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# Life Before Birth: A Thematic Analysis of Memories of Coming into Life Part 1: Recollections of Another Realm

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Autobiographic memories prior to birth remain controversial in psychology because such memories are traditionally believed to begin much later when some sense of self is formed. Prenatal sentience, including fetal learning, occurs in species from arthropods to humans, and evidence for autobiographic memories from pre- and neo-natal humans has typically come from clinical case histories of altered-state regression techniques eliciting records from adults or clinical case histories of children in normal states. This thematic analysis examined 68 “earliest memory” narratives submitted to an independent website to explore the question: what do people who claim to remember how they came into the world say about their experience prior to and including birth? The findings produced two distinct data sets. This article, Part 1, analyzes the majority of the data, narratives that described prenatal existence in an otherworldly realm. The results are consistent with and elaborate findings in established but controversial fields, notably reincarnation research, especially the intermission research, some of it veridical, and near-death experience research. Part 2, a separate article, analyzes a second subset of records that were narratives of fetal experiences, birth, and apparently veridical paranormal perinatal impressions, consistent with the clinical literature on pre- and peri-natal psychology and some of the intermission experience literature.

**Keywords:** *fetal memory, prenatal psychology, non-local memory, somatic memory, intermission experiences, near-death experiences*

Some of humanity’s most fundamental existential questions revolve around how we as sentient beings came into existence and what happens to our sentience when this life is over (Kripal, 2014). In other words, does our essential personal awareness exist prior to embodiment and after bodily death, and if so “where?” Many religious and philosophical traditions have attempted to answer these questions, calling that essential personal sentience soul or spirit. To the extent that sentience without embodiment has been studied scientifically, most of the literature belongs to recognized but controversial fields, notably paranormal (psi) studies on survival of bodily death dating from the turn of the twentieth century (e.g., Balfour, 1917; Hyslop, 1918; James, 1886; Lodge, 1909; Myers, 1903/1920) and up to the present (e.g., Almeder, 1992; Braude, 2003; Gauld, 1983; Griffin, 1997; Sudduth, 2016); near-death experience (NDE) research (e.g., Fenwick & Fenwick, 2012; Greyson, 2014; Holden,

2009; Ring, 2006; Van Lommel, 2011a, 2011b); and reincarnation research (e.g., Irwin & Watt, 2007; Matlock, 1990, 2019; Stevenson, 1960a, 1960b, 1977b, 1982, 1992). All of these fields are augmented by nonlocal models of consciousness in which personal sentience is not restricted to the central nervous system or other more distributed bodily structures, such as RNA (e.g., Almeder, 1992; Berger & Berger, 1991; Braude, 1992, 1996, 2002, 2003, 2014; Ducasse, 1969; Eisenbud, 1992; Griffin, 1997; E. F. Kelly, 2007a, 2007b, 2015; E. W. Kelly, 2007; Kelly et al., 2007; Merlin, 2020a, 2020b; Paterson, 1995; Stokes, 1997; Sudduth, 2009, 2016; Woodhouse, 1994).

But how we come into this life as sentient beings is much less documented in the scholarly literature outside different spiritual traditions. Given the consistency of the stories of existence before life and between lives across different cultures and epochs, accessed through a variety of technologies

and states of consciousness, it is surprising that this persistent idea—or experience—regardless of its ontological status, has not been seriously explored. Whether or not something like a personal essence precedes birth can be objectively demonstrated, the ubiquity of this idea suggests it has a subjective validity warranting examination.

The notion of awareness prior to birth, particularly self-awareness, remains controversial in mainstream psychology. Most published work in prenatal psychology has come from clinical case histories rather than controlled studies, though controlled comparison studies demonstrate fetal learning in utero (e.g., Dragnova, et al., 2007; Dragnova et al., 2018; Gonzalez-Gonzalez, et al., 2006; Granier-Deferre, et al., 2011; Gustafson, et al., 2022). No consensus exists about fetal sentience (e.g., Lagercrantz, 2007, 2009; Platt, 2011), despite a burgeoning of prenatal psychological theories in the 1980s and 1990s based on diverse clinical approaches (e.g., Grof, 1975, 1979, 1985, 1988; Groff & Bennett, 1990; Hayton, 2011; Janov, 1970, 1983, 1991, 2011; Laing, 1976, 1982; Maret, 2003; Odent, 1986; Verny, 1988, 2012), the majority involving altered-state age regression of adults to apparent pre- or peri-natal experiences but some involving normal-state methods with infants and children (e.g., Allan & Levin, 1993; Emerson, 1996, 2000; Lee, 2009; McCarty, 2004).

Regression therapy as a whole, most commonly employing hypnosis to help people access early experiences affecting their present lives, notoriously came under fire when charges of false memory implantation were brought in lawsuits of alleged child abuse (e.g., Bowers & Farvolden, 1996; Brandon, et al., 1998; Holmes, 1990; Loftus, 1992, 1993, 1997, 1998; Loftus & Ketchman, 1994; Ofshe & Watters, 1994; Pope & Hudson, 1995; Wakefield & Underwager, 1994), a furor that became the “greatest psychological controversy of the 1990s (and perhaps of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)” (Lindsay & Read, 2001, p. 71). Damage to the field of regression therapy has been severe (e.g., Brahams, 2000), even though two of the most prominent spokesmen alleging false memory implantation in child-abuse cases, Ralph Underwager and Richard A. Gardner, openly supported pedophilia (Sutton,

2017), and despite the American Psychological Association’s working group (Alpert et al., 1996) concluding that, while false memories *may* be created by suggestion to susceptible clients, accurate lost memories can be recovered. Some of the most touted refutations of the ability of regression techniques to reproduce age-valid physiological and psychological markers are dated, partial, and methodologically questionable (e.g., Barber, 1969; Nash, 1987; Spanos, 1996; Spanos et al., 1999) in addition to ignoring extant veridical hypnotic data (e.g., Brown, 1991; Ducasse, 1961; James, 1995; Tarazi, 1990). Indeed, recent results from better designed studies support the veracity of experiences in which earlier states are relived (e.g., Barabasz & Christensen, 2006; Christensen et al., 2009; Giordano, et al., 2012; Ham & Klimo, 2000; Raikov, 1982; Walker et al., 1976; Wallace, 1978).

Certainly any altered state possesses the potential for suggestion and confabulation; yet the benefits of hypnotherapy, including deliberate use of suggestion, have been documented for numerous conditions (e.g., Bollinger, 2018; Elkins, et al., 2012; Hasan, et al., 2014)—including specifically the efficacy of regression therapy (e.g., Clark, 2015; Durbin, 2009; Emerson, 2020; Mackey, 2009), despite criticism that most studies are small and not well controlled (e.g., Lam et al., 2015)—a truism for many therapeutic techniques. Clinical altered states for retrieving and resolving pre- and perinatal impressions affecting later functioning have been efficacious (e.g., Cotiga & Stulz-Koller, 2021; Emerson, 1987, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2007, 2020; Emerson, & Schorr-Kon, 1994; Grof, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1985; Ingram, 2016), but bias against early memories remains strong in traditional psychology: “Sometimes, notably in the clinical setting, regression can involve highly implausible memories in the womb and even earlier reports of a purported past life” (Mazzoni et al., 2014, p. 156; cf. Loftus et al., 1994; Mercer, 2014). However, substantial trauma research now exists on somatic memory (e.g., Allan & Levin, Ogden et al., 2006; Rothchild, 2000; Scaer, 2001; van der Kolk, 1994, 2002, 2014), including that spontaneous memories emerge when neurons and other cells are stimulated (Gelbard-Sagliv, et al., 2008; Verny, 2014), congruent with

implicit memory theories (e.g., Barry, et al., 2006; Packard, et al., 2014). Traumatic events are more likely than ordinary memories to be stored in a state-dependent manner, rendering them retrievable in the presence of a similar state or stimulus, including altered states that replicate prenatal conditions and play therapy interventions inviting children's normal-state re-enactments of pre- and peri-natal trauma (e.g., Allan & Levin, 1993; Ammaniti, 1991; Bundy-Myrow & Booth, 1993; Emerson, 1987, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2007, 2020; Jernberg, 1988; Lee, 2009). Despite this promising evidence, "the study of fetal behavior has not progressed because it has been judged as insignificant" and because "studies of the human fetus are simply too difficult and risky to conduct" (Buss, et al., 2009, p. 637).

### **Evidence for Fetal and Prenatal Autobiographical Memory**

Cross-disciplinary research provides evidence that prenatal memories exist, despite arguments that a functioning cerebral cortex is necessary to retain such memories: it is not (e.g., Bellieni & Buonocore, 2012; Beshkar, 2008; Brusseau, 2008; Platt, 2011). Three literatures address fetal and perinatal autobiographical memory with differing epistemologies and degrees of empirical rigor: mainstream psychological and neurological research that focuses on awareness or consciousness (thus memory) in the central nervous system (CNS); research involving cellular and genetic memory throughout the body and in nonlocal awareness; and literature representing early memories situated in an unverifiable otherworldly realm resembling near-death experiences, which may or may not extend back to an alleged past life of an individual.

### **Psychological and Neurological Evidence for Fetal and Neonatal Memories**

In the biomedical model, consciousness *per se* is a function of lower brain centers, with its contents elaborated by the cerebral cortex (e.g., Merker, 2007; Lee et al., 2005). Indeed, infants born with little or no cortical tissue demonstrate "conscious recognition, pain perception, musical preferences, and alert, wakeful behavior," orienting and responding emotionally with differentiated pleasure and aversion to their surroundings and

taking "behavioral initiatives" (Merker, 2007, p. 79). Even though new technologies permit much earlier fetal observation (e.g., Dragnova et al., 2018; Fukushima et al., 2004; Kurjak et al., 2005) most fetal awareness research is conducted during the last trimester when brainwave patterns are synchronous across both cortical hemispheres (e.g., Gustafson et al., 2022; Moser et al., 2021; Thaler et al., 2000).

