

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Children with Life-between-Life Memories

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Abstract—Studies of children claiming to have past-life memories have revealed that some of these children also claim to remember the “bardo,” or life-between-life state. Although there seems to be a small number of those with past-life memories, the number increases if we also consider children without past life memories (cf. Sharma & Tucker 2004, Tucker 2005:183–184). This article will report on some cases of Japanese children who claim to have life-between-life memories and show that the presence of life-between-life memories does not depend upon the presence of past-life memories. This suggests that children with past-life memories must be viewed within a larger context of the large group of children with one or a combination of the four types of memories: “in the womb,” birth, life-between-life, and past-life.

Introduction

A six-year-old boy recalls his experience before he was born, saying, “I was flying in the sky, looking for my mother. Looking down. I could see my mother and chose her. I thought she was the best person. She looked lonely, and I thought, ‘If I come to her, she will not feel lonely anymore.’” A nine-year old girl describes the place where she was before she came to her mother: “There were many children, or souls, and a god, an entity with authority.” To our question “Is he like a school teacher?” she replied: “No, no, no! He is much more generous,” and said, “He was looking after us, like a counselor.” There are many children in Japan who claim to remember such life-between-life experiences.¹

The phenomenon itself is not new. One of the earliest examples is the case of Katsugoro, a Japanese boy born in 1806, who gave detailed memories of his past-lives. He was taken to a house in a different village where he

claimed to have lived, and was eventually accepted by his previous parents as their son Tozo reborn. He talked about his life-between-life memories, saying that after his death, he was guided to a beautiful field by a man with long white hair, and after spending some time there, he was led by that man to his present house and reborn.² Ian Stevenson reports many examples of children with life-between-life memories,³ and Sharma and Tucker (2004) focus on the analysis of such memories.

The notable characteristic of the cases discussed here is that in contrast to the cases investigated by Ian Stevenson and his colleagues, most of the children claiming to remember life-between-life memories did not have past-life memories. The existence of children with life-between-life memories and no past-life memories is not unexpected if the survival of consciousness and reincarnation are real. Works by Ian Stevenson and Jim Tucker with Poonam Sharma have shown that a portion of children with past-life memories also have life-between-life memories (Stevenson 1975, 1983, Tucker 2005, Sharma & Tucker 2004), which means that many of the subjects with past-life memories do not have life-between-life memories. This suggests the existence of reverse cases, i.e. cases of children with life-between-life memories without past-life memories.

In this article, we will discuss the phenomenological properties of these cases and suggest an analytic framework that incorporates not only past-life and life-between-life memories, but also “in the womb” and birth memories.

Survey of Children’s “In the Womb” and Birth Memories

The existence of children with life-between-life memories came to our attention through a survey conducted by one of the authors (Ikegawa, an obstetrician and gynecologist). Inspired by studies undertaken by David Chamberlain, Thomas Verny, and others (Chamberlain 1988, 1998, Verny & Kelly 1981, Verny & Weintraub 2002), who reported cases of children claiming to have “in the womb” or birth memories, Ikegawa conducted a questionnaire-based survey in 2003 (Ikegawa 2005). The questionnaire, which was distributed to 3,601 parents through nursery schools and kindergartens in two cities in Central Japan, contained questions about whether their children have ever reported “in the womb” or birth memories, either spontaneously or in response to questioning. The number of questionnaires answered was 1,620, giving a response rate of 45.0%. The results of the survey concerning the two types of memories is shown in Table 1.

These figures show that if we include children who were specifically asked about such memories, a fairly large number of children talk about “in the womb” memories (30.5%) and birth memories (19.3%).⁴

TABLE 1
Children with "In the Womb" and Birth Memories

	Spontaneous Statements /1620	Statements after Questioning /1620	Combined Statements /1620
"In the Womb" Memory	38 (7.1%) 2.3%	496 (92.9%) 30.5%	534 (100%) 33.0%
Birth Memory	22 (6.6%) 1.4%	313 (93.4%) 19.3%	335 (100%) 20.7%

Although there were no questions about life-between-life and past-life memories in the questionnaire, some of the parents reported that their children talked about these memories as well. This is how the existence of Japanese children with life-between-life and past-life memories came to our attention.

