An Experiment with the Icelandic Medium
Hafsteinn Björnsson

ERLENDUR HARALDSSON AND IAN STEVENSON

ABSTRACT: An experiment was conducted with the Icelandic medium Hafsteinn Björnsson and ten sitters. In a random order unknown to the medium the sitters were brought one at a time to the experimental room where the medium was visually separated from them by an opaque curtain. The sitters were acoustically isolated from the medium by earplugs and music from attached earphones. The medium's impressions of deceased persons, usually relatives or friends, whom he claims to "see," were recorded for each sitter. Later each sitter was given all ten reports, unmarked and randomized, and instructed to rank them according to how clearly he could identify persons described in them. Four sitters identified the reading given for them (P = .01). An analysis of proper names and other details given provides additional support that the medium had in fact identified persons described in relation to some of the sitters.

INTRODUCTION

Hafsteinn Björnsson is an Icelandic medium whose abilities have attracted much attention in his country. Members of the Iceland S.P.R. have observed him extensively and some of them have published reports of his sittings in books written in Icelandic (Lárusdóttir, 1946, 1952, 1965, 1970; Thorbergsson, 1962, 1964, 1968).

Hafsteinn has primarily two modes of obtaining paranormal information about his sitters or persons they have known. First, he often goes into trance and at these times one or more "controls," as well as other personalities communicating directly, manifest and provide information in a manner quite similar to that of other trance mediums. Five to seven sitters are usually present at the trance sittings, which make up the bulk of Hafsteinn's meetings. Summaries of two cases of "drop in" communicators occurring during Hafsteinn's trance sittings were presented at the 1972

---

1 We wish to express our thanks to Hafsteinn Björnsson for his participation in this experiment, which involved some departures from his usual methods of working. We also extend thanks to the sitters and some of their relatives who generously gave time for the experiment and the evaluation of its results. Drs. K. Osiss and J. G. Pratt made helpful suggestions for the improvement of our report.

2 Hereafter we shall refer to the medium by his first name. This is not only a matter of friendly familiarity, but the actual custom in Iceland since persons there are known primarily by their Christian or given names to which is usually added, as a secondary identification, the name of the person's father. This information bears also on the understanding of some of the examples that we shall give later.
convention of the Parapsychological Association (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1973) and full reports on these cases will be published in forthcoming issues of the *Journal*.

Secondly, Hafsteinn, in an apparent state of wakefulness and without noticeable change of consciousness or personality, may have impressions of deceased persons whom he apparently "sees" around the sitters. He gives vivid, often detailed descriptions of these deceased persons. He can frequently give the names of these communicators as well as the names of the houses or towns where they lived. Hafsteinn's outstanding facility with proper names puts him in a rare category of mediums since most of them have great difficulty in "bringing through" proper names. Mr. A. Wilkinson, studied by J. Arthur Hill (1917), belongs in this group of mediums, which has few members.

Hafsteinn usually gives his clairvoyance (non-trance) readings in a public place where fifty, a hundred, or even several hundred sitters may be present at the same time. After describing a deceased person or group of persons, Hafsteinn usually asks if anyone present recognizes them and invites the audience to ask questions about them. He then answers the questions as far as he can, which may bring out a more detailed description of personality characteristics or events. This situation allows for some exchange between medium and sitter and often an immediate response by the sitter if the medium says something about a person whom he recognizes.

An unusual and puzzling feature of Hafsteinn's communicators is that they sometimes are from two generations behind the sitter. Thus, instead of giving information about the sitter's deceased parents, uncles and aunts, etc., Hafsteinn may talk about grandparents and other relatives so far back in time that the sitter knew them only slightly or not at all. This feature does not always occur, but happens often enough to have attracted our attention and it also bears on the evaluation of the results of the present experiment.

A visit by Hafsteinn to New York City provided an opportunity for a more controlled experiment similar to his usual public meetings for clairvoyant readings, but avoiding some of their weaknesses. The experiment took place in the Chester F. Carlson Research Laboratory of the A.S.P.R. on August 15, 1972, and was conducted under the auspices of the Society.

---

2 In Iceland all houses in the countryside have a name, as do many in the towns and villages; however, this custom is gradually disappearing in the towns as they grow larger.