Beyond mere awareness, fetal sentience is sufficient for learning (remembering a stimulus and reacting to it in a particular way), but prenatal learning is hardly exclusive to the evolutionarily advanced cerebral cortex of humans, or even mammals. Fetal learning occurs in birds (Bertin, et al., 2010; Peralta Quesada & Schausberger, 2012), amphibians (Hepper & Waldman, 1992; Mathis, et al., 2008; Ferrari & Chivers, 2010), mollusks (Darmaillacq et al., 2008), and arthropods (Peralta Quesada & Schausberger, 2012). For example, when eggs are switched, superb fairy-wrens (*Malurus cyaneus*) hatch displaying a call unique to the mother incubating them, not that of their biological mother (Colombelli-Négrel et al., 2012). Human fetuses can habituate to vibroacoustical sounds long before the cochlear nerve is fully formed (e.g., Holst et al., 2005; Dragnova et al., 2007; Dragnova et al., 2018), even as early as a gestational age (GA) of 22 weeks (Leader, et al., 1982).

Human fetuses demonstrate both short- and long-term retention (Dirix, et al., 2009; Muenssinger, et al., 2013; van Heteren, et al., 2000), including retaining fetal memories after birth (e.g., Gonzalez-Gonzalez et al., 2006; James, 2010; James et al., 2002; Jardri et al., 2011; Lang et al., 2021). For example, Dirix and colleagues assessed fetal learning through vibroacoustic stimulation during weeks 30-38 GA by observing certain fetal movements using an ultrasound scanner. Movements displaying the fetal trunk were considered a positive response; disappearance of the response for four consecutive stimuli was considered to demonstrate habituation. Each habituation test was repeated after 10 minutes to estimate fetal short-term memory. Those tested during weeks 30-36 were tested again at 38 weeks for long-term memory. The fetuses demonstrated short-term memory from at least 30 weeks GA onward, independent of GA, and 34-week-old fetuses could store and retrieve those



impressions after four weeks. Gonzalez-Gonzalez and colleagues (2006) repeatedly used vibroacoustic stimulation on 41 newborns previously stimulated in utero compared to 31 controls. Newborns stimulated in utero habituated significantly earlier than controls, suggesting that fetal memory persists into neonatal life. Lang and colleagues (2021) stimulated 34 fetuses daily from 34 weeks GA onward with a maternal spoken nursery rhyme and again two and five weeks after birth, compared to an unfamiliar rhyme spoken by the mother and the familiar rhyme spoken by an unfamiliar female voice. The newborns were observed with polysomnography using video-monitored high-definition electro-encephalogram during the stimulation, and later changes in sleep-wake state proportions during the familiar and unfamiliar voice stimuli were analyzed. Results showed calming exclusively in the experimental group, less waking, more time spent in deep sleep, and lower heart rates compared to controls.

Discussions of fetal memory are fraught, for many reasons discussed below, even up to and including the preverbal memory of toddlers. As understood today, memory systems are divided into two kinds, implicit and explicit. *Implicit* memory is generally considered the unconscious activation of previous experiences to influence behavior—that is, memory without conscious recollection, such as the ability to ride a bicycle (e.g., Gustafson, et al., 2022), including habituation, classical conditioning, and priming (when exposure to one stimulus results in a response to a second stimulus that does not occur in the absence of exposure to the first). Implicit memory is evidenced in the above nonhuman examples and in third-trimester GA human studies (e.g., Dirix et al., 2009; Gustafson, et al., 2022; Hepper, 1996; Kisilevsky, et al., 2003; Kisilevsky, et al. 2009). Implicit memory can also involve producing a learned emotional response, such as fear, without conscious thought (Packard et al., 2014). In contrast, *explicit* memory involves a person's awareness of retrieving the memory, such as the retrieval of the details surrounding a frightening event. Both memory systems tend to work in a coordinated fashion, but they may be split, such that a fearful memory surfaces without a direct link to its contextual origin, as in post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD; Packard et al., 2014), even if the subtleties of the reaction do not “coalesce” as an explicit memory (but are detectable through physiological cues, such as galvanic skin response). In the study of pre- and peri-natal memory, it is the explicit memory system that is in dispute.

For example, Howe, while acknowledging that “clear evidence of infant and even fetal memory [exists],” discounts it because “autobiographical memory does not develop until about age 2, when the child has a concept of self” (2000, p. 381). Agreement for what constitutes *autobiographical memory* is not universal, but the consensus is that *episodic memories*—recollections of specific past events usually accompanied by a sense of reliving the events by mentally placing oneself in the past (Tulving, 1972, 1983, 2002, 2005)—are autobiographical when they involve the self and past events “about which one has emotions, thoughts, reactions, and reflections” (Bauer, 2015, p. 206). Conventional estimates that people's earliest memories date to about age 3.5 years (e.g., Peterson, 2002; Rubin, 2000) have been increasingly questioned and lowered (e.g., Kingo et al., 2013; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Tustin & Hayne, 2010; Wang & Peterson, 2014). In fact, pre- and perinatal impressions that meet the criteria of episodic and autobiographical memories have clearly been demonstrated, ranging from emotional impressions of intrauterine events (e.g., Cotiga & Stulz-Koller, 2021; Granier-Deferre et al., 2011; Levine & Kline, 2007) to those frankly relived by a sense of self (e.g., Blasco, 2007; Chamberlain, 1986, 1988, 1990; Cheek, 1986; Emerson, 1987, 1998, 2020; Grof, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1985; Ham & Klimo, 2000; Kelsey, 1953; Rhodes, 2015).

Importantly, autobiographical memories are believed by some researchers (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) to be a networked type of structure “consisting of patterns of neural activation that sometimes ‘coalesce’ into memories, but often do not even enter consciousness” (Barry et al., 2006, p. 727). Autobiographical memory is generally considered to be explicit, but the role of implicit memory systems in autobiographical memory is considerable, if not yet well understood (e.g., Barnier, 2002; Magno & Allan, 2007; Rubin,

2006), and a broader systems model of memory (e.g., Rubin, 2006) probably has better explanatory value than the separate explicit/implicit assumptions tested in laboratory studies—especially for emotional human lifespan situations involving self-reference. For example, Magno and Allan (2007) found a common neural signature associated with self-referential processing (i.e., having a continuous, unitary sense of self over time), regardless of whether subjects were retrieving general knowledge or re-experiencing autobiographical past episodes.

Complex memory tasks, such as preverbal and prenatal recall, are “best understood by considering the separate component systems involved in performing them—systems that each have their own processes, schemata, and neural bases” (Rubin, 2006, p. 302). Generative retrieval of preverbal and prenatal memories is possible, when someone purposefully searches their autobiographical knowledge, but so is direct retrieval, which produces spontaneous, unexpected autobiographical memory when a stimulus activates event-specific knowledge that spreads to the lifetime, which may or may not rise to the level of a coalesced “memory” (Barry et al., 2006). (For the sake of simplicity, the word memory will be used hereafter to describe recollections, whether implicit or explicit.) Nevertheless, the evidence for any memory at any time during the lifespan is necessarily qualified by its constructive aspect; the accepted wisdom presently is that memory is “so dependent on processing that it is, in effect, a constructive (or ‘reconstructive’) process whereby memories often change or are distorted, often without the person being aware of these changes” (Barry et al., 2006, p. 723). Although evidence of third-party verification of recollected accounts of events will be presented below, claims for the accuracy of any memory must be shaded wherever possible, including in cases where the researchers themselves claimed that recollections were veridical.

### ***Eroding the CNS-Only Case for Fetal and Neonatal Memories***

The above explanations and qualifications pertain mostly to cognitive models of memory, where even most perceptual (sensory) memories reside in or are substantially mediated by the CNS.

Challenges to a CNS argument involve sources of memory distributed throughout the body and experiences of awareness situated nonlocally relative to the body. Studies indicate that somatic memories involving preference, emotions, temperament, identity and specific autobiographical memories may be carried by a variety of structures besides the CNS, including epigenetic memory (the inheritance of predestined functional characteristics of normal cells and newly acquired properties of cells passed from one generation of cells to the next), RNA, DNA, protein, and the like (e.g., Khoo, et al., 2020; Liester, 2020; Pearsall, et al., 2002; Vitaloni, 2014), in keeping with trauma research (e.g., Diamond, 2013; Levine, 2015; Price, 2006; van der Kolk, 2003, 2014). Experiences of recall through such structures will rely on integration and interpretation of data through the CNS.

Pre- and peri-natal trauma arises from maternal stressors (e.g., Buss et al., 2010; Malaspina et al., 2008; Meinlschmidt & Tegethoff, 2015; Sandman et al., 2012; Verny, 2012), obstetrical procedures (e.g., Cheek, 1975; Emerson, 1998, 2020; Rhodes, 2015), and intrauterine events, such as twin loss during gestation (e.g., Bókkón et al., 2014; Cotiga & Stulz-Koller, 2021; Hayton, 2011; Leonard, 2002; Pharaoh & Adi, 2000), and expression of these early memories can be quite specific. For example in a study of birth data from 412 forensic victims compared to 2,901 controls, suicide methods replicated traumatic birth conditions (Jacobson, 1988; Jacobson et al., 1987): asphyxiation (hanging, strangulation, drowning, gas poisoning) is more than four times higher among people who experienced strangulation at birth (e.g., umbilical cord wrapped around the neck); and mechanical suicide methods (firearms, jumping from heights, etc.) are correlated with mechanical problems at birth (e.g., breech presentation, forceps delivery). Somatic memories appear when hypnotically regressed people accurately reproduce diagnostic reflexes lost with age (Raikov, 1980, 1982) and re-enact their positioning inside the womb, descent into the birth canal, and repositioning by medical personnel to facilitate birth (Cheek, 1974, 1986), including displaying the bruising and indentations caused by obstetrical procedures.

Recollection of much earlier gestational events can also be accurately reflected in later behavior (e.g., Emerson, 2020; Piontelli, 1992). The clustering of adolescents' multiple suicide attempts around certain dates (Feldmar, 1979) coincided with the anniversaries of when their mothers had tried to abort them, information none of the mothers had ever disclosed. In one bizarre case (Emerson, 1996), a mother, whose husband abandoned her when she was 8 weeks pregnant, tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to abort the fetus using the hooked end of a wire coat hanger, something unknown to the son she ultimately bore. Yet the boy engaged in violence that mirrored the abortion attempts: he mutilated himself, gouging his genitals with sharp metal objects, especially fishing hooks, which he often complained were not big enough for his purpose. As an adult he was arrested more than 30 times for assault, usually for attacking people sleeping in parks with a large metal hook welded to a thick braid of wire.

