

Reincarnation Fraud and Self-Deception

The investigative reincarnation literature includes at least some specious cases. The ethereal nature of past-life memories affords great scope for fantasy-based and even fraudulent claims, made in search of attention, greater self-esteem, prestige, opportunity or financial gain. Such cases often involve claims of having lived past lives as famous deceased people. This article describes cases considered by Ian Stevenson and other researchers to be spurious.

Prevalence and Effects of Spurious Cases

In 1988, [reincarnation](#) researcher [Ian Stevenson](#) co-published a paper with colleagues [Satwant Pasricha](#) and Godwin Samararatne entitled 'Deception and Self-Deception in Cases of the Reincarnation Type'.¹ This was intended in part to respond to complaints that Stevenson never published such cases. The paper described seven cases of children whose claims were endorsed by at least one adult, and seemed promising enough to Stevenson and/or other researchers assisting him that they travelled to the young subjects' homes to conduct interviews, although in three cases, they had suspicions before doing so. The authors point out that these cases are not merely unsolved (that is, the previous incarnation was never truly identified) or weak evidentially,² but also, in the judgement of the researchers, compromised by 'false or seriously distorted testimony' to the point that claimed identifications should be dismissed.³ Five of the cases involve claimed past lives of internationally famous individuals (John F Kennedy, Mahatma Gandhi and the biblical King David) or people prominent in their community.

Stevenson and his co-authors quantitatively compared the seven suspect cases with cases they had not rejected at time of writing from the same four countries. The results show suspect cases were rare, making up less than 1% of the total in each country, which for India was 327; Sri Lanka, 176; Turkey, seventeen; Israel, nine.⁴

Other researchers have described a few likely spurious cases (see below).

Such cases can be used by detractors to discredit the notion of reincarnation. Reincarnation research [James G Matlock](#) writes: 'Far from providing proof of reincarnation ... they show how identifications can be made on the weakest of grounds; and, for skeptics, they do nothing but confirm that there is nothing of substance to cases of past-life memory'.⁵

Forms of Evidence and Casual Claims

Stevenson used only the following indicators as primary evidence in his cases:

- spontaneous past-life memories (of events, places, facts, people, etc) of children that were verified and highly unlikely to have been communicated to the child in any normal way

- spontaneous or well-controlled accurate recognitions of people known to the child's previous incarnation (in person or in photographs)
- specific verified [behavioural similarities](#) between the child and the previous incarnation
- [birthmarks](#), [birth defects](#) and medical conditions that corresponded with injuries or illnesses suffered by the previous incarnation and recorded in official records
- [announcing and departure dreams](#), but only as secondary evidence

Stevenson did not use facial or physical similarities in making identifications unless they were highly striking and unlikely (for instance, a fair-skinned child who recalled a past life as a Caucasian but was born into a dark-skinned family).⁶ He eschewed past-life readings by psychics as being liable to deception;⁷ déjà vu experiences, as these can have other causes;⁸ and memories induced by hypnotic regression, which are subject to suggestion by the hypnotist.⁹ He did not even mention synchronistic patterns which to some people are suggestive of having lived a past life, such as being in a particular place or experiencing events on certain dates that seem meaningful,¹⁰ or a feeling of 'resonance' with a deceased person.

All these phenomena are cited as evidence of past lives in the many unlikely claims found on English-language internet reincarnation forums and social media communities. A reason for their proliferation is likely to be the difficulty of directly falsifying past-life identities as a result of the subjective nature of past-life memory.

Examples follow of cases considered spurious by reincarnation researchers.

Fantasy Past Lives

Alfred Peacock

Philosopher and researcher [Titus Rivas](#) published a journal paper in 1991 about a retired engineer who insisted he was the reincarnation of Alfred Peacock, an infant passenger on the *Titanic* who had perished in its sinking. 'FH', as Rivas called him, experienced images of his English mother taking him by car, underground and train to a ship headed to the Americas, which then sank, drowning him. He thought he could remember his name being something like 'A...ed'. Upon reading a book on the *Titanic* disaster, which had happened a few years before he was born, then reading the passenger list, FH concluded he had been baby Alfred. Finding records of an Alfred Peacock, in Romford, who had been born on the same day and month the *Titanic* had departed (an apparent synchronicity) was the clinching proof in FH's mind.¹¹

Rivas, aided by other researchers, found that that key memories cited by FH – his birth date and age, and his memory of the family's bodies being found, of third-class passengers being allowed to tour the entire ship, and the existence of a daycare service – were in fact wrong for the Romford Alfred. Their suspicions were reinforced by FH's reaction to their findings: he insisted that there must be another

Alfred Peacock who did match his memories, that his mother had lied about his age, that historians had hidden facts for financial reasons, and so forth.