4 Further details about the history and characteristics of Hafsteinn's mediumship will be given in the first of the two reports on his "drop in" communicators to be published in the *Journal*. 
The sitters were ten persons from Iceland, most of them young people who had arrived in the United States fairly recently. Five had previously attended trance sittings or clairvoyant meetings with Hafstein in Iceland, but for most of them these meetings had taken place some years earlier. During Hafstein's thirty-five years of active mediumship thousands of persons have attended his séances or clairvoyant meetings at one time or another, and since the total population of Iceland is only slightly over 200,000, these persons now make up a fair proportion of the population. None of the sitters, however, were personal acquaintances of Hafstein and he did not know the identities of any of them. With two exceptions the sitters were unknown to the experimenters prior to their participation in the experiment. We picked the first ten Icelandic persons who volunteered for the experiment. We obtained their names from Icelandic organizations in New York or from Icelanders working with them.

On the afternoon of the experiment the sitters first gathered in the A.S.P.R. library where we both met them and explained the procedure to them. Then Hafstein came down from the apartment on the fifth floor of the building and he and Erlendur Haraldsson (E.H.) sat together in the experimental room (on the floor above the library) behind a heavy opaque curtain. This curtain separated the medium and E.H. from about half of the experimental room, including its door. Thus, neither Hafstein nor E.H. could see who entered or left the outer half of the room. In accordance with Hafstein's wish, the room was very dimly lit.

In the library Ian Stevenson (I.S.) took down the names and addresses of the sitters and randomly decided the order of their appearance in the experimental room. (This order was kept unknown to Hafstein and to E.H. until later.) Then I.S. brought the sitters one by one up to the experimental room where they sat near the door, separated from the medium and E.H. by the curtain mentioned above that was placed across the room and to the floor. Thus no visual contact was possible between the medium (or E.H.) and the sitters.

Before bringing a sitter into the experimental room, I.S. instructed him not to talk during the session and gave him two earplugs to place in his outer ears. When he was seated I.S. helped him put on earphones for stereophonic music. As Hafstein gave his reading, the sitter listened to a clarinet concerto by Mozart.

---

6 We used earplugs as well as the earphones as an extra precaution in case the earphones became loose or the music lowered in volume.
played rather loudly. Previously we had tried the earplugs and the earphones carrying the stereophonic music at this degree of loudness and found that a person in this situation could not hear what was being said on the other side of the curtain. Thus it was intended to exclude any auditory clues from the medium to the sitters.

After the sitter was seated with the earphones in place, I.S. indicated to E.H., who was on the other side of the curtain with Hafsteinn, that the sitter was ready. I.S. then seated himself on a chair in a hallway just outside the open door of the experimental room from which position he had the sitter under observation to assure that he did not remove the earphones while Hafsteinn was giving his reading.

Hafsteinn then gave his reading (in Icelandic) for the sitter and E.H. recorded this on tape. When Hafsteinn had finished, E.H. indicated to I.S. that the reading was over and I.S. removed the earphones from the sitter and indicated that he could leave the room. The sitter then left the building without returning to the library. I.S. then went down to the library and brought up the next sitter for his reading. The average length of the sessions was about five minutes, but they varied from four to seven minutes.

Several of the sitters were asked afterwards if they had been able to hear anything while they were in the experimental room. They all said that they had not heard anything except the music. During most of the periods when the sitters were in the dimly lit experimental room I.S. had them under continuous observation. At these times no sitter attempted to remove the earphones in order to hear what Hafsteinn was saying. However, due to some changes in the lighting of the hallway where I.S. sat facing the open door to the experimental room, there were a few occasions when he was unable to see the sitters clearly. He feels confident, nevertheless, that none of them tried to remove the headphones.

Hafsteinn was not in trance during this experiment. It resembled one of his public demonstrations of clairvoyance, except that in this case neither he nor the experimenter with him knew the identity of the person for whom he was giving the reading. They could not see the sitter nor could the sitter hear what the medium was saying. The sitters seemed well motivated for the experiment and Hafsteinn himself also expressed interest in it and did not complain about the conditions. He did observe, however, that he sometimes had difficulty in keeping separate the impressions he obtained about successive sitters. He also stated that he got repeated impressions of some of the deceased persons throughout the entire session.

After the readings were over they were transcribed from the tapes and duplicated. At a later date the sitters were called in one at a time to the A.S.P.R. and each was given a set of the ten reports which
had been placed in random order. Each sitter was asked to determine which report was most applicable to himself. He also had to substantiate his choice by explaining which details in this report seemed to be correct and how he was related to or had known the persons he recognized from their descriptions. Then the sitter was asked to rank the rest of the readings as to their relevance for him.