In summary, cross-disciplinary research increasingly indicates that autobiographical fetal and neonatal memory exists. However, in addition to the difficulties of designing ethical prenatal studies, political and religious pressure groups internationally use evidence of fetal sentience to justify restrictive abortion legislation (e.g., Davies et al., 2010; Gornall, 2007; Steinbok, 2011; Zúñiga-Fajuri, 2014), thereby targeting researchers, hindering the replication of earlier efforts, and depressing the objective use of fetal research results.

### **The Case for Early Out-of-Body Memories**

A second smaller, more controversial literature comprises veridical stories that, in contradistinction to somatic impressions, represents an individual's out-of-body perspective on their own fetal and neonatal life unconstrained by the limitations of an immature brain and psyche, yet coexisting with it (e.g., Wade, 1996, 1998). This material tends to come from clinical case studies elicited through regression techniques or spontaneously produced by young children in a normal state. Three veridical examples demonstrate the oddly mature, verifiable features of such cases when a person reports detailed recollection of events during gestation that occurred outside the womb. First, a hypnotized 13-year-old girl reported:

Mother was sitting on a couch. She's knitting something. Daddy comes in and is asking why she's knitting something for a *girl*. Mother says, "It's a girl. I know it's a girl. *It has to be a girl.*" She has on a green plaid dress. (Cheek, 1986, pp. 106-107; emphasis in original)

The girl's mother confirmed the information, saying:

I had a green and black plaid dress on, and I can remember when that was. I had just begun feeling Debbie kicking. It was in April. I gave that dress away right after my pregnancy. I would have been about five months along. (Cheek, 1986, p. 107)

Although it is possible that the girl saw photos of her mother in that dress before it was discarded, that does not explain her knowledge of her parents' activities when the fetal brain lacks measurable EEGs, the eyes are fused shut, and the auditory nerves are incomplete.

In a second example, a hypnotized man (Cheek, 1992, pp. 132-133) discovered that his mother's father had died suddenly from a heart attack about a week before he was born, contradicting the man's conscious belief that his grandfather had expired years before. He described the grandmother's flowered dress as she wept on a sofa and his mother's maternity dress. He reported that his mother became terrified that she would die like her father as she was giving birth, which stopped her labor with the patient stuck in the birth canal, necessitating a forceps delivery. The mother independently confirmed every detail but did not recall what the grandmother was wearing.

A third case involves a boy, Bobby, who when four years of age was asked by his mother whether he knew what was happening in a close-up portrait photograph that showed only her and his father in profile facing someone not visible (Tucker, 2005). He said, "It's a picture of you and Dad getting married. I was there. I saw the whole thing . . . . You walked up the stairs, and then you gave each other rings, and then you ate cake" (p. 167). No marriage photos had been displayed in the home, so Bobby could not have discerned that it was a wedding picture, that the bride was pregnant with

him, nor that the ceremony took place in a hilltop gazebo reached by several flights of stairs. Moreover, at the only wedding Bobby had attended cake was not served, nor does his mother eat it (her wedding was an exception). On a separate occasion, Bobby said that he had been kicking in the womb trying to be born: "I wanted to get out, but I couldn't 'cause I was stuck" (p. 167). His mother had never talked about his birth. Bobby had presented face up, could not be turned, and after prolonged labor was delivered via cesarean section. She responded, "Yes, you were stuck, and they were pushing on your head to get you to turn over. All you had to do was turn over, and you could have gotten out" (p. 167). He said:

Oh, I didn't know that. I would have turned over but I thought they were pushing me back in. Anyway, then I saw the light, and then the doctor took me out of your tummy, and then they cleaned all that slime off, and then they put me in a bed, and then I could get some sleep. (p. 168)

CNS explanations will not account for such data, in which consciousness appears to be nonlocal to the physical body, a quality documented in numerous other conditions of veridical recall (e.g., Alvaredo, 2001; Braud, 2003; Dossey et al., 2011; Greyson et al., 2009; Nadeau & Kafatos, 1999; Pizzi et al., 2004; Stapp, 2015; Woodhouse, 1994), discussed below.

### **Otherworldly Prenatal Memories**

One other literature warrants mention in the spirit of a radical empiricism that investigates the full range of reported experiences (James, 1912): recollections of an otherworldly existence prior to birth, a notion common to many spiritual traditions (e.g., Givens, 2010; Irwin, 2017a, 2017b). A well-known Western example comes from Plato's *Republic* (2010), in which Er, a soldier who perished in battle, finds himself in the underworld where the dead exist along with those waiting to be born. The unborn draw lots to determine the order in which they will be sent to earth and then pass by the three Fates, who show them their destinies. They traverse a blazing terrain, drink water that causes forgetfulness, and fall asleep. During a cataclysmic

storm, the souls shoot up like skyrocket to be born on earth. Elements of this story appear in many traditions. Most salient here are the themes of an otherworldly place where the unborn and the dead coexist before and after embodied life and that knowledge of what preceded birth is wiped from memory.

Although initially a skeptic, psychotherapist Michael Newton became so impressed by the frequent, spontaneous otherworldly narratives his regressed patients produced that he combined data from his clinical cases, the out-of-body (OBE) and NDE literature, and past-life research into a theory of sequential stages humans go through in-between lives (2001, 2004, 2009, 2010). The stages preparatory to birth involve an otherworldly realm for learning aided by spirit-guide counselors; having prior-life conduct judged by a "Council of Elders;" and then selecting the body and family for the next life to further "karmic" development (2001, pp. 71–86). Newton's best-selling books, translated into numerous languages, have influenced many. However, his protocol, revealed in published transcripts, is extremely leading, seriously compromising the validity of data gained through his method in line with critical investigations of "past life regression" therapeutic techniques (e.g. Spanos, 1996; Spanos et al, 1991; cf. Mills & Tucker, 2014).

A more credible source is Jim B. Tucker's *Life before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives* (2005), based on Ian Stevenson's extensive, rigorous cross-cultural research (e.g., 1974, 1975, 1977a, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1987, 1997a, 1997b, 2000a, 2000b, 2003) of children's spontaneous, normal-state accounts of past lives they begin volunteering usually before the age of five and in the face of familial and social discouragement, virtually all of them partially if not predominantly veridical. Among the 1,100 cases Tucker reviewed, 112 included memories of being in another realm after death in their previous incarnation; some reported meeting a spiritual being identified as God or a deceased relative; and 45 reported memories of their conception or birth into a new life. Unfortunately, Tucker provided little detail except to note that accounts of the otherworld



were more likely when the child claimed that the previous personality had died suddenly.

Other researchers took up the baton, elaborating the interval between death and rebirth in reincarnation cases Stevenson called *intermission* (1974, 1975, 1977, 1983b). Sharma and Tucker (2004), analyzing 35 of Stevenson's Burmese reincarnation cases, identified three stages of the intermission experience: a transitional stage just after death, when the person may not realize they are dead, tries to communicate with loved ones and observes funerary preparations for the body, usually ending when the body is buried or cremated; a second stage of discarnate life that often seems to pass in a fixed location, discussed below; and a third stage of choosing the parents for a new life.

Stevenson (1974) noted that the second intermission stage was fairly culturally conditioned, and indeed Matlock and Giesler-Petersen's (2016) analysis of 400 published reincarnation cases from seven Asian and five Western countries found that Asians tended to report spending the second stage in a terrestrial environment whereas Westerners tended to describe a heavenly otherworld. Both encountered the spirits of deceased loved ones and other humans as well as other spiritual entities, interpreted as the King of Death, deities and devas, or God, Jesus, and angels, respectively. The stage of selecting new parents involved "seeing" the parents and scenes from a terrestrial or otherworldly environment.

Matlock and Geisler-Peterson (2016) added two more stages to the intermission experience from the reincarnation accounts: memories of life in the womb, and memories of birth and perinatal life. Evidence of these last two stages in their reincarnation narratives was sparse compared to evidence of the first three stages—the after-death transition, discarnate life in a fixed location, and choosing the parents for the next life; however, this disparity may be artifactual because Ohkado (2015) and Ohkado and Ikegawa (2005, 2014), in research asking Japanese mothers about their children's earliest memories, reported far more recollections of intrauterine life and birth than of a discarnate pre-life period or past life. None of these sources provided an in-depth analysis of intrauterine or birth memories.

Some popular books purport to report pre-birth accounts, with a wide range of credibility. Some authors appear. One of the more objective records is a collection of about 100 contemporary pre-birth narratives (Carman & Carman, 2013) gathered from a variety of sources and compared to multicultural belief systems about the intermission period.

Conservatively, "the ubiquity of myths such as the story of Er, and now some cross-cultural research, suggest that at least some people recall not only being in the womb and their birth but also an otherworldly pre-birth realm. Without debating its ontological status, experiences of this "place" seem to possess a common structural phenomenology, similar to the common otherworldly features of NDEs, which nevertheless demonstrate some cultural and idiosyncratic variations (e.g., Greyson, 2015; Jahromi & Long, 2020; Kellehear, 1996, 2008; Long, 2010, 2017; McClenon, 2006; Nahm & Nicolay, 2010; Ohkado, & Greyson, 2014; Parnia, 2013; Pasricha, 2008; Ring, 1980 Shushan, 2018; Tassell-Matamua & Murray, 2014), discussed further below. Relatively little is known about the source of this experience of a pre-birth realm.

Given three distinct literatures purporting to represent memories of coming into life elicited by diverse methods, the purpose of this study was to explore the question: what do people who claim to remember how they came into the world say about their experience prior to and including birth?

## Study

To examine the content of individuals reporting pre-natal and peri-natal memories, thematic analysis was conducted on a set of "earliest memory" narratives submitted to an independent website.

