

ychology

Introduction

For more than 50 years, researchers have studied the phenomenon of young children reporting purported past-life memories (PLMs).¹

The vast majority of this work was pioneered and carried out by psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, at the University of Virginia. Stevenson investigated more than one thousand cases and published numerous articles and books presenting detailed case studies and typical features of this phenomenon (Stevenson, 1974; Stevenson, 2001). Most of the

cultural or language barriers, which may have impacted previous follow-up research.

normal integration of thoughts, feelings, and experiences into their stream of consciousness and memory” (Bernstein and Putnam, 1986). Two distinct types of dissociation have been described (Irwin, 1999). Milder nonpathological dissociative experiences can include experiences of psychological absorption, and they are thought to be manifestations of a dissociative trait that occurs on a continuum. More severe experiences, on the other hand, can indicate the potential presence of a dissociative disorder (e.g., dissociative identity disorder). On the DES, participants rate how often they experience 28 examples of daily life occurrences (when they are not under the influence of

Quantitative data on effects and importance of the childhood experience of alleged PLMs

Table 1 summarizes descriptive data related to the effect, importance, and impact of the alleged PLMs in different domains, based directly on participants' responses to multiple-choice questions. Parental attitudes toward the memories in childhood were retrospectively perceived as positive by most participants.

participants. Some participants who reported that the experience had no effect on their lives spoke matter-of-factly about it.

One 57-year-old woman said:

I did not dwell on the issue as I grew up. I was a child and pushed the memories to the back of my mind and never dwelled on it. My mom did not make a big deal of it and so I did not also. I have gone years at a time without even thinking of it.

Another 57-year-old woman said:

“Past life memories were what they were - a part of me. They did not shape who I am today nor did they shape any of my life choices.”

One recurring theme in multiple responses from participants regarding the positive impacts of alleged PLMs on their lives was the presence of an open-mindedness toward a broader, perhaps more spiritual, view of life and a deepened sense of purpose. A 48-year-old man said:

“The whole idea of it has made me open-minded about a lot of things that some would consider paranormal or whatever. I do not consider these things to be weird.”

Additionally, he expressed a conviction that *“the connections that we have in this lifetime are part of something larger; they do not exist in a vacuum”* and that *“we are all part of something larger.”* A 59-year-old

of general psychiatric patients scoring 30 or higher would qualify for a DID diagnosis, and this percentage is likely lower in unselected normal populations. In this sample, 4 participants (19% of participants for whom personality data was available) had DES scores of 30 or above. The two largest values (51.4 and 51.8), although not statistical outliers, are both higher than two standard deviations above the average DES. Both participants reported having been diagnosed with or treated for depression and anxiety and one of them additionally reported autism, ADHD, and OCD diagnoses.⁵

Fantasy proneness in this sample was slightly higher than in samples from unselected normal populations (Ws range: 46.5–58.5; ps range: 0.04–0.11), but lower compared to a sample of fantasy role players; however, this difference was not significant ($W = -38.5$; $p = 0.19$). In terms of subjective happiness, the participants were on par with undergraduate (p)1147n0 9 49.60s in Tc 0 ()-2.9 (a)19 (t)-5 (io)12 (n)8 (s ()TJETEMC /S2 2u(u)-n <</Lang937.5997273.8749 TmW= 75; u(u)-n <</Lang9

regarding reincarnation. The majority (65.2%, 15) of participants endorsed a belief in reincarnation, while an equal percentage (17.4%, 4) either reported being uncertain or responded negatively. Notably, these rates of endorsement of reincarnation are considerably higher than the 27% of Americans who hold such beliefs, as reported by [Pew Research Center \(2023\)](#).

Discussion

This study presents a follow-up assessment of American adults who were interviewed as children about their alleged past-life memories. Results indicate that the adults who expressed these memories as children lead normal, productive lives with families, relationships, and jobs across the spectrum of responsibilities and incomes. Among this sample of adults, there was very little evidence of self-reported detrimental impact of this experience in adulthood.

Their educational attainment was high, with 13 of the 23 reporting either undergraduate or graduate degrees. Overall, these findings are consistent with the previous follow-up studies in Lebanon and Sri Lanka that reported that adults with alleged childhood PLMs led normal lives ([Haraldsson, 2008](#); [Haraldsson and Abu-Izzedin, 2012](#)). Additionally, participants in the Sri Lankan study reported higher educational attainment compared to peers ([Haraldsson, 2008](#)), consistent with our findings in the current sample.

On average, the participants of the current study did not report major detrimental effects that they attribute to this experience. The rate of reported negative impacts in this sample was slightly lower than that observed in the Lebanese sample ([Haraldsson and Abu-Izzedin, 2012](#)), and considerably lower than in the Sri Lankan sample ([Haraldsson, 2008](#)). The rate of self-reported remembrance of the alleged PLMs in this American sample was significant, 2008

Psychological profile of American adults

likelihood that the alleged PLMs will impact some individuals

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank all the research participants who volunteered their time for this study. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the helpful research assistance of Diane Morini and Brittany Smith who helped with identifying up-to-date contact information for potential participants, Lori Derr who helped with managing our database of original cases, and Amir Jabr who helped with some of our narrative data.

