

PSYCHIC EXPERIENCES A THIRD OF A CENTURY APART:
TWO REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS IN ICELAND
WITH AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

In 2006 a large-scale representative survey of psychic beliefs and experiences, and various related local folk beliefs and experiences, was conducted in Iceland. Its purpose was to find out whether substantial changes in personal experiences and beliefs had taken place in the population since the same survey was conducted a third of a century earlier. Since that time there have been great changes in Icelandic society; it has become highly educated (6% of the 1974 sample had attended university compared with 36% of the 2006 sample) and (until the present financial crisis) one of most affluent societies in Europe, and with more contact with other countries than ever before in its history. Somewhat contrary to expectations, there was an increase in reporting almost every kind of psychic experience. Some of these increases may indicate a 'Harry Potter effect' among the younger generation, and perhaps there is also some sampling effect, but the findings may indeed show that more people experience real psychic phenomena than earlier, or—formulating this more conservatively—that they interpret their experiences more readily and more often as paranormal in nature. In 1974, 59% of the men reported some psychic experience, and 70% in 2006, while 71% of the women did so in 1974 and 81% in 2006. For some phenomena, such as perceiving a deceased person, there was a significant difference between genders, with more women reporting such experiences than men. But, generally speaking, the correlation between gender and psychic experiences was very low (averaging around 0.12). A similarly low negative relationship was found with level of education. In this paper some comparison is also made with surveys conducted in other countries.

INTRODUCTION

An important question for psychical research is to ask how common it is for people to have psychic experiences, and how stable over time is the occurrence of these? Otherwise formulated, how willing are they to interpret some of their personal experiences, perceptions or imagery, as being psychic or paranormal in nature? In 1974–75 the author conducted a major survey in Iceland ($N = 902$) of psychic experiences and beliefs, religious experiences, various folk beliefs, belief in life after death, and other related phenomena. Well over half of the respondents reported some personal psychic experience (Haraldsson, 1985), which was a much higher proportion than most observers had expected, an outcome that was widely discussed in the media. As a result of the finding that belief in psychic phenomena—and in particular our belief in elves—is widespread among the Icelandic population, it has become a favourite topic for journalists to write about when they visit Iceland, somewhat to the vexation of locals of the more intellectual type.

Time passes, societies undergo changes, and a new generation predominates. In 1974 only 6% of respondents had received some university education; in

2006 this figure had risen to 34%, and now over half of the young people in Iceland go to a university. This reflects the tremendous increase in the level of education in Iceland during the past century. There is now greater affluence and more contact with countries and cultures around us. What effect has all of that had on the psychic dimension? Have we become more like our culturally and historically closest nations, the Norwegians and Danes, who report less belief in psychic phenomena and fewer psychic experiences than almost all other nations in Europe? Folklorists at the University of Iceland were particularly interested in these questions, and one of them, Terry Gunnell, suggested that we repeat the 1974 survey. This paper describes the results of the new survey, and makes comparisons with the findings from Iceland in 1974 as well as with similar surveys conducted in other countries.

METHOD

Samples

A random sample of 1,501 persons living in Iceland was obtained from the National Registry in 2006. Born between 1931 and 1988, their ages ranged from 18 to 75. Completed questionnaires were returned from 666 persons, 266 males, 396 females and 4 with gender not stated, giving a return rate of 44% (as against 80% for the 1974 sample). National surveys were rare in Iceland in 1974, whereas now they are more common, and this could have discouraged some people from responding. Privacy regulations have become more strict on how surveys can be conducted, and this could also have affected response rates.

Because of the relatively low return rate, a further, non-random, sample of 325 persons was added in 2007. Students in a class on Icelandic folklore and a few others each administered the questionnaire to a group of 10 unselected relatives and friends. The total sample comprised 132 males, 191 females and 2 with gender not stated, who were born from 1917 to 1993 and thus were 18 to 79 years old. The two samples combined consist of 991 respondents, and should be fairly representative of the population of Iceland.

Questionnaire

There were 84 questions, of which 74 were about various psychic experiences, specific Icelandic folk beliefs and experiences, belief in psychic phenomena and contact with and evaluation of psychics, and the other ten asked for demographic information, such as sex, year of birth, education, and religious affiliation. The author and Terry Gunnell constructed the questionnaire using questions drawn from the original survey in 1974 (Haraldsson, 1985), with some minor additions and omissions related to Icelandic folk beliefs. A PDF copy of the questionnaire is available on request from the author.