## Method

To investigate the contents of reported pre-birth and birth memories, thematic analysis, which emerged from grounded theory (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 2015; Percy, et al., 2015), was chosen as a realist method to describe participants' experiences, meaning, and reality (Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest, et al., 2012) from their unprompted narratives, described below. Thematic analysis is an exploratory technique not committed to a particular

epistemological stance and thus adaptive to use within various paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006); as such, it was considered optimal for this study of discovery of a virtually unexplored field. This study took an inductive approach to the thematic analysis (Patton, 2015) rather than a theoretical one (Guest et al., 2012; Percy et al., 2015) since a) the purpose of the study was one of discovery in a new field; and b) to reduce bias. The researcher, an integral part of qualitative methods, while biased in believing that pre- and peri-natal awareness and memory are possible, was skeptical about what such memories might entail or represent and thus was open to whatever emerged with critical appreciation and curiosity. Because the most extensive intermission studies had been conducted on published reincarnation accounts, and the bulk of the research on “earliest memories” came by interviewing parents retrospectively about what children reported or from clinical case histories, this study focused on narratives submitted by adults of their own memories collected by a third-party source.

### **Material**

The data were written texts volunteered by individuals who independently found and posted their stories on the Out of Body Experience Research Foundation website ([www.oberf.org](http://www.oberf.org)) maintained by Jeffrey and Jody Long, who began collecting near-death accounts and branched into archiving related experiences, such as after-death communications (ADCs). Their websites allow the public to submit accounts via protocols with few required fields. The Longs review the submissions, edit the narrative portions into short versions linked to the full text, assign identifiers to protect anonymity, and archive the records.

Only accounts the Longs had classified as “PreBirth Experiences” were considered, including “premortal experience, pre-existence [sic], prebirth experiences, past-life/birth remembrances, reincarnation” (<https://www.oberf.org/prebirth.htm>). All records were in English; some had been translated, and in most cases, included a translator identifier. Of 95 pre-birth records posted from March 8, 2003 to March 25, 2022, 68 met the inclusion criteria of 1) describing what participants perceived to be

their life experience leading directly to being born in a physical body; 2) representing recollections of this state from early childhood, less likely to have been influenced by others and congruent with the recollection age in the reincarnation and prenatal psychology research; or 3) recollections from later in life that emerged spontaneously and unintentionally through processes not designed to evoke such memories, such as bodywork, congruent with the trauma research. Accounts mentioning the ingestion of psychotropic drugs were excluded. Past-life records, OBEs, NDEs associated with a previous life, or other experiences not leading directly to birth were excluded (even though these might have supported some of the intermission literature) as outside the focus of this study, with the exception of perinatal NDEs.

### **Treatment of Data**

The researcher contacted the Longs who kindly provided demographic information not available on the website. The data set consisted of available demographic information and narrative or multiple-choice responses to the Longs’ protocol probing features of the experience (Appendix A). Probably because of the Longs’ original focus, many survey items were more reflective of NDE phenomena than of the pre-birth literature, which respondents often omitted or noted were not applicable. Analysis centered on the unprompted narratives (question 4) and only examined responses to prompts for elaboration and clarification of certain elements to strengthen validity. Thematic analysis followed the established steps of becoming familiar with the data, generating preliminary codes, refining them, identifying potential themes, reviewing them across the entire data set, and refining them (e.g., Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest et al., 2012; Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015), using an inductive approach.

First the Longs provided demographic information for the published records, and each narrative was screened to meet the selection criteria. Qualified records were downloaded as Word documents in their entirety, and the demographic information was put into an Excel spreadsheet. Each record was read several times alone, and answers to probes highlighted for coding when

they augmented meaningful data in the narratives. Next, all narratives and highlighted probe responses were manually coded using preliminary codes that emerged from the data (Patton, 2015). These codes were refined into categories that were more applicable across the data set, including providing an operational definition of each code category. All records were then reviewed to revise preliminary coding with the refined, operationally defined codes.

Code categories were examined to produce potential descriptive themes, and those themes were reviewed across the entire data set and refined, as necessary. Only themes that rose to the level of significance were retained and reported: aggregate categories supported by fewer than three unprompted, convergent responses were omitted as not reaching significance (R. E. Boyatzis & M. Esteves, personal communication, May 9, 1999). Thus only data from the narratives contributed to significance, not information elicited only by prompts.

Demographic factors were examined across all codes and themes to determine whether meaningful trends emerged, and sex was the only one that suggested any patterns at all, as well as being one of the few demographics consistently reported. In reporting the analysis, percentages provided with theme frequency counts refer to proportions of the entire sample, and are broken out by sex (F = female, M = male). Reported themes were supported by verbatim quotes that retain idiosyncratic spelling, grammar, and usage to preserve the integrity of the respondents' expression.

### Results

The sample comprised 68 records ranging from a single paragraph to several pages. It featured first-person accounts from 38 females and 28 males, plus 2 third-person accounts furnished by adults relating unprompted perinatal narratives expressed by young boys. For purposes of analysis, the third-person accounts were considered male records for a final sample of 38 females and 30 males. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (Table 1).

The survey assessed education using a combination of degrees and years, a format retained in the Longs' database; for ease of analysis, years

**Table 1**  
*Participants by Sex and Race*

Race	Women	Men	Total
Caucasian/White	26	26	52
Black	0	2	2
Asian	0	1	1
Hispanic/Latino	1	0	1
Mixed Race	2	1	3
Other	4	0	4

after the Longs' high school-plus designations were translated into the number required for degree equivalents (Table 2); e.g. 16 years was presumed to be a bachelors degree equivalent, 20 a doctoral degree equivalent, and so forth. The majority of the sample had at least some college education.

Age when participants submitted their accounts ranged from 9.5 years for one of the minors to 76 years (Table 3). The mean age was 39.7 years, with men on average somewhat older (M = 40.1; SD = 19.49 than women (M = 39.3; SD = 14.27).

Of greater interest was the age when people became aware of their pre-birth memories (Table 4). For the majority who responded to this item,

**Table 2**  
*Participants by Sex and Highest Level of Education Completed*

Education	Women	Men	Total
Less than 12 years	2	3	5
High School or equivalent	8	2	10
High School + 1 year	3	0	3
High School + 2-3 years	9	8	17
Bachelors Degree or equivalent	9	12	21
Masters Degree or equivalent	1	4	5
Doctoral Degree or equivalent	2	1	3
No response	4	0	4

the recollection was something they “had always known”: “at the back of my consciousness all my life” (Benjamin) and “I have had this memory ever since I was born, I always knew about it” (Michelle). Confidence in such memories was strong even among those who had critically questioned their experiences.

Not only is it the first or earliest thing I remember but I \*know\* that it happened before the rest of my life...I have always had this memory. Always...I am now 40. I am also not given to new-age wooly minded liberalism either. I have a logical, scientific mind ...

It wasn't a dream, it isn't a false memory. When you \*know\* something, you know it. It's not a case of “I strongly feel this happened.” It is real. (EP)

I have remembered the following events my whole life. In some periods...I have thought that these things that I remember are just fantasies - made up delusions or unconscious substitutes such as dreams explaining my waking life. It is through my heart that I know these are, in fact, true. I guess you could say I have faith, but it [sic] moreover that I have finally come to terms with the truth in my existences and previous existences. (James)

The few whose recollections surfaced in adulthood tended to associate them with a specific event, such as Marvin, a 63-year-old whose birth memory emerged during a Reiki session when he was 46 (Table 4).

Other demographic questions from the protocol lacked sufficient comparable responses for meaningful inclusion.

The sample narratives broke into two distinct data sets: those beginning in some otherworldly realm represented the vast majority of the data (53, 78%; 31F, 22M), and those beginning on Earth, a much smaller set (10, 15%; 3F, 7M), with 5 texts too ambiguous to tell which place was described. Because these two types of narratives were so different, the analysis was divided accordingly: Part 1 covers memories of a prenatal existence in an otherworldly realm, presented in this article; and Part

2 covers memories of pre- and peri-natal incarnate life. The findings on otherworldly memories are organized more or less chronologically, starting with general descriptions of the “place” people were in, their subjective experience of self, and then what was happening to and around them leading to birth.

### Memories of an Otherworldly Realm

Of the 53 accounts that began in an otherworldly location, 49 (72%; 27F, 22M) provided at least some description of that place, and some included more than one venue as their experience progressed. The otherworld possessed three-dimensional spatial features. For 29 (43%; 17F, 12M), its expanse seemed limitless, often (22, 33%; 15F, 7M) lacking familiar features: “a void” (Cary); “All around me is white light, but with dimension and depth so that it is almost tangible, and it carries feelings and thoughts with it” (Mae); “I was in a kind of light/water but at the same time, it was no matter. It was blue... and there was some beautiful music” (Kathleen). For others (17, 25%; 10F, 7M), the space incorporated recognizable terrestrial or celestial elements, which some interpreted as heaven.

I was floating in the wind...and [had] no physical form and I was unaware of any physical feeling...I would stop floating and settle where ever [sic] the breeze took me and I could go inside anything, I remember going into a tree and feeling the feelings of a tree...I went into a rock and felt really strong and solid an [sic] the

**Table 4**  
*Participants by Sex and Age*  
*When Memory of the Event Occurred*

Age	Women	Men	Total
Up through birth	22	20	42
After birth-5 years	7	1	8
6-19	3	3	6
20-29	1	0	1
30-39	0	0	0
40-49	0	1	1
50-59	0	0	0
No response	5	5	10
Total	38	30	68



rock also had a kind of unexplainable awareness of its' self [sic]. (Carol)

I was in... Heaven before I was born....He [God] pointed to Earth as we observed it from Heaven ... . I recognized Heaven and Planet Earth. (David)

I was in heaven sitting on a swing ... everything was consumed in a light that was beautiful! Nothing like the sun, which is plain and comes from only one direction. The light in heaven came from everywhere and everything but wasn't overwhelming. It was a brilliant yet soft white and felt as though it feed [sic] everything ... .

I could see a curvy golden road leading to a HUGE white gate trimmed in gold ... . Next to the road and in front of the gate, there's a giant palm tree. (Cynthia)

I awoke became conscious in a blue world[.] I was only experiencing mental activity, no body....I then transitioned to an amazing White City, light emanated from the city[.] [I]t's [sic] structure was a white sparkling substance similar to frozen snow, no shadowing was apparent. (John B)

Patrick first was in a limitless place among an unruly mob jostling to approach the "throne of God," which was too far away to be discerned although its brilliance lit the sky above it a radiant yellow-gold; otherwise that world was entirely "in shades of gray, like early 1950s television programming ... . Images are not clear and sharp." Then he went to

an idyllic place of wondrous richly colored natural beauty and total peace. I was on high, grassy ground overlooking a wondrous [sic] meadow which flowed downhill to a valley....a scene of perfection with a sky of perfect blue, a sun which provided a perfect light and a perfect temperature. It was quiet and a place of complete calm ... . The colors were rich and deep, almost vibrant. (Patrick)

Nine (13%; 4F, 5M) were in an enclosed space with architectural features: "a huge ballroom" (Chukwuemeka), a long, white corridor (George and

Bailey), and "a chamber the size of an average sized room" with smooth, grey walls and a dome shape (Marvin).

