

## SURVEY OF CLAIMED ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD

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### ABSTRACT

In a national survey in Iceland, 31 percent of respondents reported "having perceived the presence of a deceased person." A multinational Gallup survey conducted in sixteen western countries showed widespread claims of personal contacts with the dead, as well as, considerable national differences. Such experiences were reported most frequently by Icelanders and Italians whereas Norwegians and Danes, considered culturally closest to Icelanders, reported the lowest incidence (9%). In the Iceland survey, interviews were conducted with 127 persons on the nature of these experiences, their relationship with the deceased, the conditions under which these experiences occurred, and various characteristics of the interviewees, as well as, the deceased persons. Attempts were made to test some theories of what may elicit such experiences.

Recent survey data indicate a widespread belief in life after death in most countries of Western Europe and North America. but also large national differences in belief. Malta, Iceland, and the Republic of Ireland lead in western Europe with 76 to 84 percent of respondents reporting belief in continued life after death. France and Denmark have the lowest percentages with 35 percent and 26 percent respectively. For western Europe as a whole. Gallup estimates the percentage of believers at 43 percent and disbelievers at 38 percent [1], the percentage of believers being far below the United States' percentage of around 70 percent [2].

Some persons not only believe in life after death, but they also report encounters with the dead. Studies of alleged personal encounters with the dead have found their way into the recent thanatological and medical literature [3, 4], but nineteenth-century British researchers did the first large systematic study of "apparitional experiences" of persons whose presence was reportedly perceived

when they were not physically present [5, 6]. These experiences happened to normal, sane people, and a few of them seemed to have some factual basis, insofar as the hallucinatory experience apparently corresponded or coincided in some way with events that were taking place somewhere else [5, 6]. Such “veridical hallucinations” were distinguished from the bulk of hallucinations which corresponded to no factual event or situation [7].

These findings have remained controversial, and researchers have argued among themselves on how to interpret them. Some have hypothesized that the collective experiences, and those which conveyed information unknown to the percipient, might lend support to the theory that consciousness survives death [8, 9]. Regardless of controversial intimations about survival, which are bound to be perennially interesting to many, these reports have remained intriguing and a subject worthy of further study.

### MODERN SURVEYS OF ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD

Now, a century after the British studies, sociological, ethnic, and mental health perspectives have dominated studies of apparitions and alleged encounters with the dead. Rees, of the University of London, interviewed 293 widows and widowers in Wales [4]. Fifty percent of the widowers and 46 percent of the widows reported hallucinatory experiences of their dead spouses in a clearly waking state. The experiences seemed independent of sex and age, but relatively more professionals and managers and their widows reported them than members of other classes. Social isolation had no effect on the occurrence of the phenomenon, nor was it more common among those who had, according to their medical reports, sought help for depression after losing their spouse. None of these persons had told their physician or clergyman about their experience, many of them citing fear of ridicule. Rees concluded that hallucinations of this kind by widows and widowers should be considered a normal phenomenon. Greeley [10] and Haraldsson [11] have since verified in large national samples that about half of all widows and widowers report hallucinatory experiences of their deceased spouses.

Osiris and Haraldsson conducted an extensive cross-cultural interview survey with physicians and nurses in the United States and India on the hallucinatory experiences of terminal patients [12]. Most of the 471 incidents occurred within twenty-four hours of death and were of deceased relatives and friends who the patients perceived—often joyfully—as coming to “take them away.” These experiences seemed to occur independent of medication and the nature of the disease.

Kalish and Reynolds conducted an interview survey among four ethnic communities ( $N = 434$ ) in greater Los Angeles [3]. Forty-four percent replied yes to the question: “Have you ever experienced or felt the presence of

anyone after he had died?" There were significant ethnic differences: contact with the dead was most frequently reported by blacks (55%) and Mexican-Americans (54%), followed by Anglo- (38%) and Japanese-Americans (29%). Most encounters occurred through dreams. When experiences in dreams and at mediumistic seances were excluded, the mean for the total sample was 16 percent. Also with significant ethnic differences, 20 percent of blacks and Anglo-Americans reporting such experiences, 12 percent of Mexican-Americans and 11 percent of Japanese-Americans.

In Iceland, the author included the following item in a representative national survey (N = 902) dealing with paranormal and religious beliefs and experiences: "Have you ever perceived or felt the nearness of a deceased person?" Thirty-one percent of respondents replied with a yes: 36 percent of the women, 24 percent of the men [11].

In a representative United States national survey (N = 1467), Greeley and McCready asked [13]. "Have you ever felt that you were really in touch with someone who had died?" Twenty-seven percent responded in the affirmative. This item was included in the European Human Values Study [1, 14], which revealed considerable national differences. Iceland topped the list with 41 percent claiming to have felt contact with the dead. Italy followed with 33 percent, then Great Britain and West Germany with 26 percent, and the countries with the lowest percentages were Holland with 11 percent, and Denmark and Norway each with 9 percent.

