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Experimental Test of Possible Psychological Benefits of Past-Life Regression

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Abstract—The purpose of this study was to determine whether past-life regression can lead to increased psychological well-being and changes in fundamental beliefs about consciousness and reality among those who are psychologically healthy. Twenty-four undergraduate students each participated in a single guided imagery session in which they were given either a past-life or open suggestion. Participants who were given the past-life suggestion had better scores on some measures of psychological well-being than those given the open suggestion, although post-hoc tests did not reveal any differences in psychological well-being or beliefs between those who actually experienced past-life imagery and those who did not. There was an overall shift for all participants toward more transcendent beliefs as a result of their involvement in the guided imagery sessions. The roles in past-life regression of depth of altered experience and belief in past lives were also examined.

Keywords: past-life regression—psychological well-being—past-life imagery—altered states of consciousness—guided imagery—psychotherapy—christos technique—beliefs about consciousness and reality—phenomenology of consciousness

Introduction

Past-life regression therapy consists of guiding a client, either through the use of guided imagery or hypnosis, to imagine experiencing a previous lifetime. Advocates of the procedure maintain that it is an effective means of facilitating self-development (Jue, 1996) or of resolving various psychological difficulties such as phobias, problems with relationships, and addictions (Freedman, 2002). Two basic questions are raised by the use of this psychological strategy: Are clients' images of past lives always entirely a product of their imaginations or can they sometimes be at least partial memories, and, in either case, are there any

psychological benefits associated with the evocation of past-life images? It is the second of these questions, and only the second, that is of concern in this study. References to past-life experiences in this paper are strictly to experiences as such—experiences whose content includes past-life imagery or ideation—without any judgment as to whether such experiences refer to any physical events.

Despite its use in psychotherapeutic and counseling settings, only one quantitative study of the effectiveness of past-life therapy could be found. Forty phobic participants had been asked to complete an anxiety scale for each of their phobias preceding treatment and at least two months following treatment. Thirty-seven of the participants reported past-life or between-lives experiences during hypnosis, whereas three participants did not respond adequately to hypnosis and did not receive any deliberate treatment. For those who did receive it, treatment consisted of 1 to 5 sessions (with a mean of 1.9 sessions and with each session lasting from 2 to 3 hours) in which participants were asked to go to the cause of each of their phobias in turn. It was found that reports of past-life and between-lives experiences were associated with anxiety reduction (Freedman, 1997). Two papers were found in which it was shown that, using hypnotic regression, prior expectations can affect the production of imagined past-life experiences (Baker, 1982) as well as their contents (Spanos, Menary, Gabora, DuBreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991), although such influences may be limited in scope (Freedman, 2002) and need not necessarily interfere with any beneficial effects.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether experiencing past-life regression can lead to enhanced psychological well-being among those who are psychologically healthy. The idea was to randomly evoke either a past-life or present-life experience in a single session using a guided imagery technique and to see whether there would be any differences in psychological well-being between groups. In addition to changes in psychological well-being, differences in changes to fundamental beliefs about consciousness and reality would be measured, as well as differences in the subjective dimensions of past- and present-life experiences, and participants' evaluations of the sessions themselves. Because any effects of past-life experiences could be transient, the main outcome measures would be repeated 14 days following a session. It was hypothesized that participants who had past-life experiences would have greater increases in psychological well-being and more transcendent beliefs than those with present-life experiences.

Method

Participants

Twenty-four undergraduate university students were recruited for the study, 23 from the introductory psychology participant pool who received course credit for participation and one volunteer. It was made clear that those with a history of

emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or those experiencing problems with concentration, memory, or thinking should not participate in the study. Seventeen of the participants were women and seven were men; 14 indicated that they were Christian, with the rest having their own or other religious beliefs; and the average age was 19.4 years. One of the participants indicated that she had previously been hypnotized and had experienced a past-life regression.

Instruments

In addition to a General Information Questionnaire (GIQ) that was used for gathering demographic information, four other instruments were used.

