A Scale to Measure the Strength of Children's Claims of Previous Lives: Methodology and Initial Findings

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Abstract—To assess the relative strength of children's claims to remember previous lives, a strength-of-case scale has been developed. It assigns weights to features of each case that are more suggestive of a paranormal explanation. The scale was found to have a high degree of internal consistency. Analysis of 799 cases with the scale indicated that the strength of a case correlated with the economic status of the child but not his or her social status or caste. It did not correlate with the initial attitudes of the child's parents toward the case but did correlate with an early onset of statements about the previous life, the amount of emotion shown by the child when recalling the past life, and the amount of facial resemblance between the child and the deceased individual. These results are more consistent with a paranormal explanation for the cases than with a normal one.

Keywords: reincarnation

Introduction

In various parts of the world, children have been found who claim to remember previous lives. Cases have been studied for over 30 years by Stevenson (1974, 1987) and more recently by other investigators as well (Mills et al., 1994; Pasricha, 1990). Over 2,500 cases have now been collected, and they have a number of typical features. The children begin talking about the life of a deceased individual, or "previous personality," at a very young age, usually between the ages two and five and occasionally earlier, and they generally stop between the ages of five and eight. At times, they speak of the life of a deceased family member or family friend, but other children speak of total strangers in other locations. In such situations, the children can be quite insistent that their families take them to the previous personality's home, and when this is done, the child is often said to recognize friends or family from the previous life. In addition to the statements, many children bear birthmarks that correspond to wounds suffered by the previous person, and the correspondences are confirmed by postmortem reports whenever possible (Stevenson, 1997). The children also demonstrate behaviors that appear to be associated with the previous life, such as phobias related to the mode of death of the previous individual or play that mimics the previous person's occupation.

When cases become known to an investigator, he or she then interviews the child along with as many firsthand witnesses as possible. Members of the child's family as well as members of the previous personality's family are interviewed. The two families have usually met before the investigator has arrived on the scene, but there are cases in which a written record of the child's statements has been made before the concerned families have met. Also in a very few cases, the investigator has participated in controlled tests of recognition by the child of family and friends of the previous individual.

These cases generate two general types of hypotheses regarding their etiology, the "normal hypotheses" and the "paranormal hypotheses." In the sociopsychological hypothesis (Brody, 1979), a normal hypothesis, it is pointed out that most of the children live in cultures with a belief in reincarnation. They are said to hear of deaths, and they then say that they were the deceased individuals out of either fantasy or deception. After the two families have met, the family members remember the child's statements and recognitions as being more impressive than they actually were since they have the wish that the deceased individual has reincarnated as the child. The birthmarks are said to be mere coincidences, and the behaviors indicative of the previous life are thought to be part of the self-delusion. A previous study comparing cases having written records made before the two families met with ones without records did not find support for such a theory (Stevenson and Schouten, 1998).

The paranormal hypothesis most often considered is that of reincarnation (there are others, such as possession and the "super-psi" hypothesis). Investigators have reported cases in which the children appeared to have knowledge about the previous personality that they could not have obtained through normal means, and in some cases (as mentioned), written records were made before the previous individual's family was located (Haraldsson, 1991; Stevenson, 1974, 1975, 1977; Stevenson and Samararatne, 1988). This knowledge, considered along with the children's identifications as the deceased individuals, the matching birthmarks, and the unexpected behaviors, appears to support the reincarnation explanation for the cases.

Some cases produce stronger evidence for a paranormal explanation—through more verified statements about the deceased individual, through birthmarks that correspond to lesions on the deceased, and so forth—than others do. From the two types of hypotheses, predictions can be generated about what factors might be associated with the stronger cases. For instance, the normal hypotheses would predict that in cases with more apparent evidence for reincarnation, the children have had more opportunity to obtain information about the deceased individual through normal means than in the weaker cases.

The present paper describes a scale to assess the strength of the evidence for a paranormal explanation for a case. It then demonstrates the use of this scale to determine what factors are associated with the stronger cases and to test predictions generated by the two types of hypotheses.

