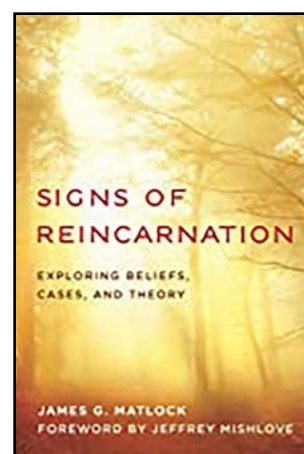


## A Comprehensive Academic Review of Reincarnation Research<sup>1</sup>

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A Review of *Signs of Reincarnation: Exploring Beliefs, Cases, and Theory*, by James G. Matlock. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019., Pp. xxi + 385. \$39.00 (paperback). ISBN 9781538124796



Beliefs in past lives have been widespread throughout history and different cultures around the world and they still are prevalent nowadays. In addition to belief in reincarnation being very popular among Eastern religious/spiritual traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) its expression is also significant in the West. Belief in reincarnation was reported by 20% of the general population in Eastern Europe, 27% in Western Europe, 33% in USA, and 37% in Brazil (DataFolha, 2007; Inglehart et al., 2004; Gallup, 2003). Moreover, belief in reincarnation has been associated with people's worldview, impacting their mental health (Davidson et al., 2005), as well as their capabilities of overcome illnesses and stressful life events (Peres, 2012), and psychological resilience and human virtues (Linley & Joseph, 2004). On the other hand, belief in past lives might be associated with psychological struggle, guilt feelings, and a sense of passivity toward life (Stauner et al., 2016). However, it is worth to note that the last five decades were marked not only for studies and investigations about belief in reincarnation, but, that a further scientific field was developed to investigate possible empirical evidence for the factual truth of reincarnation. This is mainly about claims of past-life memories.

Reports of children who have claimed past-life memories have been published sporadically at least since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fielding, 1898; Hearn, 1897; Stevenson, 2000). Although a considerable research body has been built in the past half century (Daher et al., 2017), this substantial amount of evidence is not well known outside of the field of parapsychology. There are a few books providing a good overview of reincarnation research for general audiences and some academic books devoted to the analysis of certain aspects of reincarnation studies, or of studies developed by a research group. *Signs of Reincarnation: Exploring Beliefs, Cases, and Theory* is, to our knowledge, the first academic comprehensive review of the field of past-life memories investigations. Its main objective is to address "the nature of the evidence for reincarnation, the question of how good that evidence is, and, if it is satisfactory, how best to interpret it" (p. xix).

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James G. Matlock has a background in anthropology and parapsychology and an old interest in reincarnation research. His first paper on parapsychology was a book review on the topic (Matlock, 1986) and his MA thesis in anthropology was about reincarnation beliefs in tribal societies (Matlock, 1993). After that, he shifted his interests to other topics, but since the beginning of the current decade he has focused again on reincarnation studies. Since 2011 he developed and has taught a graduate level course on reincarnation and this book is largely the product of this course. Currently, he is a Research Fellow of the Parapsychology Foundation and has contributed several articles on reincarnation to the *Psi Encyclopedia*. Matlock has also recently written, in partnership with the leading reincarnation researcher, Erlendur Haraldsson, the popular book *I Saw a Light and Came Here: Children's Experience of Reincarnation* (Haraldsson & Matlock, 2017).

All this experience in the topic is reflected in this scholarly book, based on around 900 references. Despite the fact that we have been interested in reincarnation research for more than two decades, we were constantly and positively surprised by the references to relevant books and articles unknown to us. Matlock integrates evidence provided by studies from different fields, such as parapsychology, psychology, anthropology, psychiatry, and history. As expected, he gave special attention to the seminal and voluminous scientific contribution of Ian Stevenson, the University of Virginia's professor of psychiatry who basically founded the field of academic investigation of empirical evidence suggestive of reincarnation and is still the most prolific researcher the field has ever had (Daher et al., 2017).

Matlock begins *Signs of Reincarnation* reporting a recent, unpublished and solved case of reincarnation type that he investigated. It concerns Rylann O'Bannion's, a girl from Bartlesville, Oklahoma, who was born in 2008. When she was between two to three years old, Rylann started to claim a supposed past-life. Later her case was associated to a previous personality named Jennifer Schultz, a girl from Kenner, Louisiana, who was born in 1971 and died probably by electrocution in 1982 while talking on a phone during the Pan Am 759 airplane crash. This case is based on the child's own memories claims and unusual behavior, most of them verified through interviews with Rylann, first-hand witness reports, documental analysis and the reports of Jennifer's parents. Based on Rylann's case, the author starts to introduce the field of past-life memories investigations, providing a good taste about the exciting, challenging and complex scientific investigation of such cases. Before presenting and discussing the empirical evidence provided by reincarnation studies, Matlock first provides a very good contextualization, providing a cross-cultural analysis of reincarnation belief and discussing research methods, their criticism, and interpretative frameworks. Following Edward Tylor, one of the founders of modern anthropology, Matlock claims that reincarnation beliefs have empirical basis, i.e., are mainly based on experiences suggestive of that.