The Subjects

In the present study, we investigated a total of 21 children with life-between-life memories. Some of the subjects are from those whose parents responded to the questionnaire-based survey described above. Others are those whose parents contacted us directly or were introduced to us by early childhood educators. The breakdown is as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
The Subjects

	Male	Female	Total
Questionnaire and Interview	5	8	13
Questionnaire	5	3	8
Total	10	11	21

The mean age of the subjects at the time of the investigation was 88 months (range 50 months to 177 months) old (the median age was 98 months old). It was 91 months for those with interviews and 83 months for those without interviews. We handed a questionnaire to parents who agreed

TABLE 3**Questions Concerning Life-Between-Life Memories in the Questionnaire**

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- 1 The age when the child started talking about life-between-life memories
 - 2 If there is any time or occasion when the child talks about the memories
 - 3 If there is any change in the child's state when he/she talks about the memories
 - 4 The reaction of the parents to the memories
 - 5 How the child describes the place where he/she was in the life-between-life state
 - 6 Whether there was a person or an entity there, and if there was, the role that person or entity plays there
 - 7 The feeling the child had when he/she was in the life-between-life state
 - 8 Whether the child was able to see people and events on the earth
 - 9 Whether the child says he/she chose their parents, and if the answer is positive and he/she chose both the mother and father, which he/she chose first
 - 10 Whether there is a reason why the child was born, and if the answer is positive, what the reason is
 - 11 How and when the child came to his/her mother's tummy
 - 12 Whether the child made any statement that matches an event before he/she was born
-

to participate in the study. In 13 cases, parents judged that their children would talk to us about their memories, so we also conducted interviews with these children. In one of the 13 cases, the interview was conducted via Skype.

The questionnaire consists of three sections. The first section contains questions about the child's background, including the child's handedness, the ages when the child first uttered a word and a two-word sentence, the family's religion, the parents' educational background, and the presence or absence of complications during the pregnancy.

The second section contains questions concerning life-between-life memories, which are listed in Table 3.

Section 3 contains questions about "in-the-womb" memories, birth memories, and past-life memories. We asked the parents if the child had these memories and if he/she did, to describe what the child said about these memories.

Of the parents, only mothers replied to the questionnaire.

Results

The mean age when the children started talking about life-between-life memories was 45.2 months (range 21 to 70 months) old (the median age is 48 months old).⁵ Of the 17 parents who answered Question 2 in Table 2, 14

TABLE 4
Number of Children Talking about Memories of Each Stage

Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
2	21	12

state that their children talk (or talked) about the memories during relaxed times such as bedtime or while taking a bath.⁶ The remaining three parents did not notice such a tendency. Of the 15 parents who answered Question 3, 10 noticed some changes such as the child becoming eloquent, speaking very clearly, and speaking with concentration. One parent reported that her child, who was stuttering, became fluent only when he talked about life-between-life memories. Of the 15 parents who answered Question 4, 14 stated that they were interested in their children's stories. One parent stated that she was initially disturbed and that it took her some time to realize that talking about life-between-life memories did not necessarily mean the child had mental problems. Thirteen of the 15 parents who answered Question 4 gave information about their spouses' (the children's fathers') attitude toward the memories: Two showed some interest but the remaining 11 were indifferent.

In analyzing the answers to Questions 5–12, it is convenient to adopt the framework proposed by Sharma and Tucker (2004). In order to analyze life-between-life memories of Burmese children, they proposed a framework that divides life-between-life memories into three stages: The first stage (Stage I) is a transitional one illustrated by memories of seeing their body or funeral, being taken away from weeping relatives, being directed to a different place, etc.; The second stage (Stage II) is characterized by marked stability and illustrated by memories of staying in a particular place, being involved in various activities, etc.; The final stage (Stage III) includes memories of choosing parents, being directed to them, etc. Questions 5–8 in Table 3 are concerned with Stage II, and questions 9–11 with Stage III, respectively. The number of children in the present study relating memories of each stage is shown in Table 4.