Almost half mentioned light (33, 49%; 20F, 13M). Many, like Mae and Cynthia above, described unearthly white illumination (15, 22%; 10F, 5M), such as "the brightest white light I've ever seen" (Tracey F), and beautiful blue light (5, 7%; 4F, 1M) "very bright light blue mixed with white colors/light all around" (Sandra B). But a few (3M, 4%), like Patrick and Martin above, were in a drab world of greys, whereas others were in a living, positive darkness (9, 13%; 6F, 3M):

This darkness doesn't feel like darkness.... This darkness actually feels overwhelmingly illuminating. I feel like I belong here and have been here for a very long time....I have never known anything else. This is my home....It could be explained as a darkness that felt like a light or felt like a knowledge of sorts. (Jennifer)

It was not a cold, empty and frightening darkness ... but instead was filled with the most loving and caring sensation that I have never felt on this earth. I wanted nothing more than to lie forever, basking in the glorious darkness that was at the same time the most loving light that I have ever felt. Like closing your eyes in the sunshine and receiving a warm hug from a loved one but multiplied by a million....A pitch black realm filled with love and light.... (Spencer)

Existence showed considerable variation, starting with personal identity. Just over half (38; 56%; 21F, 17M) referred to themselves directly or indirectly in bodily terms. Most (17, 25%; 11F, 6M) who talked about their self-representation had a conscious presence without a discernible form: "a soul...floating in space" (Daniel); a "disembodied spirit" without "identifiable body sensations" (Richard); "incorporeal...I was nothing more than a simple yet impossibly complex awareness" (Cary). Others suggested an anthropomorphic form (13, 19%; 7F, 6M), even if they did not necessarily mean a three-dimensional body. Usually bodily references were incidental to the narrative, not deliberate self-descriptions. For example, Laura did not say what she

looked like but mentioned walking “for a very long time” and greeting others “with open arms, ready to embrace them.” Occasionally a text contained self-reflection about having a human form: “There was a lady sitting next to me....I looked from the woman’s legs to my bare legs and I was naked, but I didn’t realize that this was unusual....I felt no shame....” (Cynthia). Some (5, 7%; 2F, 3M) were uncertain that their human-like bodies functioned in the usual manner: “We sat, or rather floated (hard to tell exactly)” (Chukwuemeka) and “sitting, I guess, though with a different kind of body” (Mae). Six (9%; 4F, 2M) had spherical energy bodies: “in the shape of a ball sort of...hard to describe because I had no body....I was floating...” (Michelle); “a little ball of brilliant blue light. About 5 cm in diameter” (Franziska).

Perception, assessed by positive and negative probes, tended to be lucid or better than normal, waking consciousness (46, 68%; 28F, 18M), typically reported as “very alert,” “vivid,” “wide awake,” and “more alert than in normal life.” Indeed, some (9, 13%; 5F, 4M) said perception was hyper-real: “more real than reality” (Franziska) and “more real than anything I have experienced on the earth” (Spencer). Most who answered probes about sight and hearing (15, 22%; 11F, 4M) said they were normal or enhanced. Four (6%; 2F, 2M) heard beautiful, unearthly music: “There was music... that I have never heard again and cannot describe” (Michelle), whereas another four (6%; 3F, 1M) mentioned a kind of white noise, like “droplets of water” (Mae) and “a static, electric humm [sic], and high pitch [sic] noises” (Nicole). Some (10, 15%; 7F, 3M) said communication was telepathic, not spoken. For seven (10%; 5F, 2M), impressions came through less defined paranormal means. Jennifer “had senses but they were very different. It was more of an understanding and being in tune with everything around me.” Suzanne said, “This was not a ‘normal’ sensory experience. I was not seeing with physical ‘eyes’ I was the landscape, melody, harmony, peace, love, a sense of oneness with all.”

Few answered probes about the experience of space and time. The only theme that reached significance involved a sense of timelessness or that

time was meaningless (14, 21%; 6F, 8M). “Time either did not exist, or I was unable to comprehend the concept” (Cary). “Everything seemed to be happening at once; or time stopped or lost all meaning” (EP). “I was just in the moment, there really wasn’t ‘time.’” (Susan).

Participants encountered three types of beings: entities like themselves waiting to be born or recuperating from previous lives; entities acting as guides or staff functionaries, such as recorders or gatekeepers; and a supreme being, usually called God, seldom directly engaged. About a third were among beings similar to themselves (24, 35%; 12F, 12M), most waiting to be born (15, 22%, 8F, 7M). Ten (15%; 4F, 6M) mentioned such others casually but did not have meaningful interactions with them. Elena was “playing with other beings...without worries, having a good time...like children playing on a patio.” Maxine was with “boys and girls like me...sitting in a circle...getting some instructions.” Patricia described a sort of waiting room filled with “whitish outlines of people without features or sex organs or clothes” who rose at intervals and left through a white doorway. Four people (4%; 1F, 3M) reported loving relationships with other unborn spirits: “It was a huge family and we all loved each other and played and we had no fear as if we were children being closely guarded and cared for...” (David). “Entities just like me working in a joyous chorus of love and light” (John B).

Thirty-one (46%; 19F, 12M) said spiritual beings directed their incarnation. For some (9, 13%; 7F, 2M), little more than an impersonal command sent them immediately to earth. Tracey saw an impassive man in “wizard robes” writing in a book when an unidentified voice announced, “Okay, it’s time to be born now.” She felt “hurt that there were no emotions from the people that sent me to be born ... just factual.” For others (11, 16%; 6F, 5M), the necessity to incarnate was conveyed by kindly guides who had to be obeyed. Maxine heard her name and turned to see “a tall sender man in a robe ... I knew as soon as I saw him that I was to go,” but she wanted to confirm. “I said, ‘Is it my time to go?’ He said ‘Yes’ ... I asked if I would be happy there and he said something like ‘If you want to be.’”

Not everyone was so easily reconciled to their fate because the otherworldly realm was so beatific (9, 13%; 4F, 5M). Derrick felt surrounded by "a being of bright golden light" who had a "voice that was deep, strong and powerful but yet gentle and loving at the same time." He was in the "most wonderful state of peace and love that even to this day I have never felt anything close to." One of the fullest narratives of the beauty, joy, and love of the otherworld follows:

All [the beings there] are angelic beautiful, off the scale....The sense of love is not describable. I have a strong (that would be the biggest understatement in the universe) urge to be with them....

The sense of absolute awe, power, love, joy, whiteness (light), humility is off the scale ... . Think of the most love you have ever felt, multiply it by the largest, most infinite number you can think of (to the "power of," even) and you will not even be close ... . This sensation is what I remember most, of wanting to be with these "angels," of wanting to be accepted ... . I was not as pure (for want of a better word) as these beings, ... but ... they loved me (and in fact everything/everyone) ... There was a flow of understanding between the angelic beings and myself, they understood me ... . (EP)

Spencer began to have "a sneaking suspicion that my 'vacation' ... was about to be cut short" when two "floating blue orbs" announced that he was "urgently needed" on Earth and that the part of his soul "that prefers doing over watching" had already departed on that mission. The guides were going to put him in a body to "re-unite with my hasty soul counterpart." Recalling "anguishing painful" past lives, he "defied these two beings and told them to stuff it," whereupon

They became slightly agitated and told me that they knew, I knew that I had to comply ... . They mentioned some kind of promise that I had made and that it was no use trying to back out now.... I was still not convinced...and began drifting back to sleep, half hoping that these beings

would leave me be. What happened instead was the cosmic equivalent of a scuffle as I felt my essence seized by these beings and heaved into a gently rotating blue portal that had opened up near us ... .

I sensed that the two blue beings were my old friends and that we had shared many adventures but this awakening of my spirit felt like a betrayal. (Spencer)

Angela also fought against being born, recalling "the pain of leaving my family on earth and the entire ordeal and never wanted to go back to earth again." Her guides let her linger, but "the time did arrive, and thy [sic] were stern but in a sweet, nice encouraging way [said] that I must go now. I cried! I threw a tantrum." Offered the opportunity to choose her parents, her sex, and other conditions for incarnation, she refused until "I had no choice at this time and I knew it."

In contrast, six (9%; 3F, 3M) eagerly insisted on coming to earth despite discouragement. Guides warned Sabine D. that "it would be tough but I wanted so badly to go ... . I could hardly wait." Margie had been looking "very forward to" her future even when shown "events that were going to happen in my life." A voice asked, "Are you sure, it's going to be very difficult. I said: whatever would happen, I want this life." When Patrick met a "gatekeeper" who grudgingly said he would be acceptable for a certain life of "much hardship," Patrick "snapped at it."

"You do not understand," the gatekeeper said. "This life will be so difficult that if you take it, you may not be able to return here".... I still wanted to accept the life he had described. "No," he said. "You must think this over carefully before you accept." He then summoned two escorts who walked me to a place of contemplation. (Patrick)

Patrick held fast to his decision, which the gatekeeper disdained, refusing to speak to him again and regarding him with "condescension."

Guides displayed different appearances and relationships with participants. In addition to sending people to earth, their primary role was preparing

them for human existence, helping them with choices ranging from what kind of body to inhabit to whether and when to incarnate. Twenty-three participants (34%, 13F, 10M) exerted some degree of influence over their upcoming life, including choosing their sex.

Chukwuemeka's guide displayed key elements of his life in a theater-like room, permitting him some choices but not others. She said he would have a bachelor's or master's degree, which he objected to because earthly education was tedious. When she gave him no choice, he asked for "all the intelligence I would need to breeze through the entire education quickly." He asked to be "same-gender loving" because it would facilitate his mission. When warned against this difficult choice, he said, "My mind was made up, I was not changing it ... . She was right, I was born in Nigeria where homosexuality is largely frowned upon ... and LGBTQ individuals are killed and stoned to death regularly." The guide said he would be his mother's firstborn, that she would die young, that he would not find a romantic partner until he was almost 30, and that he would die peacefully before the age of 60. To date, all these but his death have come to pass, he reported.