Procedure

The questionnaire, with an introductory letter and a post-paid return envelope, was mailed to every person in the sample. The introductory letter stated that the person had been selected randomly from the National Registry. The purpose of the study was briefly described as:–

... to assess the nation's folk beliefs, experiences and attitudes towards God, death and the supernatural. The last survey of this kind was conducted by Prof. Erlendur

Haraldsson in 1974. The present survey is to a large extent based on the previous one and will reveal how the beliefs of the population have changed since then.

The recipients were encouraged to fill in and return the questionnaire. The survey was conducted by the Social Science Institute of the University of Iceland, which is well known in the country. Responses were recorded anonymously to encourage respondents to register their true beliefs and experiences without concern that their answers could be traced back to them. The questionnaire was mailed again a few weeks later as a reminder that it was still possible to participate. This was followed by phone calls by which people were urged to respond if they had not already done so.

Comparison data from other countries were gathered from the sources detailed below. The questions and the response-alternatives differ between these surveys, which makes comparisons between countries difficult.

Great Britain: The 2007 Ipsos-Mori survey on beliefs, based on telephone interviews with a representative quota sample of 1005 adults aged sixteen and older (Survey on Beliefs, 2007).

Germany: Telephone interviews with 1510 persons about their psychic beliefs and experiences. Of those contacted, 51.5% participated in the survey, which was initiated and prepared by the Institute for Border Areas of Psychology and Psychohygiene, and conducted by a professional polling institute (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005). This survey was conducted in the year 2000.

United States: The 2005 Gallup Poll, concerning various paranormal beliefs but not personal experiences (Moore, 2005). Also of interest is the Charlottesville survey from 1974 (Palmer, 1979), as the questions used in it were for the most part the same as those of the Icelandic surveys.

Some comparison will also be made with the multinational Human Values Survey that was conducted in most Western European countries in the 1980s, with a mean sample size of 1329 persons (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991). This had three questions about personal psychic experiences, formulated by Andrew Greeley. It is the only international survey that allows an easy comparison of psychic experiences in a number of countries (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991). The multinational Human Values Survey has developed into the World Values Survey. Its latest wave, from 1999–2002, contains interesting data on belief, but the experiential questions have not been repeated.

RESULTS

How Common Are the Various Psychic Experiences?

This might be the proper place to emphasize that we are dealing with survey data of reported but uninvestigated psychic experiences. There is no way to determine how many of these experiences are paranormal in nature. Survey data may tell us something about the prevalence of psychic experiences, but primarily they reveal only how readily people interpret their experiences as paranormal.

Various kinds of psychic experiences are commonly reported in present-day Iceland. Table 1 shows the results for nine different experiences. In the 1974

survey there was a marked sex difference, with women reporting more, and this is repeated in the present survey although significantly only for a few kinds of experiences.

Table 1 lists separately the percentages for men and women and varying levels of education. Half of the respondents claimed a waking ESP experience (telepathy, clairvoyance or precognition). The second most common experience was having had a psychic dream, claimed by 41% of the women and 36% of the men. This was 44%, versus 27% in 1974. We have no new data about personal experiences from the USA or the UK, but in the German survey 37% reported having had a psychic dream, which is very similar to the Icelandic average of 38%. The old data from the 1974 Charlottesville survey (Palmer, 1979) gave a comparable result, with 36% of the people of that university town and 38% of the students reporting a psychic dream.

Having had some experience of a deceased person is also common, being reported by 45% of the women and 28% of the men (a notable sex difference). About half of these experiences had been visual in nature, with 60% of this group of respondents having encountered a deceased close relative, 39% a stranger, and 4% their deceased spouse. More than half had experienced more than one encounter with a deceased person.

The third most commonly reported psychic experience was having lived in a haunted house (32%). After that came out-of-body experiences (19%), visual experiences of a deceased person (17%), experience of a poltergeist (12%), remembering a past life (10%), and finally having experienced an apparition of an animal (9%).