Four of the 21 children investigated in this study claimed to have past-life memories. The figure in the first column of Table 4 corresponds to two of these four children. One described the funeral of the previous personality, and the other talked about seeing the burned house in which the previous personality and her mother died.

Let us now consider the children's Stage II and Stage III memories in detail.

Thirteen of the 21 children described the place as "cloud or sky," and three of them as "light." The remaining five described the place variously as "a wide space where you can see the Earth," "a place like a star," "a place where there are a number of levels," "up there," and "a place in the shape of a long ellipse."⁷

All 21 children said they were not alone in the life-between-life state. 14 claimed there was a god or god-like entity. They also said that the entity was like a counselor, making suggestions about their future parents or giving permission to be born to the parents they chose. Twelve claimed that they were with their current family members (mostly brothers or sisters) and/or friends. One child said that there were many "light balls" present, but that it was difficult to say who they were, although he believes some of them were somebody close to him in current life.

Thirteen children described how they felt in the life-between-life state. Eight of them said they felt "peaceful" or "calm," and two said "joyful" or "excited." The remaining three said "difficult to describe," "not different from what I feel now," and "lonely."⁸

Fifteen said they were able to see "earthly affairs" from the place they were in the life-between-life state, but their memories were limited, relating only to their parents and households.

Seventeen children said that they chose their parents. Nine of them said that they chose only their mothers. Eight of them said that they chose their fathers as well as their mothers. Of the eight, four said that they chose their fathers and mothers simultaneously,⁹ and the remaining four said they chose their mothers first.

Thirteen children said they remembered why they decided to be born. The reasons were: to meet or help their mothers (3); to help other people (5); to become happier than they were in their previous lives (2); and to enjoy life (3). One child said he did not remember why he was born because he forgot the reason when he was born in order to find what it is in the current life.

Twelve children said they remembered when they came to their mother's womb. Three of them said somebody (a god, a shining ball, or an angel-like entity) helped them to come to their mother.

Three of the 21 children gave statements that matched their parents' memories before they were born.

One of them, a female child, who was five or six at the time, said to her mother, "When you were young, I frequently came to you." This statement matches her mother's experiences before she got married: She often felt that



Figure 1. A picture by a child of the house where the child's mother used to live.

a small child (or a child-like entity) was looking at her and bustling around her.

The second child, who started talking about her life-between-life memories at the age of five, said to her mother: "I saw you in a gorgeous white dress. You were holding a dog." The mother had indeed held a dog while wearing her wedding dress. After the wedding ceremony, she had entered a room where the dog was awaiting her return. She clearly remembered this experience because holding a dog in a wedding dress is not something you are supposed to do.¹⁰

The third child, who was six years old at the time, drew a picture of a four-story building surrounded by mountains (Figure 1) and said, "This is where you lived. I saw you there." Her mother was astounded because,

as a child, she lived in a four-story building from which she could see the surrounding mountains.

Lending credibility to the stories told by the children investigated in the present study is the story of James Leininger, an extremely strong American case of the reincarnation type, who made statements similar to those made by these Japanese children. When his father, Bruce, picked up four-year-old James and told him how happy he was to have him as a son, James said, "That's why I picked you: I knew you would be a good daddy." Perplexed, Bruce said, "What did you say?" James replied, "When I found you and Mommy, I knew you would be good to me." Bruce then asked, "Where did you find us?" James replied, "Hawaii. It was not when we all went to Hawaii. It was just Mommy and you. I found you at the big pink hotel." Bruce and his wife had indeed stayed at a pink hotel in Hawaii before their son James was born (Leininger & Leininger with Gross 2009, pp. 153–154).¹¹

The nature of the evidence for possible survival of consciousness presented here is admittedly weak, and one might argue that life-between-life memories of children without past-life memories have little evidential value and the investigation should be limited to children with past-life memories. We should point out, however, that there do not seem to be notable differences between the life-between-life memories of the four subjects with past-life memories and those of the remaining 17 subjects without such memories. We should also point out the possibility that further investigation might reveal the existence of cases with stronger evidence.