Several questions come to mind when one studies these figures. What is the nature of the ostensible encounters with the deceased that a substantial part of the population reports? How are the dead perceived; what sensory modalities are involved? Do these experiences mostly occur in dark and gloomy surroundings as the folk theory implies? Do they primarily occur when people are grieving their loved ones as Rees' data suggest, or when resting or not fully awake, as suggested by Tyrrell [16]? Who are the dead perceived in this way? Do they share any specific characteristics? How good is the evidence for collectively observed apparitions? Are there truly veridical apparitions among reported contacts with the dead?

## METHOD

The author's original sample consisted of the 181 respondents to a national mail survey (N = 902) on paranormal and religious-experiences and beliefs [11]. These persons reported having "experienced or felt the nearness of a deceased

<sup>1</sup> There has been an increase in Iceland in reporting contact with the dead as 31 percent did so in 1975 and 41 percent in 1983. This might have been caused by difference in the wording of the items. However, similar increase, using the same item, has also been found in USA. In 1973, 27 percent reported having felt "really in touch with someone who had died." 30 percent did so in 1981, and 42 percent in 1987 [15].

person” and they lived in the Reykjavik area or Akureyri, the two largest population centers in Iceland. Two years had passed since the original survey was conducted. Some respondents had moved away, some could not be contacted, and twelve refused to be interviewed. Thus, we interviewed 127 persons (70%).

The final analysis included only cases in which a direct experience of a dead person was reported to have occurred in a waking state. Nine persons had only had experiences of the dead in dreams, six reported contact with a deceased person at a mediumistic seance, and there were several second-hand and unclassifiable cases. Thus, for further analysis we were left with 100 cases reported by thirty-five males and sixty-five females. Interviewees’ age varied widely; 48 percent had only attended primary school, 49 percent had attended secondary school, and 3 percent had attended college. This reflects the level of education in Iceland for a varied age group.

Magnus Jonsson conducted 100 interviews, and twenty-seven were conducted by Kristin Valdemarsdottir. Both interviewers were senior psychology students.

## Procedure

The respondents were contacted by phone and visited if they agreed to be interviewed. When more than one experience of the dead was reported, respondents were questioned only about the experience which they remembered best and in greatest detail. At the beginning of each interview the respondent was asked to describe at length his or her experience. Then the interviewer went through a thirty-nine-item interview schedule dealing with various phenomenological aspects of the experience and inquiries about the deceased person and the interviewee. Most of the interviews were recorded on tape.

## RESULTS

Eighty-four of our 100 interviewees reported an encounter with a deceased person which was of a sensory nature: visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory, whereas sixteen reported only a vivid feeling of an imperceptible presence which convinced them that they were in contact with a dead person. Some experiences involved only one modality, such as sight alone. In others, two or more modalities were involved, such as sight and hearing or sight and touch (see Table 1).

Visual apparitions were the most frequent. They were reported by a total of fifty-nine of our 100 interviewees, seventeen of these involved more than one sensory modality. As 31 percent of our mail survey respondents reported experiences of the dead and 46 percent of our interviewees (59 of 127) reported visual apparitions, we may infer that 14 percent of our original representative national sample may have experienced visual apparitions of the dead. This figure is similar to the 17 percent claiming visual apparitions in Kalish and Reynolds’ greater Los Angeles sample [3].

**Table 1. Sensory Modalities of Claimed Encounters with the Dead**

<i>Modality</i>	<i>Number of Cases</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Only One Modality</i>	<i>More than One Modality</i>	
<b>Visual</b>	42	17	59
<b>Auditory</b>	13	11	24
<b>Tactile</b>	4	3	7
<b>Olfactory</b>	3	2	5
<b>Feeling of cold</b>		1	1
<b>Only sense of presence</b>			16

The following case of visual apparition was reported by a housewife who had lost her eight-year-old boy in an accident two years earlier:

I was washing the wooden floor in our living room when I looked up a moment to pause. Then I saw him standing some distance away from me looking towards me. I looked for a while and did not immediately realize that he had died. I ran towards him saying "My Beggi," but then he disappeared. He was dressed in the clothes he had on when he drowned. I saw him on two occasions, both times on the same spot. His grandmother also saw him once at her home.

Another example of visual apparition is the following:

It was about a week after my mother was buried. She died here in the house, upstairs where she had a room. I passed her in the staircase. She had suffered a stroke and was slow in walking, and used to stop to let people pass her, when meeting someone. When I met her she passed aside as she used to. Immediately afterwards I realized that this must be an illusion, or something else. There was nothing unclear about this, I saw her well.

The feeling of an invisible presence was the second most common experience. Sometimes it occurred with a sensory experience, but in sixteen cases the experience consisted solely of the conviction of this presence.

I had just returned from the maternity clinic with my first child. I was running into the bedroom to look at my baby when I suddenly felt my deceased mother-in-law standing behind me. It was so clear that I thought it was my (living) mother, but no one was there. Somehow I felt this in a very convincing way. It was as if she was following how we were getting on. I had this feeling for a few days.

Vivid imperceptible presence, as well as other kinds of experiences, was sometimes believed to have had a correspondence with an ongoing event. One male interviewee reported that he abruptly awoke in the middle of the night and felt that someone passed the door of the bedroom of his empty apartment and

went into the bathroom. “The feeling was so vivid and upsetting that I immediately became wide awake and could not fall asleep again.” The following day he learned that a friend and former co-worker of his was missing. Soon thereafter it became known that the man had drowned, probably that very night, in a harbor in another part of the country.

