

Further Experiments with the Icelandic Medium Hafsteinn Björnsson

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ABSTRACT: Hafsteinn Björnsson (1915–1977) worked for many years in Iceland as a “medium,” and gained a widespread and favorable reputation there. In 1974 and 1975 three reports on aspects of his work were published in the *Journal*, all of them lending support to the claim that he was able to give paranormally acquired information about deceased persons. Two of the reports dealt with results from earlier mediumistic sittings when Hafsteinn was in a trance state. The third report described an experimental investigation of the claim that Hafsteinn was also able when in a waking state to give correct information that ostensibly came through him as communications from the deceased. In this experiment four sitters out of a total of 10 correctly chose the “readings” given for them when each sitter was asked to select one record from the group by a “blind” judging procedure ($p = .01$). The present paper reports 11 further experiments with Hafsteinn along the same lines, but the sitters were not able to select the readings intended for them more often than would be expected by chance. Thus the investigators were unable to confirm the positive results of the initial experiment.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent national survey on psychical phenomena in Iceland (Haraldsson, Gudmundsdottir, Ragnarsson, Loftsson, and Jonsson, 1977) a surprising 32 percent of the adult population claimed to have attended one or more mediumistic séances. Of these, 56 percent were convinced that they had communicated with a deceased person during a séance, whereas only 23 percent said definitely that they had not done so. Since the beginning of this century Iceland has had several mediums who have attained national fame, though reports on investigations of only two of them have reached the international literature: Indridi Indridsson, a physical medium (Hannesson, 1924), and Hafsteinn Björnsson (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1974, 1975a, 1975b). To those familiar with the Icelandic scene, it appears that Hafsteinn, who worked actively as a trance medium in Iceland for about four decades,¹ boosted the

¹ Hafsteinn died suddenly of a heart attack in 1977 at the age of 62, a few months after completing the work described in this report.

belief in spirit communication in Iceland more than any other individual. His reputation in Iceland may be judged by the fact that a number of popular books have been written about him and his mediumship (Larusdottir, 1946, 1952, 1965, 1970; Thorbergsson, 1962, 1964, 1968).

Hafsteinn had two modes of working in the usual practice of his mediumship. At ordinary séance meetings, typically with four to six sitters, he went into a trance during which several "controls," as well as other personalities communicating directly, manifested and provided information in a manner quite similar to that of other trance mediums such as Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Leonard. But Hafsteinn also conducted sessions in a waking state, sometimes for large audiences, during which he gave what are referred to as "clairvoyant" readings. As in his trance sittings, the information given in these waking state sessions was also put into the framework of the survival hypothesis. In both situations he gave the names of deceased persons and described them and their circumstances. Unlike the trance séances in which "messages" were relayed through his "controls" or by other personalities communicating directly, in the "clairvoyant" sessions he said he was describing what he saw (or heard or felt) directly. Hafsteinn's mediumship is described more fully elsewhere (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1974, 1975a).

PREVIOUSLY REPORTED INVESTIGATIONS WITH HAFSTEINN

In two previous reports (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1975a, 1975b) the investigators dealt extensively with two cases of "drop in" communicators that developed in connection with Hafsteinn's trance sittings in Iceland.

Hafsteinn's waking state or "clairvoyant" sessions seemed to lend themselves more readily than his trance séances to the requirements for experimental investigation. Accordingly, Haraldsson and Stevenson (1974) conducted an experiment at the A.S.P.R. on August 15, 1972, when Hafsteinn was visiting the United States, in which 10 sitters took part. They were all natives of Iceland who were in New York at the time for various personal reasons and who had volunteered to participate in the experiment. Each sitter's reading took place under conditions that provided visual and acoustical screening of Hafsteinn and the sitter from one another. The use of earplugs and music heard through earphones made it impossible for the sitter to hear Hafsteinn while he was giving his reading, and a heavy opaque curtain between him and the sitter prevented visual contact between them. Ian Stevenson

(I.S.) brought the sitters one at a time to the experimental room in random order, while Erlendur Haraldsson (E.H.) stayed with Hafsteinn and tape recorded the readings. E.H. was not informed regarding the order in which the sitters had been brought into the room to receive their readings until after he had finished working with them in the analysis and evaluation of the records, and Hafsteinn was never informed about the details of the experiment since he seemed satisfied with general statements.