The questionnaire used for measuring psychological well-being was the Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB) (Ryff, 1989; 1995) which consists of 84 six-point Likert-type items with which respondents can agree or disagree. The questionnaire items form six scales of 14 items each: Positive Relations With Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. Values of Cronbach's alpha for the scales are .88, .83, .86, .85, .88, and .91, respectively, as ascertained from the scoring manual obtained from the author of the scales. Construct validity follows from basing the measure on common theoretically posited characteristics of psychological well-being and the relationships of the SPWB with other measures of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Of significance here is that the SPWB is not a measure of the absence of psychopathology but rather of the presence of psychological qualities thought to be constitutive of psychological well-being.

The Beliefs About Consciousness and Reality Questionnaire (BACARQ) (Barušs & Moore, 1992, 1998) was used to assess participants' fundamental beliefs. The BACARQ consists of 38 four-point and seven-point Likert-type items that make up six scales: Antiphysicalism, Religiosity, Meaning, Extraordinary Experiences, Extraordinary Beliefs, and Inner Growth. Antiphysicalism is a measure of the extent to which a participant disagrees with materialism, Religiosity reflects traditional religious beliefs, Meaning gauges the belief that meaning is important in life, Extraordinary Experiences registers a participant's belief that she has had unusual experiences, Extraordinary Beliefs measures beliefs associated with the ontological primacy of consciousness, and Inner Growth is an indication of a participant's belief that it is important to undergo a process of self-transformation. In addition, all 38 items together make up a Global Scale that is an indication of a person's position along the material-transcendent dimension of beliefs about consciousness and reality. Previous use of the BACARQ with undergraduate student samples has resulted in Cronbach's alpha values of .88 to .92 for the Global Scale with reliability data for the remaining scales not having been calculated (Barušs, 2000). The BACARQ has constructive validity, at least within the community of academics and professionals within which it was initially developed, in that the BACARQ resulted from the identification of factors from cluster and factor analyses of

responses to statements drawn from the academic literature about consciousness and reality (Barušs, 1990; Barušs & Moore, 1992). The validity of the BACARQ has not been independently established for an undergraduate student population.

The Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI) (Pekala, 1991) was used for measuring a person's experience. The PCI consists of 53 pairs of bipolar statements about a person's subjective experience to which she responds along seven-point Likert-type scales. The 53 pairs of statements constitute 12 dimensions of consciousness: Positive Affect, Negative Affect, Altered Experience, Imagery, Attention, Self-Awareness, Altered State of Awareness, Internal Dialogue, Rationality, Volitional Control, Memory, and Arousal. At the time they were developed, the average Cronbach's alpha for these scales was .82 for a sample of 110 psychology students in an eyes-open sitting-quietly condition. This instrument also has good construct validity in that it is stable under similar stimulus conditions but can discriminate between different stimulus conditions (Pekala, 1991).

Finally, an Impressions of Guided Imagery Exercise Questionnaire (IGIEQ) was created to assess a participant's evaluation of her guided imagery experience. This questionnaire consists of seven seven-point Likert-type items about the extent to which the session was boring or fulfilling, the extent to which it changed a participant's way of thinking about life, the realness of experiences during the session compared to ordinary waking life, and the extent to which a participant believed that she had lived in previous lives.

Apparatus

A reclining chair in one of the rooms of the Psychology Laboratory at King's University College was used during the guided imagery sessions to enable participants to lie back and raise their feet up from the floor.

Evocation of Past-Life Imagery

Both guided imagery techniques and hypnosis have been used to attempt to induce past-life experiences (Lucas, 1993). Guided imagery techniques as such have been widely used in counseling and psychotherapeutic settings, and, although there have been some cautions concerning their possible detrimental effects on memory (Arbuthnott, Arbuthnott, & Rossiter, 2001), a guided imagery protocol known as the christos technique (Glaskin, 1974; 1976; 1979) was used in modified form to try to evoke past-life imagery in participants. The christos technique was chosen because of the second author's success with using the technique to reliably evoke accounts of past lives in some 10 people over the course of about 20 years in informal settings such as self-development groups. The first author was trained by the second author in the use of the technique, and the first author led all of the experimental guided imagery sessions.