Methods

Cases have been investigated by several researchers who have been associated over the past 30 years with the University of Virginia Division of Personality Studies. A case will typically include a registration form and the researcher's interview notes, and this information is transferred to a coding form to be entered into a computerized database. The coding form, completed as much as the information for each case allows, includes demographic information about the subject and the previous personality along with other features of the case. 799 cases have now been entered into the database, and a strength-of-case scale (SOCS) has been developed that assigns relative weights to those features of a case that may bear on the strength of the evidence for a paranormal explanation (Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, there are four broad categories of factors that provide evidence for the paranormal hypothesis. The first is birthmarks and birth defects that are said to correspond to lesions on the deceased individual. The second category involves statements that the subject has made about the previous life, with points given for statements that are verified to be accurate and points subtracted for statements that turn out to be incorrect. The third category involves behaviors that the subject exhibits that seem to relate to the previous life. Finally, the fourth involves the connection between the subject and the previous personality, since a closer association would increase the chances that a child could have learned about the previous personality through normal means. Thus, a case in which the two families are more than 25 km apart scores more points than ones in which they are closer, and ones with no contact between families score more than ones in which the families had a close association before the case developed. In addition to spatial proximity, consideration is given to closeness in socioeconomic status and, for Indian cases, in caste placement, since those at different ends of the spectrum might have just as much functional distance between them as cases that are many kilometers apart.

The points that a case gets for each item are then summed to give a total score on the SOCS. The points that each item scores were determined subjectively, with an attempt made to weigh items in a balanced way. Thus, for example, a birthmark verified by medical records to correspond with a fatal wound on the previous personality receives eight points just as the presence of more than 20 verified statements does. With each case receiving a score on the scale, other features in the cases were then examined for correlations with the strength of a case.

For this initial use of the scale, 799 cases were available in the database. The sex ratio and country of origin of the cases are outlined in Table 2. Of note is that there are some countries, such as Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), from which we have numerous cases, but these cases have not yet been entered into the database.

The SPSS 9.0 for Windows statistical package was used to obtain the statis-

TABLE 1
The Strength-of-Case Scale (SOCS)

Item	Points
Birthmarks/birth defects	
1. Corresponding to fatal wound on deceased individual	
Verified by medical records	8
Verified by friends or relatives of deceased	5
Claimed by subject but not verified	2
2. Corresponding to nonfatal wound on deceased individual	
Verified by medical records	5
Verified by friends or relatives of deceased	3
Claimed by subject but not verified	1
3. Disease or infirmity related to deceased individual	
Verified by medical records	4
Verified by friends or relatives of deceased	2
Claimed by subject but not verified	1
Statements about the previous life	
4. Subject claims to remember previous life	
Yes	0
No, claim made only on basis of other evidence	- 2
5. Statements about places or people as they appeared during previous life, these appearances having since changed	5
6. Statements about the previous life verified as correct minus incorrect statements made	
>20	8
11–20	5
6–10	3
1–5	1
0	0
- 1–(–5)	- 2
- 6–(–10)	- 5
<- 10	- 8
Behavior	
7. Unusual dietary cravings or avoidances related to previous life	3
8. Unusual methods of eating or table manners related to previous life	3
9. Unusual use of intoxicants related to previous life	3
10. Unusual philias related to previous life	3
11. Unusual skills or aptitudes related to previous life	3
12. Unusual animosities related to previous life	3
13. Unusual phobias related to previous life	3
14. Behavior related to that of the opposite sex	
According to friends or relatives	3
According to subject or investigator only	1
15. Desire or reluctance to return to previous family or place	
Strong desire	3
Moderate desire	1
Neutral	0
Moderate reluctance	1
Strong reluctance	3
16. Memories of previous life expressed in play	3
Connection to deceased individual	
17. Identification of deceased individual	
By academic investigators	3
By other investigators	2
By family or friends	1

TABLE 1 (continued)
The Strength-of-Case Scale (SOCS)

