This article continues discussions, begun in our Winter and Spring issues, of misunderstandings about, and misuses of, hypnosis regarding claims ranging from reincarnation to alien abductions.—EDITOR

Hypnosis and Reincarnation: A Critique and Case Study

So-called past-life regressions in hypnosis can seem like persuasive evidence for reincarnation until the most thorough archival search has been completed.

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"PAST-LIFE" hypnosis has been known in Europe since 1862 (Stevenson 1974) and became popular in the United States when *The Search for Bridey Murphy* (Bernstein 1956) sold a million copies. Today, past-life hypnosis is practiced in many cities of the United States and Europe and probably constitutes a major market in the commercial psychic field.

Conventional hypnotists like myself have a number of ethical and scientific concerns about past-life hypnosis. Most of its practitioners are laypersons with little training in hypnosis, psychology, or medicine, and criticism of their practice by professionals has been polemical (Fromm 1979). Moreover, in 1983 the Division of Psychological Hypnosis of the American Psychological Association published a cautionary word in a proposed statement of ethics (Brodsky 1983).

If past-life hypnosis is presented as fact when it is really based in fantasy, it may frighten people away from the more legitimate uses of hypnosis. I regularly encounter clients who might benefit from clinical hypnosis but who, having heard of bizarre pseudoscientific practices like past-life regression, are afraid to try it. It is their loss, and a preventable one.

Past-life hypnosis is a common practice, but we do not have a good

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understanding of what it is. Regressions can be induced in a great many people (Baker 1982; Kampman 1973), even in people who do not believe in them (Fiore 1978). This does not prove that "memories" of past lives are based on reality, but it does show that some people are readily disposed to have them. If past-life hypnosis can teach us something about personality, or if it is a powerful form of therapy, as its proponents claim, then it warrants study. We should not dismiss it the way mesmerism was dismissed in the eighteenth century. Nor should we take it at face value, until careful research establishes what it is. Professionals' opinions have been based on assumptions about hypnosis and reincarnation rather than on a solid body of research.

Professionals are skeptical about past-life regression because they know that people are capable of creating realistic, consistent, and vivid personalities that have no basis in fact—e.g., in dissociative disorders like fugue and multiple personality (Hilgard 1977; Venn 1984). Also, novelists, dramatists, and thespians have been entertaining us for thousands of years with their ability to create believable, fictional characters. People who are credulous about past-life regression show the same naiveté about hypnosis that has appeared in criminal cases like *State* v. *Mack* (1980), in which "hypnotically refreshed" testimony contained obvious absurdities and was thrown out of court. Controlled research indicates that people are likely to fabricate under hypnosis (Dywan and Bowers 1983), and they are likely to come out of hypnosis believing their fictions are real (Laurence and Perry 1983). A modern theory of hypnosis would explain past-life regression as the product of normal factors like suggestion, role-playing, loss of inhibition, a desire to please the hypnotist, and source amnesia.

In source amnesia, or *cryptomnesia,* a subject remembers information that was learned through normal means but does not remember how that information was acquired. Often the subject has an eerie feeling about it, because the information seems mysteriously isolated and inexplicable. People tend to offer paranormal explanations when source amnesia has occurred (given our need to try to explain things). For a history of some famous occurrences of source amnesia in parapsychology, see Stevenson (1983). Source amnesia is the most acceptable alternative to reincarnation as an explanation for most cases of past-life regression.

Adequate research methods for studying past-life hypnosis can be developed by analyzing the deficiencies of the pro-reincarnation literature, where most cases have been based on two or three items of information that make the case look convincing (Currie 1978; Grossi 1975; Holzer 1970; Steiger and Williams 1969; Wambach 1978). Absurdities, errors, and inconsistencies either did not appear or were not reported. I suspect that these would be found in many past-life cases if they were researched thoroughly enough (as in the "Sacramento Bee" case reported by Montgomery in 1968, in which a hypnotized woman named nonexistent citizens and businesses of nineteenth-century California).

Another problem with the popular literature is that most cases are based on only brief contact between hypnotist and subject. The Bridey Murphy

case, for example, was based on just six hypnotic sessions. Helen Wambach has conducted group workshops in which many subjects are hypnotized in the space of a day. Minimal contact inflates the subject's credibility. When more sessions are conducted, the subject has more opportunity to utter false, impossible, or inconsistent remarks. In the case of Matthew, which I will summarize below, I conducted 60 hypnotic sessions over an 18-month period, and the subject uttered a number of inconsistencies, such as claiming to have two adult "lifetimes" in the same year. (Impossible, unless you believe in bilocation.)

An adequate method for investigating past-life hypnosis would include a large number of sessions, and these sessions would be recorded. The case-study method would be employed, because intensive reports of individual cases are more illuminating than superficial studies of a thousand subjects. The "lifetime" in question would pertain to a time and a place for which historical records exist, and archives would be researched exhaustively. Finally, positive as well as negative data would be reported.

The case described below satisfies these criteria for a good research subject.

Matthew was a 26-year-old optometrist's assistant from Oklahoma. He began to experience "cardiac neurosis," or hypochondriacal chest pain, two weeks after the birth of his second child. Three times in a four-month period he came to the emergency room of our hospital believing he was dying of a heart attack. Each time the physical examination was negative. The emergency-room staff asked him to see a psychologist, and that is how I came to meet him.

Psychosomatic patients are notoriously resistant to psychological services, but Matthew was quite willing to discuss the emotional aspects of his problem. He was also willing to use hypnosis and proved to be an exceptionally good subject—one of the most hypnotizable people I have met. He became deeply absorbed in hypnosis in a matter of seconds, and he showed a wide range of hypnotic phenomena. He responded to suggestions for amnesia, analgesia, ideomotor movement, post-hypnotic suggestion, and age regression.

