CHAPTER VI
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The phenomena studied by parapsychologists were kept outside the purview of scientific investigations until the late nineteenth century; and claims to remember previous lives did not receive any serious attention until about two decades ago. The claims of some persons that they were able to recall spontaneously the events of previous lives earlier attracted little attention from scientists. In general, the few scientists who became aware of such claims offered conventional interpretations to explain them and dismissed the idea of looking closer by declaring this to be a worthless effort. Even those who proposed normal interpretations for the cases did so without presenting any empirical evidence for their "hunches."

The review of previous work in this area shows that there are hardly any studies prior to the present investigation, except for one-single systematic investigation. This is by Stevenson who has objectively and intensively examined the claims of these subjects since 1961. His investigations are still in progress. There have been a few surveys of the belief in reincarnation, but there have been no systematic studies where the belief has been studied in relation to actual cases of the reincarnation type.
Recently there have been increasing reports of persons (mostly children) who claim to recall previous lives. In a period of less than three years available for the data collection of the present investigation (November 1974 to March 1977) 76 such cases were reported to the present investigator. The present investigator was encouraged by the large number of reports and the dearth of scientific inquiries into the claims advanced. The present investigation was undertaken with the hope that it would contribute to the existing knowledge of human behavior, both abnormal and paranormal.

The present study was conducted with two main objects in view: First, to verify objectively the claims of the subjects in order to arrive at an interpretation that would adequately explain most of the features of the cases; and second, to learn about the influence of the belief in reincarnation on the occurrence of these cases and, conversely, the influence of the knowledge of such a case in shaping the beliefs of persons.

For the objective verification of the claims of rebirth the usual clinical methods of case-history and interview techniques were employed. Special care was taken in preparing the questionnaires and proformas that would detect the evidence for various plausible hypotheses from the case material available.

In order to learn about the belief in reincarnation and its influence on the occurrence of such cases, a special questionnaire was prepared. This measured the strength of belief of a person and the related concepts.
Out of the 76 cases reported to the investigator, 60 were contacted in various parts of north India. There were two reasons for studying the cases in north India. First, the cases were reported from that part of the country; and second, the investigator was well versed in the languages spoken there. When the claims of these 60 subjects were investigated, it was found that 15 of the cases belonged in some other category, such as fraud, "spiritistic communications," and a category that was described as "Parkaya Parvesh" by the informants. (This term subsumes instances in which the subject was born before the death of the concerned previous personality.) All these 15 deviant cases were excluded from the final analysis. The final sample therefore consisted of 45 cases.

The sample for the study of the belief in reincarnation consisted of 137 respondents. Seventy-one of these respondents were either related to families concerned in the above mentioned cases, or they had known another rebirth case at firsthand. The remaining 66 respondents did not know of any specific case. (However, they were aware of the present investigation.) They were living in Bangalore at the time of the interview. Although the sample served the purpose of comparing the two groups in terms of their knowledge of a case and its impact on their belief, it had some limitations in other respects. For example, the groups could not be matched with regard to socioeconomic status and education. Despite this weakness the survey produced some valuable information. It showed that the belief in
Reincarnation is widely held among persons of different groups drawn from widely differing socioeconomic and geographical sections of India.

In most of the cases, the main events had already occurred and the experiences of the subjects had been communicated to all the family members concerned before an attempt at verification was made. This situation resembles that in other clinical manifestations where the clinician mostly does not get the opportunity to observe the onset of a phenomenon. Instead, he must form his opinion on the basis of the information given to him by informants who have observed the patient during the "attack." Similarly, in the present investigation, information was gathered from various sources in order to understand and reconstruct the events involved in the cases.

An attempt was made to interview as many informants as were available. As many as 11 informants were interviewed in some cases. The same persons were sometimes interviewed on different occasions, some of them on three or four occasions. In all, a total of 319 informants were interviewed; this figure includes 31 subjects of the cases. Forty-seven of the informants were interviewed twice and eight were interviewed on three separate occasions. In all, 382 interviews were held during 196 visits that were made at different intervals throughout 51 weeks (April 1975 through March 1978) of field work.

