

Survival of Bodily Death

An Esalen Invitational Conference
February 11 - 16, 2000

Reincarnation and Survival

Antonia Mills

During her presentation, Antonia Mills looked at the contribution reincarnation research has made towards the question of survival by summarizing Dr. Ian Stevenson's pioneering work on the topic (Stevenson 1960, 1974, 1977, 1987, 1997a, 1997b). She also discussed the replication studies, the new directions the research is taking and her own research on the reincarnation beliefs and experiences of the Native Americans of North America.

Mills began by noting the simple fact that reincarnation is a common cultural belief in non-Western societies all around the globe. In fact, it is only in the West, in Christian and most Moslem societies, that reincarnation is not posited as a given. Belief in reincarnation was expressed in the writings of Greek philosophers and the Christian theologian Origen, but was made anathema by the 2nd Council of Constantinople in 553 A.D. This was apparently because it was thought that people would strive to act better if they thought they only had one life to attain salvation.

Mills noted that Dr. Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia has been the pioneer in the contemporary attempt to scientifically study reincarnation, which he has done by carefully documenting cases of young children who seem to remember a past life. As reincarnation cases are more common in cultures that accept the concept, most of Stevenson's studies have been conducted in India (Stevenson 1975), Sri Lanka (Stevenson 1977), Thailand and Myanmar - formerly called Burma (Stevenson 1980), Turkey, Lebanon, (Stevenson 1983) and to a lesser extent the United States (Stevenson 1987). However, as one study in Northern India showed (Barker and Pasricha 1979), reincarnation memories were reported only once out of 500 people interviewed. Thus, reincarnation cases are not as common as Westerners have a tendency to think, although higher rates of reincarnation memories have actually been documented among some indigenous peoples, including Native Americans (Matlock 1990).

Ian Stevenson's research, which has extended over nearly forty years, has demonstrated some patterns that are stable across cultures. For example, as children grow older their memories of past lives frequently begin to fade. In addition, children who remember past lives often remember lives which ended in violent deaths (Cook et al 1983). They also found that the interval between death and rebirth is shorter in the cases in which the previous personality died violently. This raises the question of how much time normally elapses between death and re-birth. Mills noted that some re-births happen in a few days or months, while in others the interval is 10 years or longer. Cases in which there is a very long interval would be less likely to be diagnosed since the child would be in a position to make fewer recognitions of people and places from a life a hundred years before. Other patterns that have been noted are that some children remembering a previous life had a phobia related to the cause of death in the past life, and some have birthmarks and birth defects related to (often) fatal wounds or other marks on the concerned deceased person.

Indeed, one of the striking features of Stevenson's research, featured in his three volumes of 1997(a&b), has been the correlation between birthmarks or birth defects on the bodies of young children who are said to remember a previous life with wounds or scars received in the past life. Speaking to this remarkable aspect of Stevenson's work, Mills mentioned a case she studied in India in which a person had a round birthmark on his temple (Mills 1989). The autopsy of the person that child claimed to be revealed that the fatal bullet had entered the previous personality's temple in the same location where the child had the small round birthmark. The autopsy also showed that the bullet had exited behind the right ear of the previous personality. Going back to the child, Mills found that he had a distended area in the skull behind his right ear, matching the bullet point of exit. Stevenson (1997a,b) has documented other cases of bullet entry and exit wounds in reincarnation cases, as well as a wide variety of idiosyncratic wounds corresponding to subsequent birthmarks and birth defects on children who remember a previous life and death. He notes other cases, such as those coming from the indigenous Ibo of Nigeria, in which the practice of mutilating a deceased child relates to corresponding birth defects on children subsequently born (Stevenson 1985, 1997a,b). Stevenson also notes the correspondence of birthmarks on children in Burma with marks made on the deceased body of the previous personality (1983, 1997a,b).

Ian Stevenson is a voluminous researcher and his 2,500 cases of reincarnation are currently being entered into a computer data base for further analysis. Stevenson has determined that those cases must have at least two of the following characteristics to be entered into the computer data base:

1) Prediction of return or stated premortem wish 2) Announcing dreams (on the part of the mother or another relative of the previous personality) 3) Verbal memories 4) Behavioral memories 5) Recognition of people and places 6) Distinguishing birthmarks or birth defects that correlate to wounds or marks on the body of the previous personality

Following up on Stevenson's long research career, Erlendur Haraldsson, Jurgen Keil, and Antonia Mills have been doing replication studies to assess whether independent researchers would reach similar results (Haraldsson 1991; Keil 1991; Mills 1989; Mills, Haraldsson and Keil 1994). These replication studies have added to the rare and valuable cases in which there is a written record of the child's statements made before the previous personality has been identified and contact made with his or her family (Stevenson and Samararatne 1988). Mills described one such case that she investigated in India in which a little 3-year old boy reported in detail how some gangsters had shot him in a town called Fariha. Some ten years later, 75 kilometers away from the boy's place of residence, investigation showed that there was such a town, and that a young man resident there had been shot by gangsters, as the child had said (Mills and Lynn 2000). Mills took the boy and his family to the town, but at the age of 13, the boy did not recognize the site or family of the previous personality, in keeping with the typical amnesia that follows the initial or spontaneous recollection of the young child.