In the modified form of the christos technique, a participant lies back in a reclining chair with her feet up and is told to close her eyes and relax. Then, in

a series of nine stages, she is told to imagine herself expanding beyond the boundaries of her physical body. Having become expanded, she is asked to imagine and describe in detail the front door of the place where she lives. Following that, the participant is told to go up in the air to progressively greater heights above her living place and to describe what she sees. At one point she is asked to change the scene from day to night and back again and asked who is creating these changes. Eventually she is told to imagine going up so far in the air that she can no longer see the earth. Then the following statements are made: "Ok. Now imagine yourself coming down in a time and a place that is meaningful to you. Tell me when you are there." Upon responding that she is there, the participant is told to look at her feet and indicate what she is wearing on her feet. Then she is asked for details about her appearance, the environment in which she finds herself, her actions, her psychological state, and her identity. At some point when the participant seems to have finished with whatever scene she is imagining, she is told to move forward to the next significant event in that lifetime and questioned again about the details of her experience. After about an hour from the beginning of the exercise, the participant is told to return her attention to the room and to open her eyes.

The command that a participant come down in a time and place that is meaningful to her was designated as the open suggestion and was to be used to evoke past-life imagery. Its previous use by the second author had reliably resulted in reports of past-life experiences. It was thought that modifying the command to say "... imagine yourself coming down in a time and a place *in this lifetime* that is meaningful to you" would evoke a present-life experience. The idea was to use an experimental design with the type of suggestion as the independent variable. Thus, when the researcher would have reached the point in the guided imagery protocol of either using an open suggestion or present-life suggestion, she would flip a coin to determine which it should be—tails, she would use the open suggestion; heads, she would use the present-life suggestion. Thus, the evocation of past-life imagery would have been randomly assigned and its causal effects could have been determined.

However, a problem was encountered at the outset. A practice volunteer from whom no data were collected was given the open suggestion. But rather than reporting past-life imagery, she described experiences from her present life. The coin toss for the first participant came up tails; hence, she was also given the open suggestion. Again, rather than past-life imagery, present-life vignettes were described. Fearing that the intended protocol would produce few reports of past-life imagery, it was decided to eliminate the coin toss and to use the open suggestion indefinitely. The next two participants also described present lives. At that point, a decision was made to introduce an explicit past-life suggestion: "... imagine yourself coming down in a time and a place *in a previous lifetime* that is meaningful to you." The past-life suggestion also failed to reliably produce past-life imagery and hence it was decided that the past-life suggestion would be used predominantly, the open suggestion would be used only when there were

a substantial number of reports of past-life experiences, and the present-life suggestion would not be used at all. In the end, of the 24 participants, 19 received the past-life suggestion, five received the open suggestion, and none received the present-life suggestion. The result of all this was methodologically a shift away from an experimental toward a correlational design.

Procedure

Participants were recruited almost entirely from the research participant pool for introductory psychology at a large university. The study was titled “Effects of Past-Life Guided Imagery on State of Consciousness, Psychological Well-Being, and Beliefs About Consciousness and Reality,” and prospective participants were told that they would “take part in a guided imagery exercise in which either present-life memories or past-life images would be evoked.” Participants came individually to sessions and were required to sign a research consent form. Then participants were left at a table in a laboratory room to complete the GIQ, the SPWB, and the BACARQ. Once they were finished, they sat back in the reclining chair and the researcher led them through a guided imagery exercise using the modified christos technique, giving them either an open suggestion or past-life suggestion. The researcher noted which suggestion had been given and whether any past-life, present-life, or future-life imagery was present. The guided imagery experience lasted for about an hour. Afterwards, participants completed the PCI, the IGIEQ, and again, the SPWB and BACARQ. They were also given an opportunity to make any written comments. Fourteen days following a session, participants were sent the IGIEQ, SPWB, and BACARQ by electronic mail, which 21 of the 24 participants returned to the researchers. Upon receipt of their completed questionnaires, participants were sent a debriefing form.