Most of the subjects gave sufficient details regarding the previous lives they claimed to remember. In 38 cases (84%)
the respective previous personalities were identified and the subjects' statements verified. Five subjects recalled previous lives as members of their present families. They claimed to be the lineal descendants of the previous personalities. In the remaining 40 cases, the two families concerned were widely separated both geographically and genealogically.

The case material obtained from the field investigations was analyzed both with regard to individual cases as well as with regard to recurrent features that were found in many cases. The most significant of the latter will be summarized next.

The majority of the cases were reported either from towns or villages. The subjects' ages ranged between three and one-half to 35 years at the time of the first interviews with them. Seventy-one per cent of them were under the age of 15.

There was a preponderance of male subjects in the present sample. It might be thought that this arose from a greater readiness of parents to allow the investigation of boy subjects than of girl subjects. But rejections of the investigation had not occurred except in one case, and it seems unlikely that this factor alone could account for the skewed male/female ratio in the present group. It is also possible that male lives are remembered more often than female ones because men in India lead in general more eventful lives than do women. This may be due to the fact that men engage in more dangerous vocational activities and are more inclined than women to use violence in settling their disputes. Therefore, it would be expected that
male subjects would preponderate because of the relatively high incidence of violent deaths in male previous personalities.

Apart from the factor of violent death, the other demographic features were more or less representative of the general population. The sample consisted of subjects from all socio-economic strata, educated and uneducated ones. And the subjects came from all residential areas, namely villages, towns, and cities.

The subjects started talking about the previous lives between the ages of two and four (with the median age of 36 months) and continued to talk about them up to a median age of 79 months. They talked irrespective of the encouragement or discouragement they received from the people in their environment.

Unusual behavioral features were found in most of the cases. Although this behavior was unusual for the subject's family, it was concordant with his statements concerning a previous life. Such behavior might include: unusual likes or dislikes toward food, clothes, persons, and themes of play; phobias of bladed weapons; wells, and guns; and philias, most of them related to the previous personality's mode of death. These behavioral features sometimes persisted in the subjects even when the imaged memories of the previous lives had apparently faded.

The median intermission between death and presumed rebirth was 14.5 months. It varied from one day to 224 months. The data showed some tendency for length of intermission to accord
with beliefs about what the length of intermission should be. For example, three of the respondents who were Jains said that the intermission was nine months, and all others said that it varies for each individual. (Other than these three Jain respondents, those who said that it is "fixed for all persons" did not claim to know what the length of the fixed interval was.) In two cases, the related previous personalities were Jains and their intermission was found to be exactly nine months. (In the only one of Stevenson's Jain cases for which he obtained reliable data about birth and death, the intermission was also nine months.)

The related previous personalities of these cases in general died younger than the expected age for persons of their generation. The median age at death was found to be 45 years, whereas the expected life span at birth (for the same generation) is 52.6 years. Another notable feature was that the incidence of violent death was far higher among the previous personalities of these cases than it is in the general population. However, there was not much difference between male and female previous personalities as far as mode of death was concerned. Violent death occurred slightly more often among male previous personalities than among female ones. However, this feature alone should not be taken as responsible for recall of previous lives, since the violent death rate is far higher than the case rate, at least the rate of reported cases. Also, certain features of recall were present in most of the cases irrespective
of the previous personality's mode of death; for example, the recall of the name of the related previous personality.

Some other observations were made with regard to the mode of death and its association with other factors.

Subjects who claimed to recall previous lives in the same family always remembered lives that ended in natural death. In each of the five cases in the sample in which both personalities concerned belonged to the same family, either on the maternal or paternal side, the previous personality had died at a relatively mature age.

Some factors were found significantly related to a violent mode of death. These features were: birthmarks, animosities, phobias, and recall of the mode of death and of other events related to the death.

Evidence for extrasensory perception was found in only three subjects.