As already mentioned, Hafsteinn frequently sees deceased persons who are not close relatives of the sitter, but more distant relatives or friends of his parents. Most of our sitters were young and claimed to have little knowledge of their remote deceased relatives. It was therefore decided that E.H. would take the reports to the sitters’ parents or other close relatives in Iceland in order to obtain additional information. If E.H. believed that the results of these secondary inquiries justified asking the sitter to reconsider his evaluation of the reports he did so; only one sitter, Miss E., decided to change her ranking. (Miss E.’s reading is given in full below.) The information received from the sitters’ relatives also served as an independent check on the sitters’ statements concerning their relations with the persons they identified in the reports and minimized the likelihood that they either exaggerated such relations or overlooked relevant details. All these secondary inquiries and decisions about ranking took place before I.S. revealed the actual order of the sitters to E.H.

Most of the sitters claimed they could find something relevant to themselves in only one or two reports, so a full rank analysis of all the reports, as originally planned, was not possible. When all the sitters had ranked their reports to the extent possible and their relatives had read them and been interviewed by E.H., he sent the rankings the sitters had made for the different sets of readings to I.S., who upon receipt sent the actual order to E.H. so that he also might compare them with the ranked order of the sitters.

RESULTS

Of the ten sitters, four selected the reading that Hafsteinn had actually given for them as most applicable to themselves. The exact probability based on the binomial theorem gives a significant P value of .01 for this result. Two sitters gave the report of their own sittings a second rank. As stated above, a full rank analysis of all the reports was not possible.

Each report contained descriptions of four to five deceased persons referred to by their Christian names and frequently also by their fathers’ names which, as we mentioned earlier, are generally
used in Iceland instead of family names. One report contained eight named persons.

The number of details given for each deceased person described in the reports varied widely. When only a Christian name was given, it made a reasonably reliable identification of that person impossible. At other times the full name was given together with a detailed description of the appearance and the manner of death of the communicator and sometimes the names of some of his deceased relatives. The communicators were nearly always described in groups, usually of two or three persons, but sometimes the sitter could identify only one of them. These groups of deceased persons usually turned out to have been relatives or friends when they were living. The nature of their relationships to one another was usually included in Hafsteinn's description.

Another rather striking characteristic was the relatively large number of persons described who had suffered violent deaths. Of the nine persons in the reports who were identified with reasonable certainty, five had drowned or died as a result of other accidents. These nine persons came in four groups. In each of these four groups there was a person who had suffered a violent death and this was the contact person to the sitter in every case. The frequent occurrence of violent death in our study provides an interesting parallel to observations of claimed memories of a previous life. In cases of the reincarnation type, the incidence of violent death in the related previous personalities far exceeds its incidence in the general population (Stevenson, 1970).

As we have stated earlier, it was deemed wise to take the reports to the sitters' closest relatives for further evaluation. They were not informed about the sitter's choice until after their evaluation of the reports. The following examples will show the value of bringing in the sitters' relatives to help in evaluating the readings.

A young woman, Miss E., did not clearly recognize any person described in any of the reports. After her relatives in Iceland had read through the reports and found that one of them correctly described two deceased members of her family, her rating was changed with her approval. This was the only case in which a sitter's original choice was changed. As stated above, this was done before I.S. revealed the actual order of the sitters to E.H. We now give the full text of Miss E.'s reading translated from the Icelandic:

There comes a man around fifty. He has known this person [the sitter] from previous years. A man around fifty. Just about average height with broad shoulders. He is sturdy. A quiet man, but a determined and resolute man. He says his name is Thórdur Thorsteinsson. He has lived up in the country in Iceland, close to, very close to a village or town. There comes with him an old woman,
a very old woman by the name of Gudbjörg. They have known one another and have known this person [the sitter] when he was a boy. Yes, I believe so. But another man is also there, a third person, who has known him. He went [died] suddenly, very suddenly. A man of average height, rather slim, both around the body and in his face, with long-drawn facial features, a finely-made man who says his name is Gunnlaugur Jónsson, a very resolute personality. He went very suddenly. I have a feeling of choking and suffocation. Somehow something happened suddenly to his breathing organs and he died as a result. Along with him come two elderly persons—an elderly woman gone a rather long time ago, and an elderly man—evidently his parents. They ask to be mentioned to those who know them. The name of a house is associated with them. I don’t know . . . Brother, yes, Brotherspart. They lived there. Jón [a man’s name] at Brotherspart. They have lived in a small town in Iceland very close to Reykjavik.