Results and Discussion

Given that the internal consistencies of the BACARQ scales for a student population were largely unknown, the values of Cronbach’s alpha were calculated for each of them. These ranged from a low of .63 for the Meaning Scale to a high of .93 for the Global Scale. It was also checked to see whether the six items of the IGIEQ concerned with impressions of the guided imagery exercise formed a single construct. Indeed they did, with alpha values of .77 and .75 for the successive iterations of the questionnaire. It appears that the six items of the IGIEQ as a whole measured the extent to which the guided imagery session was perceived to have been a valuable experience. For the purposes of the following analyses, unless otherwise indicated, an effect is said to be present if its probability of occurrence by chance is less than .05 and all evaluations of test statistics whose probability of occurrence is gauged against Student’s *t* or normal probability distributions are two-tailed.

Experimental Results

The purpose of the study was to determine whether past-life imagery can cause psychological benefits. The problem was that the experimental manipulation did not reliably produce past-life experiences. In fact, of the 19 participants who received the past-life suggestion, only 8 had exclusively past-life content, another 5 had past-life as well as present- or future-life content, and 6 had no past-life content. However, contrary to expectation, none of the 5 participants who received the open suggestion reported any past-life content.

Using repeated measures analyses of variance for all 24 participants, interaction effects with type of suggestion were found separately for Positive Relations With Others ($F(2,38) = 6.90, p < .01$), Personal Growth ($F(2,38) = 4.59, p = .02$), and Self-Acceptance ($F(2,38) = 3.46, p = .04$). Given that there were considerable violations of normality, homogeneity of variances, and sphericity assumptions, the analyses were repeated using Kruskal-Wallis H tests with changes in scale values as the dependent variables. Some effects of type of suggestion were noted for the differences in pre-induction to 14-day follow-up scores on Positive Relations With Others ($H(1) = 5.57, p = .02$) and Personal Growth ($H(1) = 3.37, p = .07$). There were no effects of type of suggestion on any of the BACARQ, PCI, or IGIEQ scales using either parametric or non-parametric tests.

The changes in psychological well-being that were found were in the predicted direction, which is to say that participants receiving a past-life suggestion had higher well-being scores than those receiving an open suggestion. However, it was not so much that there was an improvement in psychological well-being for those who received the past-life suggestion, but rather, there was a deterioration in scores at the 14-day follow-up (but not immediately afterwards) for those who had received the open suggestion. For example, the average pre-induction scores for Positive Relations With Others are 69.4 ($SD = 4.6$) for the open suggestion and 69.1 ($SD = 13.8$) for the past-life suggestion, but 65.0 ($SD = 6.2$) and 72.1 ($SD = 11.9$), respectively, at the 14-day follow-up. This could be an artefact, in that participants given the open suggestion, knowing that the study was about past-life imagery but not having experienced any, may have reflected their disappointment on the well-being scales. In fact, there was an overall drop in scores on the IGIEQ from the post-imagery administration to the follow-up administration that was numerically greater for those receiving the open suggestion than those receiving the past-life suggestion, although that difference was not statistically significant. Such a decline in attitudes toward the sessions is consistent with the notion that any deterioration in psychological well-being could reflect some disappointment with the sessions.

Without regard for the experimental manipulation, there was an overall increase in transcendent beliefs but no changes in psychological well-being as a result of participation in the experiment. Repeated measures analyses of

variance revealed increases in scores for some of the BACARQ scales, including the Global Scale ($F(2,40) = 5.16, p = .01$), although the scores tended to drop off at the 14-day follow-up. The only statistically significant pre-induction to follow-up contrast was for the Extraordinary Experiences Scale ($F(1, 20) = 12.10, p = .04$). In other words, irrespective of which suggestion they had been given, participants were afterwards inclined to believe that they had had an unusual experience. The study was not designed to determine whether such changes were greater or less than those expected in other guided imagery situations.