Mills (1992) and Haraldsson (1995, 1997) in particular have begun assessing the psychological parameters of children who remember a previous life, in India, Sri Lanka and in Lebanon. This is one of the areas noted (Mills and Lynn 2000) for further investigation. Keil (1996) has been assessing whether parental identification of a case (on the basis of a birthmark or an announcing dream, for example) later leads to the child speaking from the point of view of the previous personality, noting the frequency of "silent" cases.

Mills' recent work has looked at the reincarnation beliefs of a number of indigenous North American cultures (Mills 1994a,b,c). When Mills attended a Native American Sun Dance ritual ceremony in Montana 1969, she was struck by how common some deep philosophical concepts were among widely dispersed Native Americans, reincarnation beliefs among them. Several tribes that Mills has studied in detail are the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en from the Northwest coast in British Columbia (Mills 1988, Mills 1994). She is currently working on a book titled That's My Chair: Rebirth Narratives of the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en.

One of the noteworthy features of the reincarnation beliefs of the Gitksan is that they believe one person can reincarnate as multiple people simultaneously, although this happens rarely. A striking example of this is the Gitksan tribal member, Ellen Johnson, who before she died said she would come back 11 times. According to the Gitksan, she has come back 7 times in 7 different bodies since she died in 1987. All of these reincarnations have been within the bodies of her own descendants, for example, as the daughter of some of her favorite grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Such same-family cases are less strong than the ones found in larger societies such as India and Sri Lanka where the previous personality in nearly half the cases is unknown to the child and his or her family. Some of the same-family cases may be based primarily on hope and expectation; only two of the seven Ellen Johnson cases meet Stevenson's criteria for inclusion in the computer data base (as having two or more of the specified criteria).

Naturally, this raises the question of what comes back, the whole person or just certain aspects and particular skills of that original person? Mills pointed out that it is not just the Gitksan who maintain this outlook, but other cultures as well. In Tibet, for example, there is a belief that different aspects of a person's soul can go to different people, and also that one lama can come back as multiple people.

One of the central insights Mills has developed from her diverse research (like Stevenson) is that reincarnation cases consistently conform to cultural expectations. For example, cross-gender reincarnation cases occur more frequently in cultures that expect them and seldom in ones that don't. This raises the question of the degree to which it is the deceased person's choice that impacts the return.

Mills' work also brings up a number of fascinating theoretical and metaphysical issues for the question of survival and the human soul. From the point of view of the Gitksan, the ability to come back multiple times implies a much more complex relationship between bodies and souls in comparison to the seemingly simplistic notion of one soul always corresponding to one body. Mills pointed out that North American Indians believe that part of the soul stays in the deceased body while another part of it leaves to another dimension that is in relationship to our world. That portion can remain in that spirit world even as the "person" reincarnates, singly or multiply. Theories of the soul need to take account of the possibility that other worlds are in some kind of interaction with our world. From this perspective, it is not so amazing that the Gitksan tribe member, Ellen Johnson, could come back as 7 people, because she is thought to be relating to all 7 people from another dimension.

Overall, Mills' cross-cultural studies of reincarnation behoove survival researchers to appreciate that many humans beings from other non-Western cultures consider the hypothesis that there is a greater permeability to the human soul. The common notion of "one soul, one body" is perhaps a limited view of reincarnation imbued with Western biases that stress individuality, and uniqueness. Furthermore, since Mills' research (like Stevenson's) has displayed the great variety of beliefs that there are about the human soul and reincarnation, a potential or perennial research question would be to discern to what degree those cultural beliefs actually have a causal influence on the cases reported and on the way reincarnation actually works.

References

Barker, D., & Pasricha, S. K. (1979). Reincarnation cases in Fatehabad: A systematic survey in north India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 14, 231-240.

Cook, E. W., Pasricha, S., Samararatne, G., U Win Maung, & Stevenson, I. (1983). A Review and analysis of "unsolved" cases of the reincarnation type: II. Comparison of features of solved and unsolved cases. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 77, 115-135.

Haraldsson, E. (1991). Children claiming previous-life memories: Four cases in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 5, 233-261.