Item	Points
18. Association between the two families before case developed	
Close association or same family	- 2
Slight association	- 1
Knew about each other but no association	0
Total strangers unknown to each other	5
19. Distance (in km.) between child's birthplace and deceased individual's main residence	
0.0–1.5	0
1.6–24.9	2
25.0 or more	5
20. Difference in social status between child and deceased individual	
Slight	1
Moderate	2
Great	3
21. Difference in economic status between child and deceased individual	
Slight	1
Moderate	2
Great	3
22. Difference in caste of subject and deceased individual with score equal to difference in ranking by Brahmin-Kshtriya-Kayastha-Vaishya-Sudra-Untouchable	

tics involved in this report. Since the SOCS produced results in which the cases do not have a normal distribution, a nonparametric correlation test, the Spearman correlation coefficient, was used.

Results

A SOCS score was obtained for each of the 799 cases in the database. The scores ranged from a low of - 3 to a high of 49, with a mean of 10.40, a median

TABLE 2
Sex Ratio and Country of Origin of Cases Analyzed

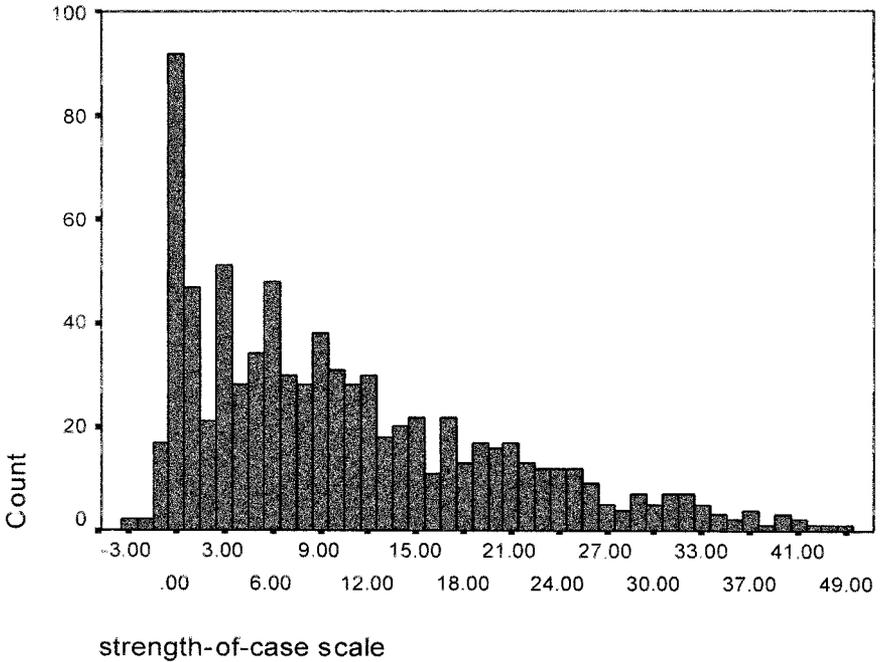|	Frequency	Percent
Sex of subject		
Male	514	64.3
Female	285	35.7
Total	799	100.0
Subject country of origin		
India	428	53.6
Sri Lanka	62	7.8
Turkey	103	12.9
Lebanon	66	8.3
United States	117	14.6
Canada	23	2.9
Total	799	100.0

Fig. 1Distribution of strength-of-case scores.

of 8.00, and a standard deviation of 9.48. The distribution was significantly skewed (Figure 1).

To assess the internal consistency of the scale, each of the individual items was compared to the rest of the scale. This produced results in which all but two of the items significantly correlated with the remainder of the scale (Table 3). The two items that did not show a significant correlation, items 4 and 14, did show trends in that direction. In addition, each of the four parts of the scale—birthmarks/birth defects, statements about the previous life, behaviors related to the previous life, and connection between the subject and the deceased individual—showed a significant correlation to the remainder of the scale (Table 4). Thus, the scale showed considerable internal consistency.