Outside of hypnosis, Matthew was rather stoic. In fact, he identified this as one of his problems. He could not cry, but he wished he could so that he would have the same emotional release as other people. His father used to beat him for crying and say, "If you keep crying I'll beat you again." Interestingly, Matthew cried during his age regressions to childhood. Then, when he came out of hypnosis, he did not remember that he had been crying.

Matthew was unusually adept at age regression. He became disoriented from the present time and place and really believed he was back in the past, reliving some event from his childhood. His voice rose in pitch to that of a child's, and he had the gestures, emotions, and vocabulary of a small child. After a few sessions, he became so fluent in age regressions that they began to occur spontaneously, without any prompting from me but entirely within the flow of his own associations. This indicated not only his hypnotic virtuosity but also the tremendous pressure that strong emotion was exerting

in his mental life. He was driving toward a deep emotional release or catharsis.

Finally he "regressed" to the personality of a French pilot, Jacques Gionne Trecaulte, allegedly machine-gunned through the chest by a German aviator near Mons in August 1914. Matthew showed the full depth of emotion that occurs in the most complete abreactions. He cried, yelled, sweated, and clutched at his chest for half an hour.

During our 18 months of working together, the Jacques Trecaulte personality appeared 20 times. At first Matthew was amnesic for these experiences, but as the weeks went by he became aware of Jacques and came to believe that he really had existed.

Matthew's chest pains disappeared. His relationships improved with his wife, his children, his coworkers, and his community. If I were a pro-reincarnation therapist, I might argue that his cardiac neurosis was related to his death in a previous lifetime and that his recovery was made possible by recalling the event in hypnosis. However, because my thinking is more in tune with contemporary psychology, I emphasize that Matthew, like many psychosomatic patients, was under a significant degree of stress but lacked the means to express his emotions adequately. He was aware of this problem and traced its origin to his father's strict discipline. Age regression in hypnosis permitted some aspiration of pent-up emotion, but a deeply therapeutic abreaction did not occur until he "regressed" to the alleged past life of Jacques Trecaulte. The further he got from reality, in other words, the more he was able to show emotion. Past-life regressions may be therapeutic not because they are real but precisely because they are not. They create distance from reality and allow the expression of otherwise taboo thoughts and emotions (Kampman and Hirvenoja 1976; Zolik 1962).

Luckily for my research, the Jacques Trecaulte personality pertained to a time and a place for which historical records are available. "Jacques" uttered 47 statements that could be checked. I investigated every source I could find: popular books, public libraries, the military archives in Paris, and the city archives of Thionville, which Jacques claimed as his home.

I divided these sources into local records (public libraries to which I had access and popular books) and foreign records (located in France). Thirty of Jacques's 47 statements could be checked against local records (including statements about French history and geography); the remaining 17 (which included the names of private citizens and references to the local geography of Thionville) could be checked only in France.

Dividing the records into local and foreign helped me to determine whether this case had a paranormal element. If Jacques Trecaulte really had existed, it should make no difference whether his statements were verified in local or foreign records; a reincarnated entity should know all this information equally. On the other hand, if Jacques was the product of source amnesia, he might know information that was available locally but be misinformed about information in foreign archives.

The results of this investigation were detailed in the *Journal of the*

American Society for Psychical Research (Venn 1986). I will summarize by saying that, of the 30 items that could be checked in local sources, 16 proved to be true and 14 were false. Jacques knew the names of French towns, weapons manufacturers, and the month and year of the Battle of Mons. On the other hand, some of the places he named did not exist, and his death could not have occurred in the way he described it: Machine guns were not installed in airplanes until October 1914 (Mason 1965).

Of the 17 statements that could be traced only in foreign archives, all proved to be false. There was no mention of Jacques Trecaulte in the three archives that should have contained his name if he had existed (the military archives of Paris, the Thionville city register, and the Thionville marriage record). There was no mention of his wife, his son, his father, his father-in-law, or some of the military men he named. The street he claimed to have lived on had not existed. I concluded that Matthew's "past life" had no basis in reality and no paranormal elements to it.

Caveat emptor! Past-life cases can be made to look rather convincing if only the positive findings are reported and the author fails to mention whether any negative findings or logical absurdities also occurred. I might have made Matthew look like a case for reincarnation if I had reported the data selectively. Matthew knew more French history and geography than we might expect from an American high school graduate, and he could not remember any normal means by which he might have acquired this information. He believed that Jacques was real, and that was his explanation for how he had acquired the information.

I believe that Matthew learned about France and World War I through normal means like books and television. Matthew watched a lot of television, and he was an avid reader of comic books, particularly of the fantasy/superhero variety. A lot of information can be absorbed in this way, but few people will recall every source.

The fantasies of hypnotized persons can be deceptively vivid, intense, thorough, and consistent. Professionally trained hypnotists are working to establish the scientific credibility of their art; and when hypnosis is used for pseudoscientific practices like past-life regressions, it is bad public relations. This is not to say that past-life hypnosis is not therapeutic. It may be powerfully so. But this may be due to the creative element it shares with psychodrama and not because of a basis in reality.

Past-life hypnosis has become a common practice in the United States and Western Europe, but adequate research is needed to establish what it really is. If it is presented as fact when it is really based in fantasy, it may do harm by misleading the gullible, confusing the mentally disordered, and giving hypnosis a bad reputation.

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