Adam was offered a life as a tall man, possibly a professional athlete, or life with a "twin brother where our bond would be eternal. I remember so easily picking my life with my twin and whatever was offering me these choices was pleased ... ."

Shelly was shown three lives playing simultaneously on something like a row of movie screens. She "immediately said no to the life on my right." She saw a family on the middle screen and "was not interested in that life either ... but I let it keep playing." The life on the left "was much too sad, so I said no." Having rejected them all, she thought she was finished. But her guide, with "the patience of a loving father," tried to convince her choose the middle screen where she could now see a woman laboring to deliver a dark-haired female baby:

I sensed there wasn't much time, but I still didn't want to leave. I could feel the entity's [guide's]

frustration...Te [sic] entity told me that it was important that I go, for I was an anchor. I do not know what that means now. But at the time...I understood what that meant. (Shelly)

The incarnation decision is the critical issue in the otherworld narratives, with slightly more people feeling forced to have an earthly life (21, 31%;16F, 5M) than those who believed they influenced the decision in some way (18, 27%; 9F, 9M). Factors in the incarnation decision involved weighing the sense of mission—having a meaningful spiritual, existential, or cosmic purpose to fulfill on earth—against the certainty that earthly life would be a painful ordeal, often derived from impressions of previous lives. David, one of the most determined to be born, kept pestering until

He [God] gave me an assignment...but it was like one of those things where like a prospective employer would say[,] "We don't have anything in the area of your expertise, but we DO have this job that nobody else wants." I just have to laugh at that because it sounds so stupid, but it's the truth. That's the job I took.... (David)

In contrast, Alex spent his time

Crying because of the painful death I had just had, and I had to make some choices...about what life I would be living eg [sic],...poor but happy, or poor and unhappy....and how I would die, but...each life I had in the past, the death had been painful or terrible....so I couldn't make up my mind. In the end, I run [sic] out of time and had to jump blindly into a soul or baby to be born at the very last possible moment. (Alex)

James was told "that an event was about to happen there [on earth]...something revolutionary for this place. I was chosen to take part in it," but he could opt to remain:

There is one [teacher] on earth that you may learn from. He has some time left [on earth] yet, though he will not be here [in the other world] until late. You must go there if you want to learn in this role. It is not of high stature....



The voice further said,

And your second choice, if you wish, is that you may stay here. One of the masters may be your teacher and companion. You will learn what they have to offer, but it is of limited value compared to what you may learn there (the world). (James)

James elected to stay to study with his heavenly teacher: "The more I learned, the more I knew it was time to go back to earth. I resisted the thought...but knew it was true. I had to go back. I was scared....It is so much different there."

In a different case, a guide gave directions from the grave. When John was 4 or 5, he saw a picture of his grandfather who had died a year before John was born. The adults dismissed John's telling them that he had met his grandfather as fantasy. But he persisted:

It was a really bright space, almost like a void. He [grandfather] told me that he could no longer protect my family and that in the future I would need to carry on..., guiding them in the right direction. He had on what looked like an old suit with a tie. I remember...promising that I would do everything in my power to honor his wishes. He then said to me that I had to go now but we would see each other again soon. [Then] he put his hand on my head and brushed back my hair....[My] father and grandmother started to cry. They said...I described...his favorite suit, but the thing that had gotten to them the most was that the way he had brushed my hair back was the exact way he would do to my father at a young age. (John)

### ***Crossing Over***

In the otherworldly accounts, when it was time to be born, guides sometimes acted as psychopomps ushering the unborn into incarnation (7, 11%; 5F, 2M). Kathleen was "so afraid of being alone, because I didn't know where to go" that she hurried after a woman holding hands with a small girl: "They turned left at the end of the tunnel, climbing up some 5-6 stairs. I ran after them. At the end of the stairs there was a very bright light and I saw the lights of the operation theater." Not all

journeys between the worlds involved being born; sometimes guides introduced people to their bodies later on. Lena came into her body three days after an induced birth when a "person of light" in a cloud of "atoms of shimmering light" with a "shimmering light sound" came down with her "into the density of matter."

As I descended from the white expanse of the ceiling into the bedroom, I was puzzled because the light atoms and sound were being replaced with denser matter and silence. I asked the being of light where I was, and it told me, "This is your parents' room...." before he placed me with a "jolt" of electrical shock into my tiny, chilly, body. I was confused and not pleased....I was about to protest. Then, suddenly, I saw with my peripheral vision, waving dangerously close to my right eye, a little pinkish wiggling object. I didn't even have the ability to turn my head or move my eyes. Startled and astonished, I asked the being, "What it [sic: is] that!?" The being said, "That is your hand." (Lena)

Michelle had been playing on a slide when one of her playmates said, "She is here for you."

So I slid down the slide, and a lady in white put her hand out, so I took it. we walked down a long white hall, and at the end crossed another hallway. there was a man in a wheelchair, leg in a cast, and a light blue robe.

The lady pointed and said, "That's going to be your dad."

I nodded and implied ok. I looked at him. He ended up being my real dad, years later. I learned he had a broken leg his senior year of high school, same leg I saw in the cast. (Michelle)

Later Michelle had "a feeling of falling quickly" and an "overwhelming-ness that was new to me. Something like pain, noise in my ears, a cry, fast moving motion that my eyes couldn't focus on. Next I remember being wrapped in softness, held by someone, being lowered...."

Whether accompanied by guides or not, many (17, 25%; 8F, 9M) identified a mechanism that transported them to earth. Seven (16%; 4F, 3M)

described an aperture, usually a bright doorway with brilliant white light on the earthly side: "White light outside a doorway" (Cynthia); "A light opened up...a much brighter shade than any white on Earth" (Daniel); an "undulating blue portal that looked like a swirling sky" (Spencer). Ten (15%; 4F, 6M) described a tunnel-like device, which usually propelled them into its depths and along its length that sometimes seemed to merge with the birth canal: a combined slide and tunnel (Michelle and Angela); a tornado (Greta); a tunnel that pulled Marvin into it and "continued to collapse and squeeze me with an almost unbearable pressure. My sense was that I was at that moment dying..." For John B, "the floor opened under me and down a grey, red and blue striped tunnel(tube) I fell. The last part of me is coming out of mom and seeing the shock of bright green tiles in the delivery room." The sensation of descent during transition figured in 14 out of these 17 accounts (8F, 6M).

Few people addressed the process of incarnation; indeed most (31, 46%; 22F, 9M) stopped after describing the other world. Only nine (13%; 4F, 5M) indicated they had been born but provided no further details. As soon as Cheri said, "I'm ready," she "quickly flew" into her infant body, and the next thing she remembered was looking around the hospital nursery. Margie, who had been existing in a "black space" said, "The next thing I remember, I was just born. I felt cold and very scared." Curt vaguely recalled being in a line, making some choices, going into a "wide open area," and stepping "into the void, then an extremely bright light followed by a room full of people."

Incarnating involved forgetting all that had gone before, especially the purpose for coming to earth. Sixteen participants (24%, 7F, 9M) expressed a strong sense of having a mission to fulfill, and all but two said either their memories were expunged or they were forbidden to disclose such information if it were retained. Some fought to remember. Jennifer 6 believed she had failed to complete her mission in previous lives because she could not remember and thus was condemned to keep repeating the cycle. Although her guides seemed to approve her being able to recall this time, a being "more like a force, devoid of care or love" in charge

of removing memories seemed amused by her efforts to hold onto them. As she came to earth, she encountered an entity panicked that Jennifer 6's memory had not been erased but who ultimately okayed her passage, saying that if she spoke about her otherworldly experience, she would not be believed. Bill D lied to and bargained with his guides to remember with some success but stated, "I was amazed no-one remembers anything. They really erase you." Another said:

I felt that heaven was so wonderful that I could never forget such a place. But I also knew that time in the flesh would make memories of heaven fade away, and I felt I HAD to remember. I wasn't going to be one of the ones who forgot ... .

I could see myself ... after my birth asking myself if what I saw in heaven was real, and the thought made me feel ashamed; ashamed to be capable of forgetting God and heaven. Then I felt God listening to my thoughts and smiling in his heart ... . I knew then that he wouldn't let me forget, it was a reassuring feeling.

And then I remember the lights getting very bright. Very harsh and it didn't feel good at all. I think that may have been when I was born. But I have no memory of my actual birth. (Cynthia)

Some (14, 21%; 9F, 5M) retained otherworldly foresight about their earthly lives, such as Michelle's seeing the man who was to be her father and Chukwuemeka's information about major events in the life he would lead. Foresight tended to be restricted to recognition of family members and having opted for a life of challenges.

### ***Summary of Otherworldly Memory Results***

To conclude this portion of the study results, earliest memory accounts that begin with an unearthly existence leading to birth can be summarized as follows. People were in a limitless space devoid of physical features, one that possessed recognizable terrestrial or "heavenly" elements, or enclosed architectural spaces, most of which were characterized by unusual lighting, ranging from brilliant illumination to grey half-tones to a vibrant darkness. People existed formlessly, as energy spheres, or with anthropomorphic bodies of some sort. Awareness seemed normal or hyper-alert, with

realistic or hyper-real perception. Audition, when reported, was unusual; most communication was telepathic rather than spoken, and some reported white noise or unearthly music. Knowledge for some occurred through identification with “other” objects rather than received information about them. Temporality, when mentioned, was not progressive and sequential.

The otherworld was populated by entities resting after previous lives and/or waiting to be born, similar to study respondents; entities who functioned as guides, teachers, gatekeepers, and recorders; and a supreme being. Whether friendly or impersonal, the “staff” entities had to be obeyed. The crucial event and focus of emotion was whether and how to incarnate, implied to be a return (rather than first-time visit) to life on earth, a choice resisted by many as too painful compared to their blissful otherworldly existence. Regardless, people tended to express some degree of influence over what their earthly life would be, choosing certain circumstances, body type, and family. Earthly life involved a sense of existential or cosmic purpose, which some embraced gladly, despite anticipated hardship. However, a major theme was induced forgetfulness of the otherworldly existence at birth, if not of the place and experience itself, of the mission driving incarnation. Respondents tended to descend from that realm into this, some accompanied by guides, through an aperture or a tunnel-like device to find themselves in the womb, being born, in the delivery room, or in an older infant body with rarely any mention of the birth process.