Post-Hoc Analyses

Looking now just at the 19 participants who received the past-life suggestion, were there differences between those who experienced at least some past-life content ($n = 13$) and those who did not ($n = 6$)? Repeated measures analyses of variance did not reveal any statistically significant differences between groups for the SPWB or BACARQ. There were statistically significant individual differences for some of the PCI scales using univariate analyses of variances, but the overall multivariate analysis of variance was not statistically significant. Also using multivariate analysis of variance, there were no differences between groups for the IGIEQ. Again there were considerable violations of assumptions for some of the parametric tests, and so the analyses were repeated using nonparametric tests. The most noteworthy result was for the Altered Experience Scale of the PCI ($H(1) = 6.27, p = .01$). The experiences of participants who reported past-life imagery were more likely to be altered than were the experiences of those who did not report past-life imagery in the sense that their body image, time sense, perception of the world, and meaning were altered. In particular, just the three items from the Altered Experience Scale pertaining to altered body image taken together yield differences between the two groups ($H(1) = 5.46, p = .02$). Those who reported past-life imagery were more likely to feel that their bodies were expanded beyond the boundaries of their skin. Since the guided imagery exercise begins by having participants imagine doing just that, it means that those more successful with that stage of the guided imagery exercise were more likely also to experience past-life imagery when given the suggestion to do so. However, contrary to this study's hypothesis, no measurable psychological benefits were found to be associated with the presence of past-life imagery.

Depth of Altered Experience

One possibility for the failure to find any substantial effects of the presence of past-life imagery could be that the state of consciousness of participants was not sufficiently altered for the past-life imagery to be effective. Freedman (2002) has maintained, on the basis of her experience with hypnotic past-life regression, that a sufficiently deep level of trance is necessary in order to evoke what she has considered to be a genuine past life. She has claimed that the reports of such

past lives are different from those obtained from lighter levels of trance, in that a person in a deeper state of trance has difficulty speaking, does not know factual information about herself in the previous life such as her name, and does not know what will occur next in the past lifetime. Those in a lighter trance tend to produce a great deal of information and do so without much emotional investment or relevance to their current life.

Freedman's contention raises two issues. The first is whether or not the use of hypnosis is different from the use of guided imagery for the purposes of past-life regression. In other words, can the use of a guided imagery technique test the claims of events occurring in the context of hypnosis? This study was based on the assumption that there are no substantial differences between the two methods, given that hypnosis, when deconstructed, is just a guided imagery technique labeled as hypnosis (Barušs, 2003). The second issue is that of whether the presence of trance, the alteration of consciousness engendered by guided imagery or hypnosis, is dichotomous or continuous. The answer, from the hypnosis literature, is that it can probably be either or both in different cases given that different psychological mechanisms appear to contribute to trance (Barber, 1999). In any event, the measurement of altered experience using the PCI in this study allows the presence of trance to be treated as a continuous variable. In other words, are people whose experiences are more altered also more likely to benefit from past-life imagery?

Freedman's contention concerning the depth of trance can be examined in this study by looking at the correlations of relevant PCI scales with changes in SPWB scores for the 13 participants who actually experienced at least some past-life imagery. Doing so reveals that there are no statistically significant correlations of the Altered Experiences Scale with SPWB scale changes. There are also no statistically significant correlations of other PCI scales with changes to the SPWB that are consistent and that persist until the 14-day follow-up. However, there were some correlations of PCI scales with BACARQ scales. For example, of those participants who reported past-life imagery, inwardly directed attention and absorption, as measured by the Attention Scale of the PCI, are associated with increases in Religiosity ($r = .72, n = 10, p = .02$), Meaning ($r = .69, n = 10, p = .03$), and Extraordinary Beliefs ($r = .75, n = 10, p = .01$) at the 14-day follow-up. Hence, in this study, greater alteration of experience is not associated with increased well-being, although it is associated with greater change toward more transcendent beliefs.