Comparison with Burmese Cases

Sharma and Tucker (2004) present some detailed analyses of the life-between-life memories reported by Burmese subjects in connection with the three stages described above. There is an interesting difference between the Burmese subjects and the Japanese subjects with respect to Stage II memories, which are characterized by marked stability. At the time of the investigation, Sharma and Tucker found 19 cases in which Burmese subjects describe the place where they stayed in the life-between-life state. Nine said that they stayed in a tree, four in a pagoda, and two remained near the place of death. In contrast, in our study, the places the Japanese children said they stayed at in the life-between-life state were in the "sky or cloud" (13), in the "light" (3), and in other various areas (5).

This difference might be caused by differences in religious backgrounds. In the Burmese cases, the religion was Buddhism combined with native animism. They believed that death initiates a new birth into one of 30 other

nonhuman realms, and that during the period in which a person lives as a discarnate entity, he or she may be assigned some task such as that of guarding temples or treasures (Stevenson 1983:209–210). In the Japanese cases, however, only three parents said their religion was Buddhism. One said Christian, and the remaining 17 said “no religion.”¹² So, though it is significant that there are common features in the life-between-life state in the Burmese and Japanese cases, there is an important difference that seems to reflect the cultural differences between the two nations.¹³

Four Types of Memories

The present study has shown that there are many children who claim to have life-between-life memories but no past-life memories. If the life-between-life memories reported by children with past-life memories were completely different from the life-between-life memories reported by children with no past-life memories, these two might need to be treated separately. However, because there are common features shared by the life-between-life memories reported by the two groups, we believe that we are justified in studying all life-between-life memories as one group.

Sharma and Tucker (2004:102) report that at the time of their writing, 217 (19.6%) out of 1,107 cases entered into a computerized database at the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies included life-between-life memories. We suspect that the actual figure (corresponding to “B” in Figure 2) might be higher because at least two factors could have contributed to an underreporting of the presence of life-between-life memories among children with past-life memories. First, researchers (Ian Stevenson and his colleagues) have not always asked for information about whether the subjects claim to have life-between-life memories because their main concern has been verifiable aspects of children’s past-life memories. Second, many cases were investigated after the subjects stopped talking about past-life memories, so the data inevitably rely on witnesses’ statements. It would be reasonable to assume that there are at least some cases in which the subject would have talked about life-between-life memories had they been asked if they had such memories when they were still young.

From the perspective of survival research, “in the womb” and birth memories will be of no value, but the inclusion of these memories in the investigation gives us a wider perspective in analyzing cases of the reincarnation type and cases of children with life-between-life memories. Consider Table 5, which shows all possible combinations of the presence or absence of the four types of memories: “in the womb,” birth, life-between-life, and past-life memories.

TABLE 5
Four Types of Memories and 16 Possible Combinations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
"In the womb" Memories	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
Birth Memories	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	-	-	+
Life-between-life Memories	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	-	+
Past-life Memories	+	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	-	+	+

The symbols "+" and "-" indicate the presence and absence of the memories, respectively. Within the four types of memories, commonality decreases in descending order (in the leftmost column of Table 5). Depending on whether a child has one or more of the four types of memories, there are 16 patterns.

Data collected to date and reported above suggest that the recollection frequency of pre-life memory classes declines in the following sequence:

Birth memories > womb memories > inter-life memories > past-life memories

We can presume that this empirical finding reflects a combination of conditions that jointly cause it to be the case that birth memories are easier to recall than womb memories, womb memories are easier to recall than inter-life memories, etc. For the present we cannot be precise about what these conditions are, but we can speculate that they might involve factors such as experience remoteness, duration, emotional intensity, etc. However, on the assessment that these resultant frequencies correlate to "difficulty to recall," it would be natural to suppose that if a child can remember a "more difficult to recall" class, they would be likely to recall all the memory classes that are "less difficult to recall" as well. Given this reasoning, the first five patterns given in Table 5 are the naturally expected ones, while the later patterns would be unexpected.