After the session consisting of the 10 sittings was completed and the tape recordings transcribed, E.H. randomized the individual records in such a way that no clues were provided regarding the original order in which the readings had been given by Hafsteinn. Each sitter then received copies of all 10 records. E.H. asked each sitter to study all the records and then on the basis of the degree of his familiarity with persons named and/or described in them to select the one most applicable to him.

E.H. then interviewed the sitters and recorded their choices of readings. Because of Hafsteinn's tendency to describe deceased persons from two or more generations back, E.H. also arranged to have the records checked by older relatives of the sitters when this was possible. One sitter changed her original choice of the reading most applicable to her circumstances on the basis of recognitions made in another reading by her relatives of an older generation.

After all the judging of the material was completed and the final choices made, the investigators exchanged the information necessary for evaluating the results, I.S. informing E.H. about the order in which the sitters appeared in the experiment, and E.H. revealing to I.S. the sitters' choices of the records which they felt best fitted their circumstances. Four of the 10 sitters chose the records intended for them, with one correct choice being chance expectation. This result is statistically significant (exact binomial $p = .01$). (For a detailed description of the procedure and results, see the original report by Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1974.)

FURTHER EXPERIMENTS WITH HAFSTEINN

Since the first experiment, as described above, was performed, a number of attempts have been made to confirm its findings with research following the same basic design. When the first efforts were not successful, the design was changed somewhat in later experiments in the hope of overcoming what might have been weaknesses in the design. None of this further research gave statistically significant results with regard to the main hypothesis (a secondary finding in one of the experiments reached significance, but was not replicated in subsequent series). Since the unexpected

death of Hafsteinn had canceled the possibility of conducting further investigations with him, we consider it important to include an account of these unsuccessful experiments in the published record of his performance as a medium.

For convenience and greater ease of cross-reference, the experiments will be presented chronologically and numbered consecutively, with the previously published investigation of Haraldsson and Stevenson (1974) identified as Experiment 1. Each subsequent investigation will be described only at the length necessary to indicate respects in which the procedure was like or differed from that used in Experiment 1.

Experiment 2

In January, 1973, an attempt was made by E.H. in Reykjavik to replicate the positive results of Experiment 1, the study done in New York in 1972. Consistent with the purpose of the investigation, the procedure of the earlier experiment was followed as closely as possible. The co-experimenter was Simon Johann Agusson (S.J.A.), then professor of philosophy at the University of Iceland, who took the role in this experiment that I.S. had performed in the New York investigation. S.J.A. handled the sitters during the experiment and randomized the order of their sittings.

The role of E.H. was the same as it had been in New York: he selected the 10 sitters, sat with Hafsteinn during the readings and taped his statements, randomized the records, supervised the reading of all the coded records by each of the sitters, and interviewed them regarding their choices of records most likely given for them. After these tasks were completed, S.J.A. informed E.H. about the order in which the sitters had participated in the session, and the investigators jointly checked on the outcome of the experiment. No sitter had selected the reading intended for him.

Hafsteinn had from time to time complained that the communicators of a sitter did not always "disperse" when that sitter left the room and the next one entered, and he felt that this "crowding effect" led to confusion in identifying the relationships between sitters and communicators. Some support for the "crowding effect" may be found in the fact that in the present experiment, though the overall result was nonsignificant, 59 percent of the 74 deceased persons identified by name in all 10 records were recognized by several of the sitters or members of their families (with one sitter recognizing more than half of the deceased persons described in three different records). This proportion of identified communicators in the material as a whole is considerably higher than it was in the successful New York experiment. Thus this

finding suggested that there may have been a "crowding effect" in this experiment which caused the information for individual sitters to spread to other records. If so, this could have caused some of the sitters to make incorrect choices regarding which records were intended for them. E.H. therefore decided that a new feature would be added in the evaluation of the results of the next experiment as an exploratory effort to detect the relevance of Hafsteinn's statements for the sitters even if a "crowding effect" were present.