Haraldsson, E. (1995). Personality and abilities of children claiming previous-life memories. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 183, 445-451.

Haraldsson, E. (1997). A Psychological comparison between ordinary children and those who claim previous-life memories. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 11,323-335.

Keil, H. H. J. (1991). New cases in Burma, Thailand, and Turkey: A limited field study replication of some aspects of Ian Stevenson's research. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 5, 27-59.

Keil, H. H. J. (1996). Cases of the reincarnation type: An evaluation of some indirect evidence with examples of "silent" cases. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 10, 467-485.

Matlock, J. G. (1990). Of names and signs: Reincarnation, inheritance, and social structure on the northwest coast. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 1, 9-18.

Mills, A. (1988). A comparison of Witsuwit'en cases of the reincarnation type with Gitksan and Beaver. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 44, 385-415.

Mills, A. (1989). [A replication study: Three cases of children in north India who are said to remember a previous life](#). *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 3, 133-184.

Mills, A. (1992, December). Childhood alternate identities: A comparison of children said to remember previous lives and children with imaginary playmates. Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, CA.

Mills, A. (1994a). *Eagle down is our law: Witsuwit'en laws, feasts and land claims*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Mills A. (1994b). Reincarnation belief among North American Indians and Inuit: Context, distribution and variation. In A. Mills & R. Slobodin (Eds.), *Amerindian rebirth: Reincarnation belief among North American Indians and Inuit* (pp. 15-38). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Mills, A. (1994c). Rebirth and identity: Three cases of pierced ear birthmarks among the Gitksan. In A. Mills & R. Slobodin (Eds.), *Amerindian rebirth: Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit* (pp. 211-241), Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Mills, A., Haraldsson, E., & Keil, H. H. J. (1994). Replication studies of cases suggestive of reincarnation by three independent investigators. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 88, 207-219.

Mills, A. & Lynn, S.J. (2000). Past-Life Experiences. In E. Cardena, S. J. Lynn, & S. Krippner (eds). *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (pp. 283- 313. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Stevenson, I. (1960). The evidence of survival from claimed memories of former incarnations. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 54, 51-71; 54 (3), 95-117.

Stevenson, I. (1974). [Twenty cases suggestive of reincarnation \(2nd rev. ed.\)](#). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Stevenson, I. (1975). [Cases of the reincarnation type. Vol. 1, Ten cases in India](#). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Stevenson, I. (1977). [Cases of the reincarnation type. Vol. 2, Ten cases in Sri Lanka](#). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Stevenson, I. (1980). [Cases of the Reincarnation Type. Vol. 3, Twelve Cases in Lebanon and Turkey](#). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Stevenson, I. (1983). [Cases of the Reincarnation Type. Vol. 4, Twelve Cases in Thailand and Burma](#). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Stevenson, I. (1986). [Characteristics of cases of the reincarnation type among the Iqbo of Nigeria](#). *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 21, 204-16.

Stevenson, I. (1987). [Children who remember previous lives: A question of reincarnation](#). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Stevenson, I. (1990). [Phobias in children who claim to remember previous lives](#). *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 4, 243-254.

Stevenson, I. (1997a). [Biology and reincarnation: A contribution to the etiology of birthmarks and birth defects](#). Westport, CT.: Praeger.

Stevenson, I. (1997b). [Where biology and reincarnation intersect](#). Westport, CT.: Praeger.

Stevenson, I., & Samararatne, G. (1988). [Three new cases of the reincarnation type in Sri Lanka with written records made before verification](#). *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 2, 217-238.

[Conferences Menu](#) | [Summary Home](#)

[Transmission Theory](#) | [Inadequacies of Contemporary Mind/Brain Theories](#) | [Hylic Pluralism and Survival](#) | [Personality and Identity: What is it that Survives?](#) | [The Scole Report](#) | [Reincarnation and Survival](#) | [Non-Local Mind and Survival](#) | [Near Death Experiences as Evidence for Survival of Bodily Death](#) | [The Buddhist Perspective on Survival and Reincarnation](#) |

[About Esalen CTR](#)
[General Calendar](#)
[Web Links](#)
[Home](#)

[Leading Scholars](#)
[Articles & Book Reviews](#)
[Meditation Archives](#)
[Extraordinary Functioning Archives](#)

[Evolutionary Theory](#)
[Survival Research](#)
[Integral Capitalism](#)
[Past CTR Conferences](#)

For inquiries about Esalen's public workshops and classes, please visit www.esalen.org.

[Help](#)

Questions or comments about our website?
Send email to WebMedia@esalenctr.org.

All text, graphics and content of the Esalen CTR website
are Copyright 1999-2001 by Esalen Center for Theory & Research.
All rights reserved.