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents in Iceland Reporting Psychic or Psi-Related Experiences in 2006

	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Education</i>		
	Men	Women	primary	middle	university
Psychic dreams	36	41	43	44	29
Waking ESP experience	52	56	50	61	52
Experience of poltergeist	11	12	13	12	9
Lived in a haunted house	29	34	33	34	26
Out-of-body experience	18	19	19	19	18
Apparition of a deceased person	28	45	43	40	31
Visual experience of a deceased person	13	20	22	18	10
Apparition of an animal	6	12	13	10	6
Remembering a past life	8	12	14	10	7

Do these figures differ markedly from the 1974 survey? Many of them do, but others, such as psychic dreams, are similar. In Table 2 the percentages can be compared between the surveys in 1974 and 2006 ($N = 666$), and the additional survey from 2007 ($N = 235$). On the whole, more people in our 2006

and 2007 samples reported psychic experiences than in 1974. Particularly noticeable was the increase from 27% to 54% and 55% in waking ESP experiences ('mind-messages' is the literal translation from Icelandic). There were also more reports of having lived in a haunted house, having had out-of-body experiences, and remembering a past life.

Some caution is advised here, because while the 1974 survey was highly representative, with 75% of the male sample responding and 84% of the females, this high representativeness was not obtained in the 2006 sample, as only 36% of the men responded and 52% of the women. Those not interested in the topic of a survey are less likely to respond, and it is likely that experiencers would be more inclined to respond than non-experiencers, resulting in somewhat inflated figures. However, some differences are too large to be explained that way, such as the increase in reports of experiencing waking ESP experiences, which jumps from 27% to 54%. At a lecture reporting these findings, someone suggested that the popularity of the Harry Potter films and books among the younger generation may have had an influence. A look at the different age groups reveals that waking ESP experiences are most commonly found among those 25–34 years old (67%), closely followed by those aged 16–24 and 35–44 (63%). The percentage then gets lower with increasing age to 29% for 65–75 years old. No sign of this age difference was found for memories of a previous life or out-of-body experiences, but it did show up for having lived in a haunted house, with almost a steady decline from the 18–24 years old group (47%) to those 65–71 years old (23%)—and even this is still higher than in 1974 (19%). Harry Potter may explain part of the increase but certainly not all.

Table 2

Percentage of Respondents in Iceland and Charlottesville Reporting Anomalous Experiences

	Iceland			Charlottesville 1974 ¹	
	1974	2006	2007	T	S
<i>N</i> =	902	666	325	354	268
Psychic dreams	36	39	40	36	38
Waking ESP experience	27	54	55	38	39
Experience of poltergeist	9	12	12	8	6
Lived in a haunted house	18	32	35	7	8
Out of body experience	8	19	23	14	25
Apparition of a deceased person*	31	38	42	17	17
Remembering a past life	2	10	10	8	9

* In Charlottesville, apparition of a living or a dead person.

New in this survey was a question on having noticed the presence of a deceased animal, which was answered affirmatively by 6% of the men and 12%

¹ T = Townspeople, 51% return rate from original sample of 700;

S = UVa students, 89% return rate from original sample of 300.

of the women; of these instances, 87% concerned pets. Mostly they were seen (39%), or heard (39%), and/or a touch was felt (31%).

In 1974, 56% of men and 71% of women reported at least one of the ten psychic experiences that were asked about in that survey. In 2006 these figures were 71% and 81% respectively for nine psychic experiences, which is a marked rise. We only have one other recent overall figure from another country (Germany), and this uses a somewhat different set of experiences, including experiences of *déjà vu* and strange coincidences. When these are excluded, 50% of the respondents reported at least one of five different psychic experiences. Interestingly enough, also in Germany the younger age groups reported substantially more experiences than the older ones, which is in line with the Icelandic findings.

In the multinational Human Values Survey from the early 1980s (see Table 3), Haraldsson and Houtkooper (1991) found that Americans and Italians topped the list of nations reporting psychic experiences of telepathy, clairvoyance and contact with the dead (60%). They were followed by Icelanders (52%), the Germans and the French. At the bottom were the Scandinavian countries of Norway and Denmark. In that great survey, nationality proved to be the strongest factor determining the frequency of reporting psychic experiences.