### Discussion

Limitations and delimitations of this study design may have affected the results, the greatest of which was sampling from the Longs’ Out of Body Experience Research Foundation website linked to their Near-Death Experience Research Foundation and After Death Communication Research Foundation websites. To the usual qualifications of publicly posted online texts—degree of internet socioeconomic bias, of literacy and English fluency bias, of site-specific social desirability bias, and of effort and willingness to post bias—must be added the qualification that beliefs in pre-birth memories

of any kind are culturally atypical in European and Anglophone countries. Presumably people attracted to the Longs’ websites are positively biased toward such experiences, especially those willing to contribute their story. It is also likely that they would have been influenced by other accounts posted there, especially NDEs, which may have conflated or reinforced certain aspects of their pre-birth reports.

Probably a high proportion of the participants have been exposed to NDE portrayals in the media or on the Longs’ NDE site. NDEs comprise some universal structural elements, however idiosyncratically and culturally conditioned, including the fact that not all NDEs comprise all elements. Common elements include: an OBE that may involve seeing one’s dead body and resuscitation efforts; meeting dead relatives; encountering beings of light; merging with the light; and a boundary condition at which the individual can either choose to remain in the afterlife or return to earth, or is forced back to earthly existence (cf. Greyson, 2015; Jahromi & Long, 2020; Kellehear, 1996, 2008; Long, 2010, 2017; McClenon, 2006; Nahm & Nicolay, 2010; Ohkado, & Greyson, 2014; Parnia, 2013; Pasricha, 2008; Shushan, 2018; Tassell-Matamua & Murray, 2014. Some of the apparent diversity in what is loosely called the NDE literature may also be accounted for by differences in research methods, religious bias, and rigor. For instance, the often-cited research by Noyes and colleagues involved life-threatening conditions, not NDEs per se [e.g., Kletti & Noyes, 1981; Noyes, 1981; Noyes & Kletti, 1972; Noyes & Slymen, 1979], a conflation repeated in more recent research purporting to challenge the universality of NDE structures [Knoblauch et al., 2001]. Zaleski’s [1987] Christian medieval accounts and Lundahl’s Mormon accounts [e.g., Lundahl, 1992, 1999; Lundahl & Widdison, 1993; Widdison & Lundahl, 1997] show congruence with particular religious views by subjects and/or researchers; and collected historical accounts [e.g., Wade, 2003] frequently do not contain enough information to assess whether NDE parameters were actually met). A life review, in which biographical events are rapidly re-experienced from different perspectives, and a transitional mode, commonly described as a tunnel that usually involves a sense of

movement toward a luminescent “heavenly” realm, tend to be culture-specific and appear in Western accounts (Kellehear, 2008). The extent to which otherworldly pre-birth accounts were influenced by NDE material is unknowable but may be rather high. Furthermore, the Longs’ protocol (Appendix A) posed close-ended questions suggestive of NDE phenomena, which could have biased response to emphasize or include features that may not have appeared in the unprompted narratives. For this reason, responses to other questions were examined but analysis centered on the unprompted narratives. In addition, the lack of meaningful demographic data, especially religious affiliation likely to color otherworldly accounts (e.g., Kellehear, 2009; Shushan, 2009), introduced a potentially significant unknown bias.

Other limitations involve exposure to widespread pre-birth motifs, especially Newton’s best-selling works (2001, 2004, 2009, 2010) and a recent wave of popular books purporting to represent children’s pre-birth recollections of “heaven” (e.g., Carman & Carman, 2013; Dyer & Garnes, 2015; Hallett, 2002) and/or published by authors with religious and political agendas (e.g., Church of Latter Day Saints pro-life writer Sarah Hinze, 2006, 2015; Widdison, 2011). As noted, a few records in this study included past-life and other experiences not analyzed that may have affected the pre-birth portions in unknown ways, though the mere inclusion of such information in pre-birth narratives is consistent with Newton’s life-between-life theories, speculation by some of the popular writers identified above, and the little known reincarnation intermission research, discussed below.

Offsetting the limitations and delimitations, not only was the sample sufficient for a qualitative study but also the reported themes ranged from significance to saturation. Since the data were contributed singly over a period of years, were highly idiosyncratic in form and content, and, for this subset of the study data, reflected memories accessed in a normal, waking state, it is reasonable to have some confidence in their subjective integrity. The findings, moreover, are congruent with established research literatures in ways that tend to support validity of different types.

## **Comparison with Other Pre-Birth Otherworldly Accounts**

The sample’s much larger proportion of otherworldly compared to intrauterine and birth accounts (reported in Part 2) is striking, and whereas this disproportion might reflect cultural influences, it cannot be so easily dismissed for two reasons. First, since myths of this type are atypical in contemporary European and Anglophone cultures, professing to have such an experience would tend to lower one’s status or credibility, so people would have to have compelling reasons to claim such experiences; this conclusion is supported by the secrecy surrounding other accounts of the numinous, as seen in some NDE research (e.g., Bush & Greyson, 2014), the Longs’ other website data about disclosure of anomalous experiences (e.g., OBERF.org) and research on transcendent sexual experiences (Wade, 2004). Second, such myths have appeared in numerous cultures throughout history (e.g., Campion, 1994; Gottlieb, 2005; Heschel, 2005; Rudd,er, 1993; Smith, 2013, Doctrine and Covenants, 93:29; Wiley, 2009), suggesting that they have a certain universality, and, therefore, some inevitability in any population. The mytho-historical trope seems to be one of a place where the unborn (and sometimes the dead) exist pending life on earth and are guided by otherworldly beings to make certain choices regarding the circumstances of incarnation in order to fulfill a cosmic or existential (“karmic”) purpose, most of which is expunged from their memory at birth (analysis of all the myths of this type is beyond the scope of this paper).

Contemporaneous research, notably the Western reincarnation intermission studies (Matlock, 2017; Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016; Rivas, et al., 2015; Sharma & Tucker, 2004), as well as this study, augment that motif in only one way, that the majority dread coming to earth but are forced to do so (cf. Wambach, 1984). Matlock and Giesler-Petersen (2016)’s phenomenology of the second intermission phase noted that whereas Asians tended to remain in an identifiable terrestrial location like a pagoda or a tree in-between lives and Westerners tended to be in a “heavenly” realm, both encountered nonhuman entities who enacted the same roles identified in the present study: gatekeeper, escort, entity in charge,



and other, however these beings were culturally interpreted, a dynamic also identified in Native American reincarnation accounts (cf. Matlock, 2017, p. 233). In the intermission literature (Matlock & Geisler-Petersen, 2016; Sharma & Tucker, 2004), the third stage involves choosing parents for the next life, a choice that occurred in both this-world Asian and otherworldly Western accounts. Choice in these accounts was either elective or “assisted” reincarnation (e.g., Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016) rather than forced, as many participants in the present study alleged. A small number of the Asian cases (Matlock & Giesler-Petersen, 2016) ate a fruit or other food that caused forgetfulness, similar to the erasing of memory in the current study. Interestingly, such recollections for both this sample and the intermission samples were accessed in a normal state of consciousness and were memories people had “always” possessed. Congruence with these intermission stages based on cross-cultural research of children’s reincarnation reports was more exact than comparisons to the altered-state regression accounts (e.g., Grof & Taylor, 2009; Newton, 2001). In particular, Newton’s life-between-life stages (2001), garnered from spontaneous utterances in therapy by multiple clients independently and his theorizing from the NDE, OBE, and reincarnation literatures before the intermission research was codified, contain many elements missing in the intermission data and lack the structure of the intermission model. Indeed, Newton’s work seems to reflect much more cultural conditioning and suggestion, congruent with his leading protocols.

What is striking is the consistency of such between-lives dynamics across times, cultures, technologies, and states of consciousness, suggesting that they may be archetypal, at a minimum, if not making any claims for their ontological or metaphysical status. In archetypal terms, this persistent pattern of an otherworldly place, at least for Westerners, where the unborn await birth may represent dynamic motifs from the collective unconscious that manifest in a recognizably common form despite personal expression, enculturation, and psyche (e.g., Jung, 1934-1954, 1978; Hillman, 1997; Irwin, 2017a, 2017b; Stevens, 2006). The ubiquity of such patterns, while it does nothing to

establish the objective reality of the otherworld, does support its subjective validity as an imaginal realm in both the Jungian sense (a psychic domain in which image and metaphor manifest in dynamics that seek purposeful expression; Hillman, 1983) and the Islamic sense (an intermediate realm between spiritual and bodily existence, the discarnate and the living, where symbols render the spiritual comprehensible; Chittick, 1989; Ostransky, 2015). However, scholarly documentation of the pre-birth otherworldly realm in spiritual traditions and experiential accounts remains skimpy compared to the historical afterlife literature augmented through NDE research.

### **Comparison with NDE Otherworldly Accounts**

The pre-birth otherworld in this study shares certain features with the NDE otherworld, but also differs from it in significant ways. Whereas the NDE otherworld is usually a recognizable terrestrial landscape of brilliant illumination (e.g., Lundahl, 1981-82; Ring, 1980; Sutherland, 1995), the pre-birth otherworld in this study was more often depicted as a strange, infinite expanse, only occasionally possessing natural or architectural features. Some pre-birth accounts mentioned light, but the radiance prominent in Western NDE records is rare, and seldom were pre-birth entities described as the light beings of NDEs (e.g., Ring, 1980; Sutherland, 1995). The pre-birth entities possessed a variety of anthropomorphic or incorporeal forms and behaved in mundane ways unlike the sublime NDE light beings typically reported (e.g., Ring, 1980; Sutherland, 1995). Contrasting with the emotionally powerful life reviews in Western NDEs (cf., Farr, 1993; Long, 2010; Parnia, 2013; Ring, 1980, 1984; Ring & Valarino, 1998) were the cerebral past-life reflections of the pre-birth accounts. The aversion to earthly life in this study compared to remaining in the otherworldly realm is consistent with that in NDE accounts (e.g., Ring, 1980, 1984), altered-state regressions (e.g., Wambach, 1984), and myths of a “fall” from paradise into the mundane world (e.g., Campion, 1994; Gottlieb, 2005). Finally, descriptions of the pre-birth transition device to the earthly realm varied, rather like the early NDE accounts before cultural acceptance made *tunnel* the common heuristic (Athappilly, et al.,

2006; Kellehear, 1996, 2009), which has shaped subsequent NDE accounts to an unknown extent. Whichever realm is at the “other end” of the tunnel, earth in the pre-birth accounts and the afterlife for the dying, appears brightly illuminated in contrast to the person’s present location.