Experiment 3

This experiment with Hafsteinn was conducted by E.H. in Reykjavik in July, 1973. The same basic procedure as before was used in the testing, but during the judging stage 10 control readings from the previous experiment were randomly mixed in among the actual readings. The co-experimenter was Aevar Johannesson, a laboratory technician. He handled the 10 sitters and brought them one at a time in random order into the experimental room. As before, E.H. interviewed the sitters without knowing which records were intended for them. Each sitter was given 20 readings, 10 from the previous experiment and 10 from the present experiment.

Thus each sitter's choice could be scored from two points of view. (a) Was it the record Hafsteinn had intended for that person? Each sitter had to make his choice from among 20 records, so the chance probability of success was 1/20 for each individual or less than 1 correct choice (.5, to be exact) among the 10 participants in the experiment. (b) Regardless of whether a sitter's choice was correct, was the record selected as the "best" one taken from among the 10 readings of Experiment 3? From this point of view each sitter had a 1-in-2 chance of choosing a record from his own experiment. Thus the expected chance score for the 10 sitters would be 5.

Actually, no participant selected the record intended for him, but all 10 of them chose records from their own experiment instead of the previous one. This finding is statistically significant (exact binomial $p = .001$) and taken at face value it seems to lend support to the hypothesis that a "crowding effect" had occurred. But this is only one possible interpretation, a paranormal one, and there were other ways the result could have been caused normally. E.H. knew which records were from each of the two experiments, and he might have given the subjects sensory cues in spite of his efforts not to do so. There may have been some characteristics of the records of Experiment 3 that induced the sitters to choose them instead of those of the previous experiment. As already stated, the experiment was regarded as being only exploratory insofar as this

aspect of the analysis was concerned, but nevertheless the results did make it seem worth while to continue to examine the data of later experiments in these two ways. If these first results held up, efforts to improve the design could be made to control against explanations of the findings along familiar, normal lines.

Experiments 4-7

In October, 1973, E.H. conducted four experimental sessions at the A.S.P.R., using the same basic design as in the previous experiments and including the modification allowing for the "crowding effect" introduced in Experiment 3. Thus an equal number of control readings were interspersed among the experimental readings, all in random order. The co-experimenters with E.H. were James Merewether, research assistant at the A.S.P.R., and Nancy Sandow, a college student interested in parapsychology. As before, E.H. did not know the order of the sitters' appearances in the experimental room until after he had interviewed all of them. The judging took more than a year to complete because of E.H.'s long absence from New York. During this period duplicate records of the actual order of the sitters in the sessions were kept at the A.S.P.R.

Only Icelandic sitters took part in Experiments 4 and 5, only American sitters in Experiments 6 and 7. In the two Icelandic sessions two out of 22 sitters (11 participants in each session) made correct choices of their own records, a chance result. Their choices were equally divided between experimental and control records, so there was no evidence of the "crowding effect" that was suggested by the results of Experiment 3.

In the two American sessions only 14 of the 19 sitters that had participated could be reached to evaluate their readings. None of them recognized the readings that Hafsteinn had given for them. As in the case of the Icelandic sitters, their choices did not significantly differentiate between experimental and control records. In general, the American readings were considerably less specific than the Icelandic readings, in which full names were frequently given along with detailed descriptions. However, this difference likely has a normal psychological explanation, because Hafsteinn knew when the sitters were Icelanders and when they were not.