Since, as mentioned earlier, Stevenson's is the only available study on the subject, the present findings were compared with his findings on 50 Indian cases. In all, 53 factors were compared. The two series showed significant differences in only nine of these 53 factors. These were: (1) Population of residence of subjects (2) Population of residence of previous personalities (3) Educational level of subject's father (4) Age of subject's first speaking in coherent phrases (5) Evidence of adult attitude in subjects (6) Evidence of ESP in subjects (7) Previous personalities' age at death (8) Status of
investigation of cases (9) Direction of difference in economic status between previous and present personalities. The first six factors seem to be interrelated. Since the two samples were derived differently, most of the cases in Stevenson's group came from cities and towns compared with the group of the present study which were found mainly in towns and villages. When the subjects' families live in urban areas, they have better opportunities and also more need for higher education in order to qualify for many occupations. Stevenson's subjects started speaking relatively earlier. This also could be attributed to the living conditions of his subjects. The parents in his group were better educated and therefore they could provide more stimulus for their children to learn how to speak. Also, such parents would have taken cognizance more readily of such features as the presence or absence of ESP and an adult attitude on the part of the subject.

Stevenson studied his cases earlier than the present investigator. The life expectancy has increased from what it was two decades ago. Since he has been studying cases for a number of years, most of his cases have been followed longer and investigated more thoroughly. The difference in degree of difference in economic status was probably due to Stevenson's not using a standard scale for evaluating the economic status in his cases.

The belief in reincarnation questionnaire revealed that the belief existed even amongst persons who did not know of any actual rebirth case. But such persons' knowledge differed from
that of persons who were in some way or other directly associated with such a case. Both knowledge and belief were considerably influenced by firsthand acquaintance with a rebirth case. The respondents with direct knowledge of a case said (usually) that they had believed in reincarnation before, but their belief had been strengthened or weakened depending upon their experience with the case they had observed. Also, their answers regarding other details were based on the features of the cases they knew. For instance, persons who knew about cases with birthmarks said that they would accept cases on the basis of birthmarks, which should correspond with the previous personality's wounds; those who knew of cases whose subjects were born soon after the death of the previous personality said that rebirth occurs instantly; and those who knew of cases with longer intermission said this varies or is longer for everyone. On the other hand, persons who did not know of a case gave answers based on their knowledge of scriptures or other literature pertaining to the subject of reincarnation.

On the basis of the present findings, it can also be said that the belief in reincarnation does not necessarily produce rebirth cases, since the belief occurs more frequently than the cases. Disbelief in reincarnation, on the other hand, could not quite change the features of the cases. (Yet it might have been responsible for suppression of cases.) The present group had two Muslim subjects, but the features of their cases did not differ from those whose families believed in reincarnation.
Stevenson compared aspects of the belief in reincarnation with the features of the cases found in several different cultures (Stevenson, 1970, 1973, 1974b, 1975b). It seems likely that the belief in reincarnation has a circular relationship with the occurrence of cases. In other words, belief facilitates the recognition and expression of such experiences; and the occurrence of the cases strengthens the belief.

The individual cases were analyzed with regard to possible hypotheses that may account for the subject's claims. The main hypotheses fall into two groups: those that suppose some normal means of communication between persons knowing the facts about the concerned personality and the subject; and those that suppose the subject acquired his correct information about the concerned previous personality through some other, that is, paranormal process.

To take the first group first, the following hypotheses were considered on the side of normal communication of the information to the subject about the life of the deceased person who the child claims he has been.

**Fantasy.** Various critics have suggested that subjects make such claims out of imagination in order to avoid some unpleasant situation, such as an unhappy home. This hypothesis can be set aside since in 86 per cent of the cases, the claims of the subjects have been verified and the respective previous personalities have been identified. The subjects of these cases were therefore talking about real persons who had actually
lived; they were not just inventing fictional persons. Furthermore, all of the subjects do not claim to have lived before in better socioeconomic situations. In fact, some of them claimed to have been in much poorer situations in the remembered previous lives.

**Fraud.** The next hypothesis considered is that of fraud. This hypothesis assumes that persons, either the child or his family, fabricate a case to achieve some personal gain. Only one case of fraud could be identified during the present investigation. In no other case was any motivation for fraud or other indication of it detected that seemed strong enough to explain the case.