Nevertheless the similarities between the two otherworlds are striking, including the sense of hyper-reality, timelessness, telepathic communication, reluctance to leave that place for material existence, tunnel-like transition device, and so forth. With a larger sample and an ability to interview people with a more directed protocol, it might be easier to determine how similar the prebirth and near-death otherworlds actually are, especially in areas reported by a minority in this study. In fact, NDE researcher Kenneth Ring (personal communications, September 11 and 16, 2019) employed a large letter U to describe the arc of life, with the starting and ending points in an “upper” otherworldly realm at birth and death that dipped at the bottom of the U into embodied life. Ring makes no claims for the ontological status of this notion, but the parallels between prebirth and NDE research findings warrant mention, especially since the much newer intermission research suggests that after leaving the dying body and its disposal, people’s awareness goes to an interim experience in an otherworld for Westerners or terrestrial one for Asians prior to choosing the next life and being born; hence some interstitial existence, whether “there” or “here” between lives, may reinforce the notion of continuity of the self as a soul or spirit reincarnating (e.g., Rivas, 2005; Rivas, et al., 2015).

One other possibility warrants mention connecting NDE and pre-birth accounts, and that involves the sense of a tunnel with a bright light at its end as a transitional device between worlds. Grof (cited in Blackmore, 1991 and in French, 2005), based on regression research with psychoactive drugs and controlled hyperventilation, coined the term *near-birth experience* for NDE tunnel imagery, which he saw as the dying reliving the trip through the birth canal and seeing the bright hospital lights outside the vaginal opening, an idea shared by astronomer and science popularizer Carl Sagan (1979). Physiologically the light-at-the-end-of-

the-tunnel near-birth experience is unlikely since babies’ faces are smashed up against the sides of the birth canal, not looking “out,” and it has been roundly criticized for other problems (e.g., Becker, 1982; Blackmore, 1983, 1991; French, 2005). Of course life-threatening births occur (e.g., Oza, et al., 2015; and Part 2 of this study), so having an NDE proximal to birth or conflated with a pre-birth memory is quite possible (e.g., Serdahely & Walker, 1990). Now the intermission data and nonlocal models of consciousness suggest that bright-light-on-the-other-side and tunnel experience may not be a literal physiological memory so much as imagery produced when awareness moves from a physiological realm to an incorporeal one or vice-versa. Bausch (2011) postulated that visions of an interlife otherworldly realm at either extreme of the lifespan may be a form of *endo knowing*, “communications from our bodily unconscious that have their own logics and languages” (p. 130), in which content is determined by the focus of conscious, vital attention—the stress of being born and dying. His idea is very similar to the Jungian and Islamic imaginal realms.

### **Conclusion**

Besides being an archetypal trope, it is possible that pre-birth otherworldly phenomena share some kind of developmental neuroanatomical processing, just as explanations have been proffered by NDE skeptics to reduce aspects of those experiences to the neurological aberrations of a dying brain (e.g., Blackmore, 1993; Blancke, et al., 2002; Britton, & Bootzin, 2004; Carr, 1982; Mobbs, & Watt, 2011), the experiencers’ questionable mental health, such as dissociating at death (e.g., Greyson, 2000; Irwin, 1993; Noyes, & Kletti, 1977), or being more prone to fantasy than normal people (Marsh, 2016; Wilson, & Barber, 1983). Although none of the physiological arguments put forward to explain away NDEs accounts well for that data set (e.g., Greyson, 2017; Rivas, et al., 2015), possibly analogous arguments could be put forward about the immature fetal and perinatal brain, especially as it undergoes the crushing of a vaginal birth. Similar skeptical efforts have been made to account for the apparently veridical past-life experiences spontaneously volunteered by

children (e.g., Haraldsson, 2003) and for adults who claim to remember past lives (e.g., Carson, et al., 2003; Meyersburg, et al., 2014; Robertson, & Gow, 1999). Non-local models of consciousness rather than locating consciousness in the CNS just will not account for all the data, although distributed models of consciousness may be more adequate.

The intermission researchers, especially Matlock (2017, 2019) and Rivas (2005; Rivas et al., 2015), seem to be constructing a vision of personal reincarnation linking past-life memories to a life-between-lives to prenatal and birth memories, non-local consciousness, and various psi theories. The present study augments the data on a between-lives otherworldly existence and choice to come into earthly life from people who may or may not recall a previous life, and, in combination with the Japanese studies of early memories (Ohkado, 2015; Ohkado & Ikegawa, 2014), seems to balance the emphasis on past-life recall with more pre-birth accounts. Depending on the population studied, people sampled because they remembered a past life or people sampled because they had pre-birth memories, the gaps in the intermission research are beginning to be filled, regardless of the many challenges to such controversial findings by a materialist audience. To the extent that it adds to other findings, this study supports the same notions of a mature non-local personal awareness that precedes conception, an idea put forward earlier based on prenatal and near-death phenomenology (Wade, 1996, 1998). Part 2 presents the data from the present study involving arrival in an earthly body, birth, and the perinatal period.

## Appendix A

### Protocol for Contributors of Pre-Birth Records on the Out of Body Experience Website (<https://www.oberf.org/prebirth.htm>) Retrieved June 2, 2019

Date of experience

Age at time of experience

Age now

Location of experience

Gender Male Female—REQUIRED FIELD

Condition around the time of experience

Clinical death (cessation of breathing or heart function or brain function)

Life threatening event, but not clinical death

Illness, trauma or other condition not considered

life threatening

Other (briefly specify)

Circumstances around the time of experience (check all that apply):

Accident

Illness

Surgery-related

Childbirth

Heart attack

Allergic reaction

Suicide attempt

Combat

Criminal attack

Other (briefly specify)

Status of health after experience

Excellent Good. Fair. Poor

Status of health now

Excellent Good. Fair. Poor

Did your experience include (check all that apply):

Out of body experience

Presence of unearthly beings

Light

Presence of deceased persons

Darkness

A landscape or city

Void

Boundary

Strong emotional tone

Special knowledge

Life review

Vision of the future

Features consistent with your beliefs at the time

None of the above

Has your experience resulted in changes in the following (check all that apply):

Personal relationships

Belief system

Job or studies

Physical aftereffects  
Increased sensitivity, healing or psychic abilities  
Feelings about family, friends or society  
Feelings about death  
Sense of life purpose  
None of the above

Have these changes resulting from your experience been:

Positive. Disturbing Mixed

Over time, did these changes resulting from your experience:

Increase. Decrease. Stay about the same

Your current principal occupation:

Your main interests and hobbies:

Your religious background at the time of experience (Faith/denomination or 'none'):

Conservative/fundamentalist. Moderate. Liberal

Your religious background currently (Faith/denomination or "none"):

Conservative/fundamentalist. Moderate. Liberal

Race (check as many as apply):

Caucasian  
Black  
Hispanic  
Asian  
Native American  
Other (briefly specify)

Country of birth:

Was your experience(s) consciously and deliberately induced? REQUIRED

After your experience, did you consider the contents of your experience:

Wonderful Frightening Mixed

Highest level of EDUCATION.

1<sup>st</sup> grade (each one listed through 12<sup>th</sup>)  
High school + 1 year  
High school + 2 years  
High school + 3 years  
College graduate (4 years) or equivalent  
College graduate (4 years) + 1 year  
College graduate (4 years) + 2 years (Masters degree)

College graduate (4 years) + 3 years  
College graduate (4 years) + 4 years (Doctorate)

1. Were there any associated medications or substances with the potential to affect the experience?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
2. Was the kind of experience difficult to express in words?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
3. At the time of this experience, was there an associated life threatening event?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
4. Please describe your experience using as much detail as you can and as much space as you need (scroll bars allow almost an unlimited amount of writing):
5. What was your level of consciousness and alertness during the experience? REQUIRED FIELD
- 5a. Was the experience dream like in any way? REQUIRED FIELD
6. Did you experience separation of your consciousness from your body?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
7. What emotions did you feel during the experience? REQUIRED FIELD
8. Did you hear any unusual sounds or noises? REQUIRED FIELD
9. LOCATION DESCRIPTION: Did you recognize any familiar locations or any locations familiar from religious teachings i.e.. Heaven, Hell, Hades, etc.? Did you encounter any locations inhabited by incredible or amazing creatures?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
10. Did you see a light?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
11. Did you meet or see any other beings?  
Yes No Uncertain No response



12. Did you experiment while out of body or in another altered state? For example did you attempt to visit a family member or friend at another location? Did you eyewitness an event that you would not have known about had you not been out of body? Did you attempt to move a physical object while in the astral/etheric universe?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
13. Did you observe or hear anything regarding people or events during your experience that could be verified later?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
14. Did you notice how your 5 senses were working, and if so, how were they different?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
15. Did you have any sense of altered space or time?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
16. Did you have a sense of knowing, special knowledge, universal order or purpose?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
17. Did you reach a boundary or limiting physical structure?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
18. Did you become aware of future events?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
19. Were you involved in or aware of a decision regarding your return to the body?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
20. Did you have any psychic, paranormal or other special gifts following the experience you did not have prior to the experience?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
21. Did you have any changes of attitudes or beliefs following the experience?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
22. How has the experience affected your relationships? Daily life? Religious practices? Spiritual choices?
23. Have you shared this experience with others?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
24. What emotions did you experience following your experience?
25. What was the best and worst part of your experience?
26. Is there anything else you would like to add concerning the experience?
27. Has your life changed specifically as a result of your experience?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
28. Following the experience, have you had any other events in your life, medications or substances that reproduced any part of the experience?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
29. Did the questions asked and information you provided accurately and comprehensively describe your experience?  
Yes No Uncertain No response
30. Please offer any suggestions you may have to improve this questionnaire. Are there any other questions we could ask to help you communicate your experience?

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