Buddhist Monk

Stevenson and his co-authors reported the case of an Indian Buddhist monk whose cousin died of illness saying he would be reborn in northern India. Directed to a particular location there by an astrologer, the monk found a family with a young son whose name was the same as his deceased cousin. He tested the boy by offering him a ten-rupee bill and a gold watch that had belonged to the cousin and was convinced when the boy eagerly took the watch, saying it was his.

Witnesses, however, said that the monk had in effect told the boy the watch was his. Investigations by local researchers employed by Stevenson indicated that the villagers had played along with the monk's grief-prompted certainty in the hope of gain, and that the case was one of wishful thinking.[12](#)

Parental Imposition of Identity

Kenedi Alkan

Also detailed in Stevenson's paper is the case of Kenedi Alkan, so named because his father was convinced he was the reincarnation of the assassinated American president John F Kennedy. Shortly before his son's birth in 1965, two years after the assassination, the father had a dream in which the deceased president entered his house to stay with him. Interviewed by another researcher in 1985, Kenedi's father claimed his son had declared himself to be Kennedy as a young child. The family maintained he was unusually industrious and had excelled in school (though he had left early and become a labourer), was considered a leader and wanted to travel to America. He himself claimed to have a birthmark on his shoulder, although the fatal bullets actually hit the president on the head and neck. Stevenson concluded that this was a case of a parent imposing an identity on a child.[13](#)

Christian Haupt

The case of American baseball prodigy Christian Haupt is recounted in a book published by his mother in 2017.[14](#) She maintained that Christian had been the 1920s American baseball star Lou Gehrig in a previous life.

Christian showed an extraordinary talent for and dedication to baseball from a very early age and declared that he had been a 'tall baseball player'. He also showed accurate remembrance of period details, such as the fact that professional baseball teams travelled in the 1920s by train and always played during the day, since stadium lights had not yet been invented,

The claim was investigated tentatively by reincarnation researcher [Jim B Tucker](#), who now holds Stevenson's position at the University of Virginia and has a particular interest in American child cases. Tucker has published three other cases in which the past incarnation was a prominent American: a Hollywood actor, the screenwriter of *Gone With the Wind*, and a championship golfer.[15](#) However, Tucker

declined to publish about the Haupt case, as he remained unconvinced that the Gehrig identification was correct.^{[16](#)} A particular problem is the conflicting versions given by Christian's mother. His mother writes in her book that when she showed him a picture of the team he pointed at Gehrig and said 'That's me' (which by her own account she alone witnessed).^{[17](#)} But in an article published three years earlier in a local newspaper,^{[18](#)} this supposedly-crucial moment is omitted.

Media Error and Fraud

Carl Edon

At the age of two, Carl Edon of Middlesbrough, England, began to mention having once crashed an aeroplane through a window. As he grew older he elaborated that he had been a German pilot killed by crashing into a building while on a bombing raid over England in World War II. He drew Nazi symbols and a sketch of the control panel of a plane's cockpit and showed some typical German behaviours and a liking for Germany.^{[19](#)}

In 1982, when Carl was twelve, the case began to gain publicity in local and international publications. In 1997, construction excavations turned up the wreckage of a German Dornier 217-E bomber that had crashed after hitting a balloon cable in 1942 near Middlesbrough. There was media speculation that this might be connected to Carl Edon's memories, and that Carl's previous life had been that of the pilot, Joachim Lehnis.^{[20](#)} Carl's family thought it was more likely to have been that of another crew member, bombardier Heinrich Richter. But key discrepancies – Carl had said his name was Robert, he had flown a Messerschmidt and had crashed into the window of a building – left reincarnation researchers unconvinced.^{[21](#)}

Matlock writes: 'The newspaper that first reported Carl's story updated it and posted it online, without noting the lack of correspondence between Carl's memories and Richter's death. That posting and a 2015 YouTube video about the case leave the impression that it is now solved – no doubt a major part of the reason these links have spread so widely around the web.'^{[22](#)}

Druze Boy

Internet websites give accounts of an Israeli Druze boy who spoke of having been murdered in a previous life. He is said to have identified the murderer, who then confessed. The narrative was first given in a 2005 book *Children Who Have Lived Before*^{[23](#)} by regressionist and writer Trutz Hardo. Hardo claimed it had been described to him by an Israeli physician, Eli Lasch, although Lasch made no mention of it in his autobiography.^{[24](#)}

The boy said he had been killed with an axe, a detail which corresponded with the a linear birthmark on his head.

A posse of fifteen men including his father toured the area with him. At a certain village the boy is said to have recalled his past-life name, pointed out the man who

had killed him and accurately pointed out where his body had been buried; the murderer is said to have confessed.

The story was picked up by the *Epoch Times*²⁵ and has since proliferated on the Internet. However, attempts by [Erlendur Haraldsson](#) to find the boy and his family were unsuccessful, and a local researcher considered the story to be unfounded.²⁶

David Morris

A 1968 issue of the occult magazine *Fate* describes a case of David Morris, an Israeli boy, who appeared to some to be the reincarnation of the biblical King David. At age three, the child spoke ancient Hebrew which scholars translated as a speech rallying his soldiers. He built a replica of King David's temple out of toy blocks and revealed the existence of a secret passage under Jerusalem which King David might have used to capture the city.