Belief in Past Lives

Finally, what impact did prior belief in reincarnation or having lived in previous lives have on participants' experiences? When examining the data for the 19 participants who were given the past-life suggestion, prior belief that one has lived in previous lives was correlated, among other variables, with higher scores on the Altered Experience Scale ($r = .52, n = 19, p = .02$) and higher

scores on the scale derived from the IGIEQ, both when measured immediately after the imagery experience ($r = .50, n = 19, p = .03$) and at the 14-day follow-up ($r = .72, n = 16, p < .01$). Surprisingly, given the correlation between prior belief in past lives and the Altered Experience Scale and the association between the Altered Experience Scale and actually having past-life imagery, there was no correlation between prior belief in having lived past lives and experiencing a past life during the session ($r = .06, n = 19, ns$). While a belief in having lived in previous lives can contribute to the depth of one's experience in the guided imagery session, it is the depth of experience itself, rather than the belief, that is associated with experiencing a past life.

Conclusions

The hypotheses of this study, in general, were not borne out. There were no substantial psychological benefits or changes in beliefs associated with the presence of past-life imagery. It may be that inner exploration, whether of ostensible past lives or present and future lives, is equally effective or ineffective. Any benefits associated with regression procedures may not pertain to the time periods actually imagined but to other factors such as their appropriateness at that time for a particular person. It may also be that the depth of trance was insufficient for psychological benefits to occur. In one particular case, a participant who became deeply absorbed in her past-life experiences, as judged at the time and subsequently by a high score on the Altered Experience Scale, nonetheless had no improvement in psychological well-being. The fact that those with past-life imagery were more likely to have higher scores on a measure of altered experience suggests at least the relevance of depth of trance to past-life regression procedures. It may be that past-life regression used in isolation, as it was in this experiment, is not effective, and that other factors, such as a counseling or psychotherapeutic environment, must be present in order to release any potential benefits. It may also be that the presence of past-life imagery is more effective when targeted toward the treatment of specific psychological disorders rather than simply used in order to try to achieve greater psychological well-being. Studies are needed to ascertain whether the presence of past-life imagery can contribute to the alleviation of psychological problems such as phobias, undesirable addictions, and compulsive behaviors. There could also be methodological reasons why the hypotheses were not substantiated. The sample size was small so that, even though there were suggestive patterns in the data, they did not stand out in sufficient relief to merit serious attention. Furthermore, there was a loss of power as the number of cases used in the progressive statistical analyses dropped from 24 to 19 to 13. In addition, whereas analogue studies such as this one can identify the contributing factors to successful counseling techniques when such factors are implicated, analogue studies cannot rule out contributing factors because of the complexities of the

actual counseling and therapeutic dynamics that can be only partially reproduced in a laboratory.

The overall shift toward more transcendent beliefs is not surprising given the social cognitive features of the experimental sessions, such as the expectations of participants that they could experience past-life imagery. It may also be that the sessions provided participants with an opportunity to explore their own experiences and hence to sensitize or reintroduce them to the potential value of such inner exploration. Nor is it surprising that such shifts were greater the more absorbed the participants were in the exercise, nor that prior belief in having lived past lives was associated with more altered experiences and greater subsequent satisfaction with the sessions.

This study had a number of limitations that could perhaps be addressed in future research. First, we were unable to reliably induce past-life experiences. It would be helpful to know what variables actually contribute to the evocation of such experiences. Some of these are almost certainly individual differences variables so that, even using promising techniques under optimal conditions, it would probably not be possible to evoke past-life experiences in all participants. Second, we used only a single past-life regression session. Although psychological benefits have been found following a small number of sessions, as indicated by Freedman's study cited in the introduction to this paper, beneficial effects may be more apparent with greater numbers of sessions. Third, there were only 24 participants in this study. A larger number of participants would augment universal small differences, if there were to be any, so that they could be detected, and likely increase the probability of having solicited participants for a study who could substantially benefit from the evocation of past-life experiences, if that were to be possible. Past-life regression is being used as a counseling and psychotherapeutic technique and, although this study did not find any substantial benefits of the presence of past-life imagery, more investigation is needed in order to determine if such a technique has any possible benefits.

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