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the empirical evidence related to reincarnation cases, it is essential to deal not only with isolated features, but with what Matlock describes as "rebirth syndrome." This would be composed of two categories of what he called "signs of reincarnation." The "principal signs" are spontaneous memory claims of previous lives (autobiographical verbal, spatial and identification memories), behavioral identification with the previous person (personality traits, unusual behaviors, and skills) and birthmarks and other physical signs. The "secondary signs" are signs of discarnate agency (rebirth announcement dreams, or apparitions, and intermission memories of the period between death and the new life), universal and near-universal patterns (e.g., predom-

inance of males and violent deaths, age children start and stop talking about previous life) ,and psychological impacts of past-life memories (e.g., phobias and gender non-conformity). The book provides a fairly comprehensive review of these “secondary signs” that are often overlooked in academic literature, for example the transcultural similarities and differences, and the existence of verified statements about facts claimed being observed during intermission periods. Another interesting innovative point is the analysis of the similarities between reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) and intermission periods in reincarnation cases.

Given the fact that the most robust evidence comes from children, there are few studies of adults claiming memories from past lives, both spontaneous and induced (usually by regression hypnosis) cases. There is a chapter that fills this gap reviewing the evidence available and concludes that the evidential nature of the published reports is still very poor. However, it is also important to understand who the adults who claim these memories are, and, what are the features of these claims. There is also some discussion about revelations by shamans, psychics, and mediums of alleged consultants` past lives.

At the end of the book, Matlock states: “With no valid reasons for rejecting reincarnation a priori, the questions of its occurrence should be settled by the evidence” (p. 271). After providing a fairly comprehensive and balanced review of the empirical evidence related to reincarnation, he concludes: “I now feel no hesitancy in declaring that I believe reincarnation to be the only intellectually defensible interpretation of the data” (p. 270). In making the case for the reality of personal *postmortem* survival, the author properly puts the evidence provided by reincarnation cases in the broader context of several other empirical evidence suggestive of survival such as NDE, crisis apparitions, mediumship, and terminal lucidity. Finally, Matlock proposes a “theoretical model of the reincarnation process” (p. 271), which he calls “processual soul theory.” Based on the empirical data and ideas from authors like Frederic Myers, William James, and Ian Stevenson, his model argues that “the stream of consciousness that animates a body during life continues into death, and persists though death, until it becomes associated with (possesses) another body... The consciousness stream is composed of both subliminal and supraliminal strata... Once in possession of its new body, the reincarnating mind customizes it by adding behavioral and physical effects through psychokinetic operations on its genome, brain, and underlying physiology” (p. 259). This model is proposed for heuristic reasons to stimulate further research and developments. Matlock also argues for the persistence of personal/individual consciousness but against the existence of retributive or juridical karma, astral bodies, and Cartesian dualism. Instead, he proposes processual karma, a stream of consciousness (a continuous self with no astral body), and an idealist property dualism. However, we found unconvincing the arguments he provided against the former and in support of the latter. It seems we still have no empirical base to decide, since, for example, concepts of Cartesian ego and astral body may also be able to accommodate the evidence available.

Some historical aspects presented are also problematic. It is not correct to attribute Kardec`s views on mediumship to a single medium (a claim based on an Aksakof`s controversial paper based on poor historical investigation, i.e., an interview with only one person who was hostile to Kardec) (Aksakof, 1875; Moreira-Almeida, 2009). It is also not accurate to state that according to the “most widely accepted version of quantum theory ... consciousness ... is instrumental in the creation of physical reality” (p. 236). Although there are leading physicists who have defended this position, it

is questionable to state that this is the most widely accepted version of quantum theory. However, these problems are related only to collateral aspects of book's main purposes and do not jeopardize its many good qualities.

Although the phenomenon of past-life memories still is a scientific field largely unexplored, even neglected by the mainstream academic community, Matlock's work reinforces it as a current, relevant, and worldwide phenomenon that warrants further attention. Moreover, as pointed by Stevenson (2000), the great empirical significance of cases of the reincarnation-type should be further considered regarding its possible implications to personality development, health, learning, relationships, and religious/spiritual aspects, even in those people who have never claimed any past-life memory. However, some challenges have to be overcome. There are few research groups currently investigating such cases around the world, with the exceptions of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia (USA), Erlendur Haraldsson at the Psychology Department in the University of Iceland, Ohkado Masayuki at the Chubu University in Japan, and the Research Center in Spirituality and Health at the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora - UFJF (Brazil). Moreover, considering the cross-cultural aspects of such cases, the language barrier might be considered a great limitation. Consequently, it would be important that new researchers are trained and prepared to carry out such challenging investigations around the entire world. Finally, considering the decrease of scientific studies related to past lives memories after Ian Stevenson's death, we hope *Signs of Reincarnation* will be an important way of disseminating, bringing attention, and encouraging the interest of a new generation of researchers to the exciting and challenging scientific field of reincarnation phenomena.

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