In the present study, 16 of the 21 children said they had "in the womb" memories and 15 of them said they had birth memories. Based on the classification in Table 5, the present subjects are analyzed in Table 6.

Because the children under the present investigation all have life-between-life memories, possible types occurring in the present data are

TABLE 6
Classification of Subjects by Presence or Absence
of the Four Types of Memories

Pattern (1–16 of Table 1)	Pattern 1	Pattern 2	Pattern 4	Pattern 9	Pattern 11	Pattern 12	Pattern 14
Number of occurrences	3	10	1	2	3	1	1

Pattern 1, Pattern 2, Pattern 8, Pattern 9, Pattern 11, Pattern 12, Pattern 14, and Pattern 16. As expected, Pattern 2, one of the natural patterns, is the highest in occurrence. Pattern 1, another of the natural patterns, is the second highest in occurrence, although it is equaled by Pattern 11. Therefore, the occurrence of the types seems to be in conformity with the conjecture that the first five patterns in Table 5 are natural ones that are expected to occur with the highest frequencies.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the presence of life-between-life memories does not depend on the presence of past-life memories. Thus, children with past-life memories must be viewed within the context that there is a larger group of children with one or various combinations of the four types of memories (“in the womb” memories, birth memories, life-between-life memories, and past-life memories), and that children with past-life memories and those with life-between-life memories are subgroups of this larger group. Based on theoretical considerations and the admittedly small number of examples, we have suggested that combinations of the four types of memories can be divided into natural patterns and irregular patterns. We hope that future investigation, with larger samples will demonstrate the validity of this conjectural analysis.

Notes

¹ In the case of children without past-life memories, the term “life-between-life memories” may be regarded as inappropriate because it implies the existence of past-life memories. However, because one of our goals is to point out the common characteristics between children with past-life memories and those without them, we will keep using the term without any implication that it presupposes the existence of past-life

memories. Note that we cannot avoid this problem by using other terms such as “intermission memories” or “bardo” because they have the same implication.

² The original report was written in Japanese by Hirata Atsutane in 1823. An English translation, which Ian Stevenson cites in his 1960 essay, was published by Lafcadio Hearn in 1897.

³ For example, the cases of Puti Patra and Veer Singh (Stevenson 1975), the cases of Disna Samarasinghe and Lalitha Abeyawardena (Stevenson 1977), and the case of Nasir Toksöz (Stevenson 1980). Numerous other examples are given by Stevenson (1983, 1997a, 1997b).

⁴ From these figures, we cannot know how many children were asked and said nothing.

⁵ These figures are based on 17 responses. Note that they should be taken with some reservation because most parents do not remember the exact age when their children started talking about life-between-life memories, therefore they answer “about two years old” or “probably three years old.” In such cases we ignored the “about” or “probably” and counted them as “two years old,” or “three years old.”

⁶ In Japan, young children usually bathe with their parents and the family bathtub is often an important place for parent–child communication.

⁷ This child might be describing “in the womb” memories. However, because he talked about other Stage II memories, we classified this statement as an example of life-between-life memories.

⁸ It is difficult to understand this claim because he also said he was with his cousin.

⁹ One child said she chose her father first because she saw him slightly earlier than her mother. We interpreted this statement as “simultaneous.”

¹⁰ There is a photograph of this event. Her mother emphasizes that the child had never seen the picture before the statement.

¹¹ Jim Tucker pointed out that the stories told by two of the three Japanese children are different from those told by other children of the reincarnation type (CORT) because the events described by them took place a long time before conception. This raises the question about when children choose their parents (if they actually do so as they claim), which will not be explored here.

¹² According to a survey conducted by Gallup in 2006–2008, Japan is ranked the 8th least religious country among 143 countries, with 25% of people answering “yes” to the question, “Is religion an important part of your daily life?” (Crabtree & Pelham 2009).

¹³ Sharma and Tucker (2004) point out the existence of culturally connected features in both near-death experiences and life-between-life memories. See

Kellehear (2009) for similarities and differences observed in near-death experiences reported from various countries.

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