Experiments 8-11²

In the fall of 1975 J. G. Pratt (J.G.P.) proposed a further series of experiments with Hafsteinn in which the basic procedure described

² We acknowledge with thanks a research grant from the Parapsychology Foundation which made these experiments possible. We also thank Dr. Ian Stevenson for his helpful suggestions.

in the published report (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1974) would again be followed, but with one procedural change that had been recommended in that report (p. 201): each sitter would remain in the experimental room for a fixed length of time (seven minutes) even though Hafsteinn usually completed his reading for most sitters in a shorter time. Thus no sitter could obtain a clue during the judging procedure regarding which was his own record from the length of his reading as compared to the others in the series.

Despite the fact that E.H. had already attempted unsuccessfully (in Experiments 2-7) to replicate the original Haraldsson-Stevenson (1974) findings, both he and J.G.P. agreed that it would be worth while to carry out this further effort at confirmation. During May, 1976, E.H. and J.G.P. carried out two experiments (8 and 9) at the A.S.P.R., with 10 sitters in each session divided equally between Americans and Icelanders. The results were analyzed, as before, by having each sitter read through all the records and choose the one that best fitted his circumstances. One sitter made a correct choice from among the 10 records in each experiment, precisely the number most likely to occur by chance. (Since the control readings were not significantly differentiated from the experimental readings by the sitters in Experiments 4-7, they were not used in Experiments 8-11.)

In two further experiments (10 and 11) conducted by E.H. and J.G.P. in Reykjavik in June, 1976, one of 10 sitters chose his own reading in the first experiment, and two of 10 in the second, an outcome that is again well within the range of chance expectation.

Several older relatives also checked the records when this was feasible, and this was always done while E.H. was still "blind" regarding the order in which the sitters had participated. In no instance was any reason found for a sitter to change his original choice. Thus, the four experiments conducted during the period of May-June, 1976, failed to yield any statistically significant results.

Experiment 12

In the winter of 1976-77, E.H., in collaboration with Magnus Kristjansson, associate professor of psychology at the University of Iceland, conducted the final experiment with Hafsteinn. The same basic design of the earlier experiments was used regarding the judging of the records, but another procedural change that had been recommended in the published report (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1974, pp. 201-202) was introduced in the hope of minimizing if not eliminating the "crowding effect" that Hafsteinn had complained about. Instead of asking him to give his readings for all the sitters (10 took part in this experiment) one after the

other in the same session, he gave only one reading per session, and then several days (usually a week) elapsed before the next participant came for his sitting. Hafsteinn was also asked to try to give longer readings than he had in earlier series.

After the first five sittings, the readings were transcribed, coded and randomized, and given to the sitters for judging. Only one sitter identified his own reading, the result expected by chance when selecting from a group of five records. In the second group of five sitters, no one selected the reading intended for him. Thus, despite the effort to avoid the "crowding effect" by spacing the sittings further apart than in the earlier work, this experiment consisting of 10 sittings was unsuccessful.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research failed to find evidence that Hafsteinn's utterances contained paranormal knowledge of deceased persons connected with the sitters taking part in this series of experiments. The first experiment designed and carried out to test this hypothesis (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1974) was significant (four out of 10 sitters correctly chose the records intended for them). However, more than 100 further sitters who participated in 11 additional experiments and whose results could be evaluated were not able to choose their own records at a level higher than that expected by chance.

This failure to confirm the results of Experiment 1 may indicate that the four correct choices (where only one was expected) in that study were a fluke of chance. It is possible, of course, that the success reported in Experiment 1 was due to paranormal processes which were detected there but were not present in the subsequent experiments. On the assumption that this was the case, one could speculate at length regarding why this pattern of an initial success followed by repeated failures should have occurred, but it seems to us that it would serve no useful purpose to do so. We felt that we had an obligation, in view of the three articles on the work with Hafsteinn that have been published in the *Journal*, to complete the record by reporting our failure to confirm the success achieved in Experiment 1 in the research summarized here. In our judgment, however, this outcome does not affect the interpretation of the evidence for unusual paranormal material in the two cases of "drop in" communicators previously reported (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1975a, 1975b).

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