The scale was then used to assess how other factors in the cases correlate with the strength of the cases. To look at the possibility that the cases originate from fantasies of poor children wishing they were in better circumstances, the social status, economic status, and caste of the subject (for Indian cases) were compared with scores on the SOCS. In this instance, subjects from the extremes of the socioeconomic range have an advantage on the scale since they are more likely, by chance, to have a greater distance from the circumstances of the previous personality. The economic status of the subject was found to have a marginally significant correlation with the SOCS score ($p = .045$), but when the item for the difference in economic status between the child and the

TABLE 3
Correlations of Each Item With Remainder of SOCS

Item	Spearman coefficient	Significance
Birthmarks matching fatal wounds	0.082	0.020
Birthmarks matching nonfatal wounds	0.144	<0.001
Disease related to deceased individual	0.172	<0.001
Subject claims to remember previous life	0.047	NS
Statements about changed appearances	0.329	<0.001
Verified statements about previous life	0.445	<0.001
Unusual dietary cravings related to previous life	0.267	<0.001
Unusual methods of eating related to previous life	0.231	<0.001
Unusual use of intoxicants related to previous life	0.173	<0.001
Unusual philias related to previous life	0.320	<0.001
Unusual skills or aptitudes related to previous life	0.172	<0.001
Unusual animosities related to previous life	0.259	<0.001
Unusual phobias related to previous life	0.205	<0.001
Behavior related to that of the opposite sex	0.060	NS
Desire or reluctance to return to previous place	0.438	<0.001
Memories of previous life expressed in play	0.164	<0.001
Identification of deceased individual	0.451	<0.001
Association between the two families before case	0.124	<0.001
Distance between child and deceased individual	0.364	<0.001
Social status difference between the two	0.412	<0.001
Economic status difference between the two	0.412	<0.001
Caste status difference between the two	0.300	<0.001

previous personality was removed from the scale, then that correlation was no longer significant (Spearman correlation coefficient = 0.082, p = .075). The social status and caste of the subject showed no correlation at all (Table 5).

To assess the possibility that enthusiasm of parents is creating these cases, the initial attitude of each of the subject's parents was compared to the strength of the case, and there was not a significant correlation (Table 6). (Even in countries with a belief in reincarnation, many parents try to suppress the child's statements about a previous life, believing, for example, that such statements will lead to a shorter life.) This is consistent with a previous study that found that in 41% of cases in India, parents tried to suppress the children from talking about previous lives, but this had no effect on the duration of the child's speaking of them (Stevenson & Chadha, 1990). The amount of acceptance of the case that the family of the previous personality shows does corre-

TABLE 4
Correlations of Sections With the Remainder of SOCS

Section	Spearman coefficient	Significance
Birthmarks and birth defects	0.178	<0.001
Statements about the previous life	0.360	<0.001
Behaviors related to the previous life	0.429	<0.001
Connection to the deceased individual	0.360	<0.001

TABLE 5
Correlations Between the SOCS Score and the Social Status, Economic Status, and
Caste of the Subject

	Number of cases coded	Spearman coefficient	Significance
Social status of subject	493	- 0.008	0.863
Economic status of subject	471	0.092	0.045
Caste of subject	247	0.009	0.892

TABLE 6
Correlations Between the SOCS Score and the Attitude of Families Toward the Case

	Number of cases coded	Spearman coefficient	Significance
Initial positive attitude of subject's mother	497	- 0.061	0.172
Initial positive attitude of subject's father	457	0.032	0.493
Amount of acceptance from deceased's family	275	0.234	<0.001

late significantly with the SOCS score, implying that those families use crite-
ria similar to the ones in the scale in assessing the legitimacy of the case.

Several other characteristics of the cases were studied (Table 7). The age at
which the child began to talk about a past life shows a significant negative cor-
relation to the SOCS score, so that in the stronger cases, the child is more like-
ly to start talking earlier. In addition, there is a strong correlation between the
SOCS score and the amount of emotion that the subject shows when recalling
the past life. Since item 15 of the scale, desire or reluctance by the subject to
return to the previous family or place, might be related to the amount of emo-
tion the subject shows, this correlation was tested with item 15 removed from
the scale, and it remained significant (Spearman correlation coefficient =
0.205, $p < .001$). Finally, the amount of facial resemblance between the sub-
ject and the deceased individual, as judged by those who knew the deceased,
proved to be significantly correlated with the strength of the case.