Table 3

Persons Reporting Psychic Experiences (%) in Some Countries in Western Europe and the USA. Results of the 1980–83 Human Values Survey

	Telepathy	Clairvoyance	Contact with the dead	Some experience
France	34	24	24	48
Italy	41	39	34	60
Spain	21	14	16	32
Belgium	21	14	18	29
Britain	36	14	26	44
Germany	39	17	28	49
Holland	29	12	12	34
Ireland	19	11	16	30
Denmark	15	12	16	25
Finland	40	15	14	45
Iceland	34	7	41	52
Norway	17	7	9	24
Sweden	24	7	14	31
EUROPE	34	21	25	46
USA	54	25	30	60

In the present survey women reported more psychic experiences than men. The correlation with gender varies from 0.001 for experiences of 'spelled

spots' to 0.17 for having experienced a deceased person. On the average the correlation with psychic experiences is $r_s = 0.12$, which is very low, but significant because of the large sample size. The correlation with education is the same, averaging $r_s = -0.12$. In the analyses of the European Values Survey data (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991) gender played a similar role, but also nationality, and such variables as sensitivity–emotionality, response bias, belief in reincarnation, taking moments for prayer or meditation, and belief in spirit or life force rather than believing in a personal God or no God at all.

The European Values Survey, from the early 1980s, showed Icelanders as the second-highest in Europe in reporting psychic experiences, after the Italians (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991). One can only speculate as to whether this order has changed, or if similar increases have taken place in other European countries, as no comparative data are available.

How Widespread is Belief in Psychic Phenomena?

It is evident from a study of Table 4 that Icelandic respondents believe strongly in a variety of psychic phenomena. Greatest is the belief that psychic dreams can occur, which 50% consider certain or likely, and a further 42% consider possible (which is not easy to interpret, but the responses indicate some degree of belief), whereas only 8% believe it to be impossible or unlikely. Women report higher levels of belief than do men, as do the less educated. These differences are relatively small, but become significant on account of the large sample size. Only the Ipsos-Mori British survey has a relevant item, "Dreams can predict the future", with 35% saying yes, whereas 60% replied negatively (Paranormal Survey, 1998).

There is a similarly high degree of belief in clairvoyance and telepathy, with 46% considering these abilities certain or likely, again with a significant variation with gender but not with education. In the USA many more believe in the occurrence of extrasensory perception (50%) than do not believe (27%). In Germany there are also more believers (49%) than disbelievers (41%) in telepathy (see Table 5). In Iceland there are fewer people who think that poltergeist phenomena are certain or likely than there are who regard them as impossible and unlikely, as can be seen from Table 4.

What about the other-worldly aspects of psychic experiences, such as the reality of apparitions of the dead? The occurrence of apparitions of the dead is considered likely or certain by 40%, and impossible or unlikely by 18%. Gender and, to a lesser extent, education play a significant role. Similarly, in Britain 32% believe that it is possible to receive communications from the dead (Table 5); in the USA 28% believe that people can hear from or communicate mentally with someone who has died, with an almost equally high number responding with a 'don't know'. Additionally, in the USA 38% believe that ghosts or spirits of the dead can come back in certain places and situations (Moore, 2005). This shows that a substantial proportion of the populations of Iceland, the UK and the USA believe that some form of encounter or contact with the deceased is possible. No comparable data are available from Germany.

Table 4

Attitudes of Respondents in Iceland Towards Psychic Phenomena and Psi-Related-Topics

<i>Consider the existence of:</i>	Impossible	Unlikely	Possible	Likely	Certain
Clairvoyance / telepathy					
2006	2	7	49	24	22
1974	0	5	50	26	19
Precognition					
2006	4	9	52	27	12
Psychic dreams					
2006	3	5	42	26	24
1974	1	2	40	30	26
Apparitions of the dead					
2006	7	11	41	21	19
1974	2	5	33	27	33
Poltergeists					
2006	6	19	38	2	16
1974	11	26	39	14	10
Communication with the dead at séances					
2006	8	14	39	22	17
1974	3	9	39	24	24
Life after death					
2006	5	11	34	28	22
1974	2	5	21	29	42
Pre-existence and reincarnation					
2006	11	24	39	16	10
1974	12	31	39	13	5

Replies to a question about the possibility of communicating with the dead at séances reveal that 39% consider that certain or likely, whereas 22% see it as impossible or unlikely. No comparable data are available from Germany and the USA. A related question that was asked in the USA about belief in channelling, namely allowing a 'spirit-being' to assume temporary control of a medium's body, revealed that this was believed by 9% but disbelieved by 70%.