**Genetic memory.** The next hypothesis that has been suggested is that the claimed memories of previous life of a child are passed on to him through genetic transmission. In the present series of cases, only five subjects were lineal descendants of their claimed previous personalities. In the remainder of the cases the subjects were not related—even distantly—to the previous personalities. Therefore the question of genetic transmission does not arise in them. In two cases in which a biological relationship did exist, the subjects remembered the mode of death of the respective previous personalities but, in principle, this could not have been possible by "inherited memory," since the supposedly transmitting parent of the subjects had been born long before the death of the related previous personality.
Cryptomnesia. Another interpretation that has been suggested as an explanation for these claims is cryptomnesia. In this hypothesis the subject's knowledge about a previous life is not in question, but he is thought to have come by it normally. In the absence of information in the child's environment, how can any knowledge be passed on to him? In 21 of the 45 present cases, there were no connections between the two families concerned before the development of the case. This hypothesis has certain other weaknesses and fails to explain various features of the cases. For example, the process of cryptomnesia (at least in cases of the parapsychological literature) almost always manifests itself in altered states of consciousness; but the subjects of the cases under study here almost always narrated their experiences when in a normal mental condition. Furthermore, the usual subject of a case of cryptomnesia gives few details about his experience and these have usually been traced to some book. In contrast, the subjects of the present investigation gave many details sufficient (usually) to identify the deceased persons to whom they were referring, and often many others as well. Finally, the hypothesis of cryptomnesia cannot account for the behavioral features shown by the subjects that correspond well with the behavior of the concerned previous personalities.

Paramnesia. Paramnesia is a disorder of memory—that of false recollections. A person, on seeing a new place or meeting
A stranger feels that he has been to the place or has met the person before. A variant of this phenomenon is also known as *déjà vu*. But most of the subjects of the present cases do not come under this category, since they started talking of new places or persons even before visiting or meeting them.

It is possible that informants for the cases had some degree of paramnesia. Many of them possibly—and some of them certainly—gave discrepant testimony on some details. This means—assuming their intention to be helpful—that they misremembered some events and therefore had a degree of paramnesia. But a careful review of the testimony makes it most improbable that such errors could account for the main features of the cases. Moreover, confidence in the testimony is increased by the similar features found in so many of the cases. The informants for the different cases did not know each other, except in rare instances. So paramnesia on their part does not account for the similarities among the different cases. It is not reasonable to suppose that separated informants would commit the same errors of memory over and over again.

After having eliminated the hypotheses of normal communication of the information to the subject, hypotheses of paranormal interpretations were considered.

*Extrasensory perception and personation.* This hypothesis suggests that the subjects are gifted with ESP and obtain their correct information regarding the concerned deceased person.
 paranormally—most probably by telepathy—from his surviving relatives and friends. Then with this information the subject reconstructs a new personality for himself. In a facilitating environment where the belief in reincarnation exists, his claimed memories are accepted as evidence of reincarnation (Chari, 1962a, 1962b; Murphy, 1973).

This hypothesis has several limitations for explaining the features displayed by the cases in the present investigation. It cannot adequately account for the behavioral features shown by the subjects. Furthermore, the subjects (with two exceptions) showed no evidence of extrasensory perception apart from their claimed memories. This hypothesis also cannot explain birthmarks on the body of a subject that correspond closely with wounds on the body of the deceased person of whom the subject has been talking. The correspondences between these birthmarks and wounds on the concerned previous personalities were independently verified from the relatives of the deceased persons. In addition, some autopsy reports were examined for more definite confirmation. Finally, cases have also been reported and studied in the present group where the environment did not facilitate such claims. Cases among Muslims would be examples of this.

Possession. This hypothesis supposes that the body of the subject is taken over or is "possessed" by some spirit, temporarily or permanently. This hypothesis has some appeal, but it fails to explain aspects of the unusual behavior on the
part of the subject. Such behavior often long outlasts the fading away of the subject's imaged memories of the previous life that he earlier remembered. If these memories were due to the influence of a persisting discarnate personality on the subject, one would expect imaged memories and associated behavior to cease together when the presumed possessing spirit withdrew from the subject.