Miss E.’s father and other members of her family immediately recognized Thórdur Thorsteinsson and his mother Gudbjörg. When around the age of forty-six, Thórdur drowned when his boat sank in 1948. He was a rather heavy-set man of average height and had lived with his mother in the village of Patreksfjörður in the northwest of Iceland. Thórdur had been married to the sister of Miss E.’s foster father (Miss E.’s grandfather). His boat frequently came to Reykjavik where Miss E.’s grandfather lived. Thórdur stayed with Miss E.’s grandfather when he was in Reykjavik. Thórdur’s mother Gudbjörg died in 1943 at the age of ninety-three. (All this information was given by Miss E.’s family.)

Every detail of the description of Thórdur and Gudbjörg seems to fit. But Hafsteinn’s statement that they had known the sitter “when he was a boy” was incorrect. Miss E. is of course not a boy and she was actually not born until a few years after Thórdur and Gudbjörg had died. (It should be noted, however, that Hafsteinn made no claims to know the sex of any of the invisible sitters.)

Gunnlaugur Jónsson and his father Jón were not recognized by Miss E.’s family. In Iceland E.H. made extensive inquiries about a house by the name of Brotherspart in a village near Reykjavik. In the whole area of Faxaby (a coastline of over a hundred miles of the Reykjavik area) two old houses were found by that name. One of these houses is in the village of Akranes and a man by the name of Gunnlaugur Jónsson, born in 1894, had lived there. He died in 1962. E.H. was able to trace his brother, O.J., who lives in Reykjavik, and verified from him the accuracy of Hafsteinn’s description of Gunnlaugur and Jón. Gunnlaugur choked to death when a piece of food got stuck in his throat. Gunnlaugur’s father, Jón, had also died in 1962, and his mother in 1961.

At first we were not able to find any connection between
Gunnlaugur Jónsson and Miss E.’s family. However, Gunnlaugur’s brother O.J. vaguely remembered that Gunnlaugur had known Miss E.’s grandfather when Gunnlaugur worked for two years in Reykjavik as a clerk in an office whose owner was a friend of Miss E.’s grandfather. On inquiry, Miss E.’s grandfather said that he had often visited the owner at this office, though he could not recall Gunnlaugur Jónsson. It should be noted that Gunnlaugur had worked in this office in Reykjavik some seventeen to eighteen years earlier and that Miss E.’s grandfather is now very elderly. Miss E.’s reading was the only one in which all the persons mentioned were identified with reasonable certainty. (Miss E. had never before attended a meeting with Hafsteinn.) At the other extreme, we had some reports in which no person could be identified.

There was one more case in which members of a sitter’s family confirmed the sitter’s first choice of report by recognizing additional persons mentioned in it. In this case the sitter, who is married to a person of Russian origin, made her choice solely on the basis of the medium’s descriptions of persons speaking Russian. Russian names were given, but they could not be identified. This sitter’s Icelandic parents, on the other hand, singled out this report only because of some Icelandic names they recognized, although not with a great degree of certainty.

In the case of another sitter who recognized definitely only one fully named person who was not related to her, but with whom she had been acquainted, we were able upon further inquiry to identify another person who was described along with the first one. The second person, who was completely unknown to the sitter, was found to have worked with the person whom the sitter had recognized. They had both died in the same accident. Cases of this kind, which E.H. has also observed at Hafsteinn’s meetings under less controlled conditions, seem to exclude the hypothesis that Hafsteinn’s impressions are all obtained through telepathy from the sitter.

In another instance a brother-in-law of the sitter clearly identified two persons described in the reading, although the sitter himself had not recognized any persons in his reading nor in any other, and had made a wrong guess as to the one intended for him. The two persons recognized by the brother-in-law had died rather recently and had apparently never been known to the sitter. The sitter’s brother-in-law, however, had at one time worked closely with one of these persons and had had a slight acquaintance with the other. He had quite recently settled the latter’s estate after his death, which had occurred only a year or two earlier. This was the only instance in which a member of a sitter’s family was able to identify with reasonable certainty persons outside the sitter’s
family. Since no relationship could be established between the two persons described and the sitter, his original (incorrect) choice of the reading intended for him was not changed.

We stated above that five of the ten sitters had previously attended a séance with Hafsteinn in Iceland. Of the four sitters who made a correct choice of their own readings, two had previously attended a séance with Hafsteinn and two had not.