Two investigations were made, one by an Israeli associate of Stevenson, another by a second magazine that was considering reprinting the story. Neither David Morris nor any of the individuals quoted – including his father, a historian, a psychologist, an archaeologist and a rabbi – could be traced, and it was found that the supposedly secret tunnel was already known. The article's author, Leo Heiman, protested that he had used pseudonyms to protect their privacy. But *Fate* retracted it and accepted no more contributions from him.

Walter Semkiw

Walter Semkiw, a reincarnation author, claims on his website to have identified, with the help of psychic Kevin Ryerson, previous lives of dozens of celebrities, on the basis of facial resemblance, similarity of interests, analysis of literary style and synchronistic patterns. However, academic reincarnation researchers have pointed to serious shortcomings in this work. Semkiw has not published in peer-reviewed academic journals; he does not interview his subjects, or seek to find out if they have verifiable past-life memories that can be verified. Nor does he search for the idiosyncratic groups of specific behavioural correspondences one sees in Stevenson's case reports. When working with Ryerson, he does not use blinding, preferring simply to present an identification to Ryerson and ask whether it is correct, which is claimed to be 85% of the time.

Matlock believes that Semkiw is largely responsible for the popular notion that people always resemble their previous incarnations (which Stevenson did not find) and for the 'fad of side-to-side photographs in support of matches',²⁷ which Semkiw promotes despite the known frequency of purely coincidental facial resemblance.²⁸

Edgar Cayce

Spurious past-life identifications may also be made by psychics. No one has yet attempted to verify all of the thousands of past-life readings given by the American psychic [Edgar Cayce](#), whose work has been influential in the New Age movement. Matlock notes that Cayce biographer Gina Cerminara stated that some of Cayce's

identifications have been verified and others proven wrong, that philosopher [Cl. Ducasse](#) was unable to find records of the person Cayce told him he had been, and that Cayce's Egypt-related readings contained datings which were tens of millennia off those accepted by Egyptologists.[29](#)

Religion scholar J Gordon Melton performed a statistical analysis on a sample of Cayce's readings. He found that the eras and cultures in which the past lives were supposedly lived were mostly limited to the small number commonly known to Americans of Cayce's time; a disproportionate number – as many as half in some periods – were purportedly of royalty or nobility. Melton also identified features of the readings, such as the prominence of Atlantis, drawn from Theosophical readings of history and philosophy.[30](#) Matlock points out that Cayce's concepts of karma and the Akashic Records are also drawn from Theosophy, to which he had been introduced by a client shortly before he began to give his life readings.[31](#)

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988). All information in this section is drawn from this source unless otherwise noted.
- [2](#). For samples of relatively weak cases, see Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 57-72. From a sample of thirty Druze children from which one very strong case (Nazih al-Danaf) had been removed, Haraldsson randomly chose three to investigate more deeply, and gives their case reports here.
- [3](#). Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988), 2.
- [4](#). Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988), 3.
- [5](#). Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 260.
- [6](#). For examples, see Stevenson (1997), 1764-855.
- [7](#). Stevenson (2001), 41-42.
- [8](#). Stevenson (2001), 47-49.
- [9](#). Stevenson (2001), 45-47.
- [10](#). See Matlock (2019), 232-33.
- [11](#). Rivas (1991). All information in this section is drawn from this source.
- [12](#). Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988), 6.
- [13](#). For the brief full report see Stevenson, Pasricha, & Samararatne (1988), 22-26.
- [14](#). Byrd (2017).
- [15](#). See Tucker, (2013), 88-119 (Ryan / Marty Martyn); 122-30 (Lee / Sydney Coe Howard); and 130-35 (Hunter / Bobby Jones).
- [16](#). Matlock (2019), 102.
- [17](#). Byrd (2017), 47.
- [18](#). Byrd (2014).
- [19](#). Stevenson (2003), 67-68.
- [20](#). Stevenson (2003), 73.
- [21](#). Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 258-60.
- [22](#). Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 259-60. See [here](#) for an example cited by Matlock of a newspaper account and [here](#) for a web account. The 2015 YouTube video he cites is no longer available, but a YouTube search for 'Carl Edon' produces others.
- [23](#). Hardo (2005).
- [24](#). Lasch (1998).

- [25.](#) *Epoch Times* has deleted the story, but it [lives on](#).
- [26.](#) Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 256-58.
- [27.](#) Matlock (2019), 231-33, from which all information in this section is drawn unless otherwise noted.
- [28.](#) See [here](#), for instance.
- [29.](#) Matlock (2019), 229-30.
- [30.](#) Melton (1994).
- [31.](#) Matlock (2019), 82-83.