At the bottom of our list for Iceland is belief in poltergeists (that things can be moved by supernatural causes), which 18% of respondents consider likely or certain. In Germany a very comparable figure, 16%, share that belief.

Table 5

Percentage of Persons in Four Countries Who Believe in Psychic Phenomena

	<i>Iceland</i> ²		<i>United Kingdom</i>		<i>Germany</i>		<i>USA</i>	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Telepathy, ESP	46	9	41	53	49	41	50	27
Contact with the dead	40	18	32	61	–	–	38	48
Psychic dreams	50	8	35	60	–	–	–	–

Belief in psychic phenomena and experiencing them are obviously related. It is hence of interest that according to Gallup in the USA three in four Americans believe in the paranormal. Gallup has comparative representative survey data from the United States and Great Britain regarding two phenomena: the belief “that houses can be haunted” is shared by 37% in the USA and 40% in Great Britain; “That people can hear from or communicate mentally with someone who has died” is believed by 21% in the USA and 27% in Great Britain (Moore, 2005). These and other questions by Gallup are not strictly comparable with those used in the present Icelandic survey, but they show that belief in psychic phenomena is also widespread in the United States and Great Britain.

How Many Believe in Life After Death and Reincarnation?

Related to the question of contact with the dead is belief in life after death. As Table 4 indicates, there is a strong belief in Iceland in life after death, which 50% think certain or likely, whereas only 16% judge it to be impossible or unlikely. This indicates a slightly lower degree of belief than in the 1974 survey. How does this relate to the level of belief in other countries? Abundant comparative data are available from a recent wave of the European Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2004). They asked, “Which of any of the following do you believe in?” and provided the response options ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘don’t know’. The results for several Western European countries, including Iceland and the UK, are given in Table 6.

It should be pointed out that the European and World Values Surveys generally ignore the ‘don’t know’ answers, which inflates to some extent the percentages of believers and disbelievers, particularly when there is a large group of respondents who answer with ‘don’t know’. When asked about their belief in life after death, 13% made such a response, and 17% did so for the question about belief in reincarnation.

Only one country in Europe, Ireland (79%), surpasses the Icelanders (78%) with regard to a strong belief in life after death, but of course this 1% difference would be within the margin of error. This high level of belief is matched in the USA, where in various surveys it usually hovers around 75–80%. Italy is also high (73%), but at the bottom with 38%, interestingly, is Denmark, with which Iceland has had close ties, having been a part of the Danish kingdom for several centuries.

² Note different response-alternatives from the UK, Germany and the USA.

Table 6

Percentages of Respondents in Selected Countries of Western Europe Who Believe in Life After Death and in Reincarnation

	Life after death	Reincarnation	R/L
Ireland	79	23	27
Iceland	78	41	53
Italy	73	18	24
Switzerland	64 *	36 *	56
Austria	59	23	36
United Kingdom	58	29 *	50
Netherlands	50	21	41
Norway	47	15 *	33
Sweden	46	22	48
France	44	21	59
West-Germany	39	19	42
Denmark	38	17	45

Results from the 1999-2002 European Values Survey unless otherwise indicated.

R/L indicates the percentage of believers in life after death who also believe in reincarnation.

* Data from 1990–1993

Belief in reincarnation in Iceland is much less common than belief in life after death, but still considerable: 26% consider reincarnation certain or likely, 39% possible and 35% unlikely or impossible. Figures for Iceland from the European Values Surveys reveal comparable results. In Iceland 41% believe in reincarnation, which is the highest proportion found in Western Europe, the next being Switzerland with 36%. If we look at the whole of Europe a higher level of belief is found only in Lithuania (44%). This high figure is partly the result of the high percentage (36%) in Lithuania who selected the 'don't know' option. (For results from individual countries in Europe, see Inglehart et al., 2004, and Haraldsson, 2006.) In Table 7 percentages are given for the various parts of Europe and America.

Perhaps the least expected finding to emerge from analysis of the European Values Survey data on life beyond bodily existence is the high degree of belief in reincarnation among those who believe in life after death. Of those in the European countries who believe in life after death, 47% believe in reincarnation. The figures for individual countries vary from 24% to 85%. Reincarnation is therefore a major form of belief in survival. An overview for 35 European countries and the six most populous American countries is given in Table 7.