**DISCUSSION**

We hoped in this experiment to establish under controlled conditions the paranormality of Hafsteinn Björnsson's mediumship. His critics in Iceland have put forward the hypothesis (to our knowledge it has never been spelled out in writing) that he possesses an extraordinary memory and has gathered a vast knowledge of genealogy, persons, and places. At his clairvoyance meetings, where hundreds of sitters may be present, Hafsteinn might, these critics say, simply bring out of his prodigious memory a number of deceased persons from the general area where the meeting is being held in the hope that some of the sitters might recognize those he describes. (In four such meetings attended by E.H. in different parts of Iceland, Hafsteinn described on the average about 150 deceased persons and of these only some five to eight were not recognized by any of the sitters.) The great majority of Hafsteinn's meetings are, however, of the trance type where usually only five to seven sitters are present; in these sittings the "vast knowledge" hypothesis seems more difficult to apply in view of the apparent successes that are claimed by so many of the sitters.

In the present experiment Hafsteinn was dealing with only one sitter at a time, and his identity was unknown to him. A quantitative evaluation shows acceptable nonchance results that indicate a paranormal interpretation and rejects the "vast knowledge" hypothesis. A study of the qualitative aspects of Hafsteinn's readings seems further to substantiate our quantitative finding. The combinations of some of the facts he mentioned seem extremely unlikely to have occurred by chance as they were attributed to fully named persons known to the sitter or to members of his family.

Hafsteinn's readings center around deceased persons whom he claims to see and to communicate with. This inevitably brings us close to the survival question and the dilemma of super-ESP as an alternative interpretation to that of communication with the deceased. It was not our intention to tackle this difficult problem in our initial experiment with Hafsteinn, but he does appear to us to be a very promising subject for this area of research. His previously mentioned extraordinary faculty for giving proper names (illus-
trated above in one of our examples) could remove much of the uncertainty that accompanies work with other mediums with whom it is often difficult to make specific identifications of the communicators. It is of interest to note here that neither in this experiment, nor at other meetings in Iceland which we have investigated rather carefully, has Hafsteinn described living persons as dead or vice versa. In six séance meetings in which we chose the sitters, there were two instances in which persons that the sitters had known a number of years earlier were described as deceased and this came as a complete surprise to the sitters, who thought they were still living. Upon inquiry, however, it was learned that in both cases the men Hafsteinn had described had passed away, in one case within the year, in the other a few years previously. A systematic investigation is needed in this area.

We have thought of some technical variations for further experiments with Hafsteinn similar to the one reported here. It may be asked why we did not place the sitters in a completely different, perhaps adjoining, room from that of the medium. J. G. Pratt (1936) adopted this technique in a study with Mrs. Eileen Garrett as the medium. We were afraid that such a complete isolation of the sitter from Hafsteinn would depart too far from the conditions he was accustomed to and inhibit the flow of paranormal knowledge. In any event, the curtain placed between the medium and the sitters seems to have been successful in preventing visual contact between them, while the earplugs and earphones provided acoustical isolation for the sitter. The results show that these conditions did not block the medium's paranormal abilities and neither he nor the sitters complained of the conditions.

It would be helpful to have each sitter remain in the experimental room for a fixed length of time, say eight minutes, even though the medium might not make any further statements for the sitter's reading after the first two or three minutes. This would prevent any sitter from drawing inferences about the length of his reading as compared to the others in the series he was ranking. However, the likelihood that such inferences were drawn in the present experiment seems remote since most of the sitters left the building immediately after their session and therefore had no means of comparing the length of their own reading with those of the later sitters. Nevertheless, this safeguard will be introduced in a new series of sittings we are planning to conduct with Hafsteinn, who has expressed interest in continuing to take part in well-controlled experimentation.

Hafsteinn has sometimes complained about a certain "crowding" of discarnate personalities. As it seems to him, the communicators of one sitter may not disperse when that sitter leaves the room and
the next one enters. Whatever the origin of this experience, it may result in some confusion about the connections between the perceived discarnate persons and the sitters to whom they are related. Hoping to overcome this difficulty, we plan in our next experiment to space the individual sittings farther apart, thus giving time between each reading for a "clearing out" of communicators or images in the mind of the medium—whichever the case may be.

REFERENCES


STEVenson, I. Characteristics of cases of the reincarnation type in Turkey and their comparison with cases in two other cultures. International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 1970, 11, 1-17.

THORBERGSSON, J. Lif er ad loknu thessu. (There Is Life after This Life.) Iceland: Skuggsjá, 1962.


THORBERGSSON, J. Brotinn er broddur daudans. (Broken Is the Thorn of Death.) Iceland: Skuggsjá, 1968.

American Society for Psychical Research
5 West 73rd Street
New York, New York 10023

Division of Parapsychology
School of Medicine
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22901

Printed by the St Catherine Press Ltd., Tempelhof 37, Bruges, Belgium.