TABLE 7
Correlations Between the SOCS Score and Other Characteristics of the Cases

	Number of cases coded	Spearman coefficient	Significance
Age when subject first talked about previous life	636	- 0.106	0.007
Amount of emotion subject shows during recall	484	0.235	<0.001
Facial resemblance between subject and deceased	300	0.386	<0.001

Discussion

The above results can be considered in relation to the normal and paranormal hypotheses. In looking at the internal consistency of the scale, one area that produced surprising results was how the connection between the subject and the previous personality correlated with the remainder of the scale. A case is given points for distance between the two, be it lack of association between the families, geographical distance, or socioeconomic or caste difference. All of these correlated with the remainder of the scale, both as individual items and as a group. Thus, greater distance between the child and the previous personality is associated with more evidence for a paranormal explanation. This is the exact opposite of what the socio-psychological hypothesis would predict, since it supposes that the children have acquired their knowledge about the previous personality through normal means. These results suggest that this is likely not the case.

As for the reincarnation hypothesis, it would not necessarily predict a positive or negative correlation between distance and the strength of a case. What the positive correlation may suggest is that, while the long distance cases may well be reincarnation cases, some of the close proximity reincarnation cases may be diluted by others best explained through normal means.

In looking at how other factors may correlate with the SOCS, the correlation between the scale score and the economic status of the subject provides some support for the idea that the cases are the result of poor children fantasizing about a better life, but as noted above, this correlation is not significant if the difference in economic status between subject and previous personality is removed from the scale. In addition, there is no correlation between the strength of the case and the social status and caste of the subject. This lack of correlation would be perfectly consistent with the reincarnation hypothesis. The lack of correlation between the SOCS score and the reaction of the subject's parents to the child's claims is also inconsistent with the prediction of the normal hypotheses that the parents help create these cases, either accidentally or intentionally for an unknown motivation.

The negative correlation between the SOCS score and the age when the child begins talking about the previous life is consistent with the reincarnation hypothesis, in which children with more residue from the previous life would be more likely to talk about that life as soon as the child is able. As for the normal hypotheses, one might argue that younger children with less developed language skills would make statements that would be more likely to be misinterpreted as possessing paranormal knowledge, but it could also be argued that older children could be more reliably made part of a fraud. It seems most reasonable that the normal hypotheses would not make a prediction regarding a correlation between the strength of the case and when the child starts talking about the past life.

Likewise, the reincarnation hypothesis would predict that children with strong impressions from the previous life would be more likely to express their

memories with strong emotion. The normal hypotheses would not predict a correlation between the strength of a case and the amount of emotion the child demonstrates about the memories, but in fact, a correlation was found.

Lastly, the correlation between the SOCS score and the facial resemblance between the subject and the previous personality is consistent with the reincarnation hypothesis, in which cases with more past life residue would carry with them some facial resemblance just as they do birthmarks and birth defects. The socio-psychological hypothesis might predict that people who believe a child is the reincarnation of a deceased person would be more likely to see a facial resemblance than they would otherwise. It would not, however, predict this finding that facial resemblances are more commonly reported in the stronger cases than in the weaker ones.

Conclusions

A scale has been developed that measures the evidence that each case of past life claims provides for a paranormal explanation, and it shows good internal consistency. Several factors have been found to correlate with the scale score, including distance between the subject and the deceased individual, earlier onset of statements about the previous life, the amount of emotion the subject shows when discussing the previous life, and the amount of facial resemblance between the subject and the deceased individual. These results are more consistent with the reincarnation hypothesis than with one of a normal origin. While they are not definitive, they do indicate that more research is justified in the cases of children who appear to remember previous lives.

Acknowledgements

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