Table 7

Belief in Life After Death and Reincarnation in Various Parts of Europe and America According to the World Values Survey

	Life after death	Reincarnation	R/L
Nordic countries (5)	52.8	22.6	42.8
Western Europe (15)	58.9	22.2	37.7
Eastern Europe (15)	47.6	27.0	56.7
35 European countries	53.2	24.3	46.6
USA	78.0	26.0	33.3
Canada	69.0	31.0	44.9
South America (4)	74.4	47.0	69.6

R/L shows the percentage of believers in life after death who also believe in reincarnation. The number of countries involved is given in brackets.

Specific Icelandic Folk-Beliefs and Experiences

To some extent every culture or language area has its own way of conceptualizing psychic phenomena, giving rise to location-specific beliefs and experiences. There are at least three kinds in Iceland, all linked with an other-worldly aspect. The recorded folklore of past centuries abounds with stories of all three (Simpson, 2005; Sveinsson, 2003).

Fylgja is the most common. Literally this means a 'follower' and it is sometimes translated into English as 'fetch, supernatural follower', and is related to the Norwegian *vardoger*. This is an ancient belief in the Nordic countries, perhaps also related to the more southern notion of a *daimon* or guardian angel that everybody was believed to have. For example, a knock is heard on the door but nobody is there when the door is opened. However, a few minutes later someone does arrive. This phenomenon is explained in terms of the visitor's *fylgja* having arrived ahead of them. Some persons or families have a greater reputation than others of having a *fylgja*.

There is a more macabre explanation of the origin of *fylgja*. In earlier centuries when there were no institutions in Iceland to take care of the desolate and homeless, the law required that every farm should shelter and feed such a person for three days and nights if he or she knocked on their door. If a farmer rejected such a person who then died on the way to the next farm, it was believed that the dead person might follow the farmer's family, and also their descendants for several generations.

There is more belief in the *fylgja* phenomenon than in any other Iceland-specific psychic form, with 28% of respondents considering it certain or likely, 42% possible, and only 22% rejecting it as impossible or unlikely. One person in six reported having had such an experience (see Table 8b), which is about the same figure as in 1974.

Table 8a

Specific Icelandic folk-beliefs; elves, spell-spots and 'followers'

Consider the existence of:	Impossible	Unlikely	Possible	Likely	Certain	No opinion
Elves						
2006	14	22	32	16	8	7
1974	10	18	33	15	7	17
Followers						
2006	9	13	42	17	11	8
1974	5	12	35	21	16	11
Spell-spots						
2006	9	20	38	17	8	8
1974	5	14	35	22	11	13

Table 8b

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Experiences of Specific Icelandic Folk-Beliefs; Elves, Spell-Spots and 'Followers'

	1974	2006	2007
Elves or hidden folks (<i>álfar</i> or <i>huldufólk</i>)	5	5	5
Spell-spots (<i>álagablettir</i>)	2	3	5
'Followers' (<i>fylgja</i>)	17	16	17

Spell-spots (*álagablettir*) require an explanation. Elves are believed to dwell there or use them for magical purposes in some way; they are usually rocks or even a small piece of grassland. The elves are believed to have cast a spell on such spots so that if they are interfered with or used by humans (e.g. demolished or the grass cut) then the elves may exact revenge through a calamity befalling on the person responsible, such as a serious sickness, accident or loss of fortune. Belief in spell-spots is thought to stem from Celtic countries. Genetic research and analysis of the origin of the settlers of Iceland recorded in the 12th-century *Book of Settlements* indicate that up to one-third of the settlers came from Celtic countries (such as Ireland and Scotland). Roughly equal numbers of respondents accept and reject this belief, with 38% considering it possible, and hence not ruling it out. Personal experience of this is rare: only 3% in 2006 and 2% in 1974. This belief is still extant in the western part of Ireland.

Last and best known is the belief in elves (*álfar*). More respondents reject that belief than accept it, but about a third of the respondents consider it possible that they may exist. Personal experience is quite rare, five percent in 2006 and in 1974. Icelandic folklore sometimes distinguishes between *álfar* (elves) and 'hidden people' (*huldufólk*), the latter being an invisible parallel

race who live much like ordinary humans. The former are like the elves of Continental Europe, beings of light but humanlike, their characteristics being closely similar to the angels of Christianity. In our survey, 54% of respondents did not distinguish between elves and hidden people, 20% did and 26% said they were not sure.