References

- Acunzo, D., Cardeña, E., and Terhune, D. B. (2020). Anomalous experiences are more prevalent among highly suggestible individuals who are also highly dissociative. *Cogn. Neuropsychiatry*. 25:179–189.
- Barker, D. R., and Pasricha, S. K. (1979). Reincarnation cases in Fatehabad: a systematic survey in North India. *J. Asian Afr. Stud.* 14, 231–240. doi: 10.1177/002190967901400304
- Bernstein, E. M., and Putnam, F. W. (1986). Development, reliability, and validity of a dissociation scale. *J. Nerv. Ment. Dis.* 174, 727–735. doi: 10.1097/00005053-198612000-00004
- Cameron, T., and Roll, W. G. (1983). An investigation of apparitional experiences. *eta* 11, 74–78.
- Carlson, E. B., Putnam, F. W., Ross, C. A., Torem, M., Coons, P., Dill, D. L., et al. (1993). Validity of the dissociative experiences scale in screening for multiple personality disorder: a multicenter study. *Am. J. Psychiatry* 150, 1030–1036. doi: 10.1176/ajp.150.7.1030
- Cohen, J. (2009). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. 2nd Edn. New York, NY: Psychology Press, 567.
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., and Buchner, A. (2007). G*power 3: a flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behav. Res. Methods* 39, 175–191. doi: 10.3758/BF03193146
- Frischholz, E. J., Braun, B. G., Sachs, R. G., Hopkins, L., et al. (1990). The dissociative experiences scale: further replication and validation. *Dissociation Prog Dissociative Disord.* 3, 151–153.
- Gibson, C. The children who remember their past lives. *Washington Post*. (2024) Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2024/05/02/children-past-lives/> (Accessed February 10, 2024).
- Glisky, M. L., Tataryn, D. J., Tobias, B. A., Kihlstrom, J. F., and McConkey, K. M. (1991). Absorption, openness to experience, and hypnotizability. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 60, 263–272. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.60.2.263
- Gow, K. M., Hutchinson, L., and Chant, D. (2009). Correlations between fantasy proneness, dissociation, personality factors and paranormal beliefs in experiencers of paranormal and anomalous phenomena. *Aust. J. Clin. Exp. Hypn.* 37, 169–191.
- Haraldsson, E. (1997). A psychological comparison between ordinary children and those who claim previous-life memories. *J. Sci. Explor.* 11, 323–335.
- Haraldsson, E. (2003). Children who speak of past-life experiences: is there a psychological explanation? *Psychol. Psychother. Theory Res. Pract.* 76, 55–67. doi: 10.1348/14760830260569256
- Haraldsson, E. (2008). Persistence of past-life memories: study of adults who claimed in their childhood to remember a past life. *J. Sci. Explor.* 22, 385–393.
- Haraldsson, E., and Abu-Izzedin, M. (2012). Persistence of “past-life” memories in adults who, in their childhood, claimed memories of a past life. *J. Nerv. Ment. Dis.* 200, 985–989. doi: 10.1097/NMD.0b013e3182718c51
- Haraldsson, E., Fowler, P. C., and Periyannpillai, V. (2000). Psychological characteristics of children who speak of a previous life: a further field study in Sri Lanka. *Transcult. Psychiatry* 37, 525–544. doi: 10.1177/136346150003700403
- Irwin, H. J. (1999). Pathological and nonpathological dissociation: the relevance of childhood trauma. *J. Psychol.* 133, 157–164. doi: 10.1080/00223989909599730
- John, O. P., and Srivastava, S. (1999). “The big five trait taxonomy: history, measurement, and theoretical perspectives” in *Handbook of personality: theory and research*. eds. L. O. Pervin and O. P. John. 2nd ed (New York, NY, US: Guilford Press), 102–138.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Lifshitz, M., van Elk, M., and Luhrmann, T. M. (2019). Absorption and spiritual experience: a review of evidence and potential mechanisms. *Conscious. Cogn.* 73:102760. doi: 10.1016/j.concog.2019.05.008

Lyubomirsky, S., and Lepper, H. S. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Soc. Indic. Res.* 46, 137–155. doi: 10.1023/A:1006824100041

Merckelbach, H., Horselenberg, R., and Muris, P. (2001). The creative experiences questionnaire (CEQ): a brief self-report measure of fantasy proneness. *Personal. Individ. Differ.* 31, 987–995. doi: 10.1016/S0191-8869(00)00201-4

Paloutzian, R. F., and Ellison, C. W. (1982). “Loneliness, spiritual well-being and the quality of life” in *Loneliness: a sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*. eds. L. A. Peplau and D. Perlman (New York: Wiley), 224–237.

Paloutzian, R. F., and Ellison, C. W. (1991). *Manual for the spiritual well-being scale*. Nyack, New York: Life Advance.

Panchal, N., Saunders, H., Rudowitz, R., and Cox, Cynthia. (2023). The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use. Available at: <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/> (Accessed 29 May, 2024).

Parra, A. (2006). Seeing and feeling ghosts: absorption, fantasy proneness, and healthy schizotypy as predictors of crisis apparition experiences. *J. Parapsychol.* 70, 357–372.

Pasquini, G., and Keeter, S. At least four-in-ten U.S. adults have faced high levels of psychological distress during COVID-19 pandemic. *Pew Research Center*. (2022). Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/12/at-least-four-in-ten-u-s-adults-have-faced-high-levels-of-psychological-distress-during-covid-19-pandemic/> (Accessed May 29, 2024).

Patihis, L., and Lynn, S. J. (2017). Psychometric comparison of dissociative experiences scales II and C: a weak trauma-dissociation link. *Appl. Cogn. Psychol.* 31, 392–403. doi: 10.1002/acp.3337

Pehlivanova, M., Janke, M. J., Lee, J., and Tucker, J. B. (2018). Childhood gender nonconformity. *Childhood* 30, 29–40. doi: 10.1111/cdev.12997