Reincarnation. All the above mentioned hypotheses are known to exist from independent evidence. But they can be eliminated in the present cases unless particular evidence found in the cases justifies retaining and preferring them. If the cases do not contain adequate evidence for these other hypotheses, one is justified in considering that of reincarnation. It explains most of the features of these cases more adequately than the hypotheses mentioned above. Even if it is impossible to exclude them beyond all doubt, they appear to be less probable explanations than reincarnation itself. Secondly, the comparative study of the present and Stevenson's findings suggests that these cases derive from some natural phenomenon—one occurring more or less as reported by the informants. The similarities between the cases of the present investigation and those studied by Stevenson suggest that all the cases derive from some common process, which may be reincarnation.

In conclusion, it must be added that the sample had its own limitations. All the cases have flaws, as everything
connected with human testimony can have. The cases investigated for the present research were all drawn from a part of north India, namely the states of Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab, and Rajasthan. Conclusions drawn from cases in this restricted geographic area may not be valid for cases even in other parts of India, not to say of other parts of the world, at this stage.

Implications of the Research and Proposals for Future Investigations

For many studies in psychology and psychiatry, children are the best subjects because an understanding of the child gives insight into the main characteristics of the adult and helps to clarify the foibles and idiosyncrasies of a person's later years. The subjects of the present study started narrating their recollections of previous lives when quite young. This reduced or minimized the possibility of the contamination of their experiences by all the information to which adults are exposed. Young children seem to present the phenomenon of claims to recall a previous life as it manifests under natural conditions.

If the results obtained in the present investigation support the hypothesis of reincarnation, they add to existing knowledge and understanding of human personality. Furthermore, they increase our comprehension of such disorders of personality as unusual and irrational fears, childhood animosities and
vengefulness, and gender dysphoria for which there is no satisfactory current explanation.

Orthodox theories of psychology, psychiatry, and criminology emphasize the importance of childhood experiences in the formation of personality. But if we fail to trace the cause of a person's deviant behavior to his genes or his immediate environment, we may justifiably conjecture that it derives from events even earlier than those of childhood or infancy, namely those of a previous life.

The present study revealed certain physical and psychological characteristics in the subjects that were unusual for their families but that corresponded well with those of the identified previous personalities. Except in five cases, in which the subjects were biologically related to their claimed previous personalities, the hypothesis of genetic transmission cannot adequately explain such unusual behavior on the part of the subjects. Where the genetic theory has failed to explain the inheritance of physical and psychological traits, the hypothesis of reincarnation may offer an explanation for them.

An extensive study of more cases in different geographical areas would be desirable in order to increase the generality of the results obtained. A multivariate analysis might help in mapping out related factors and could throw fresh light on the process of the phenomenon.

Follow-up studies with the subjects would be useful in
learning about their development and adjustment in later life. On the basis of retrospective studies, from interviews with older subjects, it appears that—with rare exceptions—these subjects develop normally. They tend spontaneously to forget about their previous lives by about 10 years of age. (Systematic follow-up studies with the subjects will aid in an early detection of the rare cases where this does not happen.) This knowledge will help—indeed, has already been helpful—in reassuring the parents of these subjects that the development of their children will not be affected by the recall of a previous life.

The findings of this research will also aid in eliminating or reducing important superstitions associated with the occurrence of previous life memories. It is widely held (in India) that children who claim to remember previous lives die young. (This belief has no support whatever from the facts of actual cases, so far as their investigation has now progressed.) This leads parents to take measures, sometimes even violent ones, to suppress the memories of children who claim to recall previous lives:

A high incidence of violent death in the concerned previous personalities seems to be associated with the recall of previous lives. It will be helpful to conduct surveys in different parts of India (and eventually in other parts of the world) to determine the incidences of rebirth cases and of violent death in the same areas. It may then be shown that the cases tend
to occur with greater frequency in regions having a higher than average incidence of violent death. This correlation, if found, could provide helpful information about factors that contribute to the occurrence of cases of the reincarnation type.