To illustrate what an elf may be, here is a case from the biography of a well-known labour leader who was brought up on a sheep farm. One day in his early youth he found himself rather far away from the farm, when he noticed a lamb that had become stuck on a small ledge on a cliff and unable to move either down or up. The boy succeeded in climbing down from the top of the cliff to the lamb, but then discovered that he was unable to get back up to the larger ledge from which he had climbed down. As he brooded on his desperate situation he was called by his name. He looked up and saw a young girl with particularly beautiful eyes, on the ledge above. She stretched her hand down, first for the lamb and then for him. As he got up to the ledge he turned round to thank the girl who had saved his life, but she had disappeared and was nowhere to be seen. The memory of her beautiful shining eyes and appearance remained with him as one of the most beautiful experiences of his life. Perhaps others might have interpreted this experience differently, but for him she was an elf. One member of the author's family has had an experience of an angel which might also be interpreted as a saving experience (Haraldsson, 2008).

We have no comparable data on elves from other countries, although such beliefs and experiences are reportedly found among people in the Western part of Ireland. Because of their similarity to angels, it is the author's view that elves may be a pre-Christian form of angels. For comparison it may be interesting therefore to look at some data on belief in angels in Europe. The 1999 wave of the European Values Survey (Halman, 2001) included an optional question on belief in angels. The mean for the eight participating countries was 50%, with figures varying from 70% in Italy and Hungary to 24% in Germany. Iceland was slightly below the mean with 48% expressing belief.

Visits to Psychics and their Usefulness

As in 1974, we asked about visits to various kinds of psychics and the usefulness of their services. Table 9 shows that little has changed. As previously, twice as many women as men visit or seek help from psychics, mediums, astrologers or healers (Roe, 1998). However, there is no significant difference regarding how men and women evaluate their usefulness, though it is evident that the healers and the mediums have the best reputation.

CONCLUSION

The results of this survey indicate that more persons in Iceland claimed psychic experiences in 2006 than in 1974. The reasons for this increase are not evident, but a little may be due to the less representative sample of the present survey, and some to a 'Harry Potter effect' in the younger generation. A higher degree of education and affluence than in 1974 seems to have had no noticeable effect on the reporting of psychic experiences. The occurrence of psychic experiences in the population has been remarkably stable over time.

Table 9

Uptake and Evaluation of Psychic Services

<i>Percentage of respondents who had visited psychics</i>				
	Men	Women	All 2006	All 1974
Attended a séance	28	47	38	32
Visited a psychic	26	64	45	52
Visited an astrologer	7	15	11	3
Sought help from a healer	15	31	23	31
<i>Usefulness of psychic services. Percentages from 2006 and (1974)</i>				
	Very useful	Useful	Useless	Harmful
(Prophecy-) Psychics	5 (3)	44 (25)	49 (71)	3 (1)
Astrologers	5 (5)	61 (42)	34 (53)	0 (0)
Healers	44 (34)	46 (57)	9 (9)	0 (0)
<i>Percentage of respondents attending a mediumistic séance who experienced contact with a deceased person</i>				
	Men	Women	All 2006	All 1974
Yes	35	56	46	56
Perhaps	25	17	21	21
No	39	26	33	23

The data of the Human Values Survey reveal that nationality is an important factor when it comes to having or reporting psychic experiences. Now we find that this factor is quite stable. We have no comparative new data from the other Nordic countries but also no obvious reason to assume that much if anything has changed there. Hence Icelanders are likely to differ as much as before from their historically and culturally closest nations, the Danes and the Norwegians, and in fact from most Western European nations.

What has made the Icelanders different? Some have suggested the isolation of the country, but this has been reduced a lot over recent decades. Others have cited the small population in a relatively vast country (only 3 persons per square kilometre), and closeness to the raw forces of nature. An American sociologist (Tomasson, 1980) points out that Iceland was the first new society to come out of old Europe, with the settlement of America being the second. Emigration freed the settlers from old fetters and a new society was formed with much greater freedom. Perhaps this also made them more responsive to psychic experiences. The Human Values Survey indicates that the population of Iceland is more like the USA than most European nations when it comes to psychic experiences. More certain than these speculations is that our well-recorded living folklore from past centuries, along with a strong spiritistic movement in the early part of the 20th century, has played a significant role.

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