another part’ of the speaker’s own mind. In some reports of xenoglossia the command of the relevant ‘other’ language is reported as only passive (understanding speech or writing produced by others), or largely so, but in others active command (speaking or writing) is reported.

The psychiatrist Ian Stevenson claimed several cases of this kind as evidence of reincarnation. He regards the second language as having been acquired by normal means in a previous lifetime and as somehow having been retransmitted into the mind of the new incarnation (*note 2*). Of course, this is a possible explanation **only** if reincarnation itself is a genuine phenomenon. If reincarnation is indeed the explanation for observed cases of xenoglossia, this has major consequences for world-views.

Many alleged cases of xenoglossia involve children. This would not be surprising if reincarnation really were in question; the ‘other’ language might be expected to manifest itself early in life.

Several writers on such matters, including Steven Rosen (*note 3*), have endorsed Stevenson’s interpretation of such cases, at least to a degree; and Ian Lawton examined the matter with some care, drawing no firm conclusions but **not** categorically rejecting Stevenson’s analysis, and critiquing some skeptical comments (*note 4*).

However, the professional linguist Sarah Thomason found that Stevenson’s reports of fluency and understanding were much exaggerated (*note 5*). The subject’s command (active and passive) of the ‘other’ language is typically minimal and unimpressive, and could have been obtained from very limited studies which the subject might have forgotten (‘cryptomnesia’, a term coined by Théodore Flournoy - *note 6*).

One subject whose second persona supposedly spoke German failed to understand commonly-used idioms such as *Was gibt es nach dem Schlafen?* This literally means ‘What happens after sleep?’ but is used to mean ‘What do you have for breakfast?’. The subject seemed to recognise only the word *Schlafen*, meaning ‘sleep’, and

interpreted the question as an enquiry about where she slept. She gave a response of two unconstrued words, the second word being *Bettzimmer*, which is not in fact the normal German word for ‘bedroom’ as someone knowing only very elementary German might imagine. And although Stevenson suggests that this subject gave many responses in ‘correct’ German, a high percentage of these responses were ‘Ja’ (‘yes’) or ‘Nein’ (‘no’) – and, given that the purported previous life was that of a person unknown to history, it was not even possible to check whether or not each such response was factually accurate.

Most of the other responses given by this subject were nonsensical or were ‘cop-out’ standard answers meaning ‘I don’t understand’ or ‘I don’t know’. None of the subject’s responses suggested any more than a very basic knowledge of German.

In other cases, it emerges that the subject had in fact had sufficient exposure to the language in question (not always consciously) to account for the data. One such subject was ‘unaccountably’ able to rehearse expressions in Russian (without understanding). This subject had grown up in a flat separated by a thin wall from another flat occupied by a person who taught Russian from home.

In still other cases, the subject was familiar with a very closely related language. One subject’s second persona was supposed to be proficient (largely passively) in an Indic language – but the first language of her main persona was another Indic language, and the various members of this language sub-family share many features and vocabulary items.

In addition, Stevenson’s own grasp of linguistics appears limited; he makes some conceptual errors, suggesting for instance that the usage of uneducated speakers of languages cannot be expected to manifest grammar (a folk-linguistic idea).

In some other such cases there is a mixture of contemporary usage and an attempt at archaic forms, usually in the same language; see for instance the case of the Bloxham Tapes, made under hypnosis and allegedly relating to past-life experiences (*note 7*). Some speakers recorded by Bloxham displayed a mixture of contemporary English and amateur attempts at early modern English usage (probably influenced by popular representations in fiction and/or in movies).

In one more recent, rather extreme case cited by Benjamin Radford, it is reported (without convincing evidence) that a 13-year-old Croatian awoke from a one-day coma no longer able to speak her native language but instead communicating in German (*note 8*). Radford comments that such cases have at times been attributed to demonic possession – although reincarnation might still be adduced.

Some groups of religious believers also claim that they are able to understand languages which they have never learned, perhaps through reincarnation. This was reported in conversation with me by some followers of Subud in New Zealand. Unfortunately, these people were uninterested in demonstrating the truth of their claims.

In addition to Thomason’s work, there are various other skeptical treatments of xenoglossia (*note 9*).

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/5fr76u2h>
2. Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2nd edn (University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 1974); *Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy* ((University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 1984).
3. Steven Rosen, *The Reincarnation Controversy: Uncovering the Truth in the World Religions* (Torchlight Publishing, Badger, CA, 1997).
4. Ian Lawton, *The Big Book of the Soul*, 2nd edn (Rational Spirituality Press, 2010), especially Chapter 3; available at <http://www.ianlawton.com/plr1.html> (accessed 18 February 2011).
5. Sarah Thomason ‘Past tongues remembered?’, *Skeptical Inquirer*, XI (1987), pp. 367-75. Summer, 1987 (reprinted in *The Hundredth Monkey and other Paradigms of the Paranormal*, ed. Kendrick Frazier (Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1991), pp. 85-94), and sources cited by Thomason; see also Thomason’s ‘Response to “Response to Past tongues remembered?”’, *Skeptical Inquirer*, XII (1988), pp. 323-4; ‘Almeder and xenoglossy’, in Gordon Stein, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 1996), pp. 835-44; ‘On reconstructing past contact situations’, in *The Life of Language: Papers in Linguistics in Honor of William Bright*, eds. Jane H. Hill, P.J. Mistry and Lyle Campbell, (De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, 1997), pp. 153-8; ‘Do you remember your previous life’s language in your present incarnation?’, *American Speech*, 59 (1984), pp. 340-50. Thomason’s ‘response to a response’ was to a very confused rejoinder to her original critique, Robert F. Almeder, ‘Response to “Past Tongues Remembered?”’, *Skeptical Inquirer*, XII (1988), pp. 321-3. For an online summary report on some of Thomason’s conclusions, see: <https://tinyurl.com/2tm83da5> (accessed 15 April 2021).
6. Robert Todd Carroll, *The Skeptic’s Dictionary* (John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ):

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cryptomnesia> (accessed 18 February 2011).
7. See for example D. Arnall Bloxham, *Who was Ann Ockenden?* (Neville Spearman, London, 1958); Jeffrey Iverson, *More Lives Than One? The Evidence of the Remarkable Bloxham Tapes* (Macmillan, New York, 1977).
 8. Benjamin Radford, 'Demonic Possession, Reincarnation and Xenoglossia', 23 April 2010), available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3kn63jt3> (accessed 21 May 2021). Compare the alleged sudden knowledge of Japanese displayed by some Filipina girls, reported by Darcy Fredericksen, letter in *Fortean Times*, 163 (2002), p. 55.
 9. See for example Carroll, *Skeptic's Dictionary*, p. 411:
<http://www.skeptdic.com/bloxham.html>
<http://www.skeptdic.com/bridey>
<http://www.skeptdic.com/stevenson.html>, <http://www.skeptdic.com/xenoglossy.html>
(all accessed 18 February 2011); also Nicholas P. Spanos and John F. Chaves, eds, *Multiple Identities and False Memories: A Sociocognitive Perspective* (American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1996), etc.