Next in frequency were auditory experiences which were claimed by 24 percent. Almost half of these experiences involved more than one sensory modality. One example:

When my husband proposed to me I was very undecided. Then I felt my father, who had died when I was six years old, standing at my side and saying to me: ‘This is the man that you should marry.’ I often felt his presence.

Some of the auditory experiences were nonvocal such as the following example:

Mrs. A was visiting the house where she had been brought up. There were two apartments in the house, separated by a wall. The woman who had lived in the other apartment had recently died and the apartment was empty. One day when Mrs. A. was resting in the afternoon, she heard doors opened and closed, and someone working on the stove. Our percipient interpreted these noises as coming from the old deceased woman, who also in death could not fully leave her kitchen.

There were seven cases of tactile experiences, four of them solely involving tactile sensations. Here is one:

I had lost my husband about a week ago. I had lain down for rest and almost fallen asleep, when I clearly felt my husband as if lying on the bed at my side, resting one hand on my shoulder. I was so happy when I felt his touch. I then somehow knew that he was still there (with me); he had not gone away.

There were five cases of olfactory nature, sensations of odor which had been characteristic of someone when this person was alive. Some were collective, reported by more than one person at a time such as the following experience:

It happened about a week after my father-in-law died here at our home. I was coming home from shopping when I sensed all over the apartment a strong smell that I immediately recognized. It was of the medicine which the old man had been taking and he had kept in a little box he carried with him. No one felt [smelled] this smell apart from me. But one day, a friend of mine comes in and says: “What a peculiar smell this is, like the old man’s medicine.” My older girl also sometimes felt [sensed] it. This lasted on and off for ten to twelve days and then it finally disappeared. Before this started I had thrown the medicine box away and cleared away all the old man’s belongings.

### Conditions under Which the Claimed Encounter with the Dead Occurred

It has been theorized that apparitional experiences are most likely to occur when external stimulation is minimal. This found little support in our self-reported data, since forty-four of our interviewees reported experiencing apparitions in daylight or full electric light, twenty in semidarkness, and only nine in darkness.

It has also been theorized that apparitional experiences tend to occur when a person is resting or in a drowsy state. There was more support for this view. One-third of the interviewees were resting, sitting, or lying in bed, and another third had just awakened or were on the point of going to sleep. In a few cases, the percipient thought he or she might have dreamt and awakened to see an apparition which then vanished or walked through the wall of the room. Some of these percipients were not sure if they woke up to see the apparition, or if the apparition was, as it were, carried over from the dream. Still, one-third reported having been physically active, working, or going about their daily activities.

In the thanatological and psychiatric literature, apparitional experiences have frequently been associated with bereavement or grief [4, 17, 18]. We distinguished between the feeling of grief at the death of the person allegedly perceived (henceforth we shall refer to that person as the agent), and grief felt at the time of, or just before, the reported experience.

Grief at the time of the experience or just prior to it was reported in eleven of the seventy-three cases in which the identity of the agent was known. In about

**Table 2. Conditions under Which the Claimed Encounter with the Dead Occurred**

Daylight, normal electric light	44
Semidarkness	20
Darkness	9
Varied, unknown	27
Physically active, working	30
Resting	24
Falling asleep	8
Awakening	17
Unclear if sleeping or awake	15
Other	5
Grieving at time of experience of identified agent	11
No feeling of grief	62

one-fourth of the cases the percipient had been grief-stricken at the death of the agent. In thirteen cases the percipient did not know at the time of his experience that the agent had died. Grief or bereavement therefore played a minor role.

Medical and physiological factors some times known to cause hallucinations were practically absent in our interviewees. They were in a normal healthy state; only six were bedridden; none were feverish; and only one was under the influence of medication.

Sixty-nine percent of the visual hallucinations lasted only a few moments, 27 percent a few minutes, and only one occurred more than once. Experiences involving other modalities tended to last somewhat longer and 17 percent of them were intermittent.

The time period since the experiences varied from within a year to fifty-five years. Twenty-five percent had occurred within the last seven years, half of them within eighteen years, and the rest had occurred over eighteen years ago. They were evidently rare experiences. Seventy-two of the percipients were below forty at the time of their experience, twentyeight older, with four over seventy years of age.

### Characteristics of the Agents

The identity of the agent was recognized in seventy-four cases (see Table 3). Fifty-three percent of the agents were close relatives of the percipients. 10 percent were friends or co-workers. 11 percent were only slightly known or strangers, and 26 percent were unidentified. The agents varied greatly in age, but most of them were older persons.

**Table 3. Some Characteristics of the Deceased Person (Agent) Reportedly Experienced by the Percipient**

	<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<b>Sex of agent</b>		
Males	63	77
Females	19	23
Unknown	18	—
<b>Relationship to percipient</b>		
Related	53	72
Friends, coworkers	10	14
Others, identified	6	8
Strangers	5	7
Unidentified	26	
<b>Cause of death</b>		
Disease	52	77
Violent death	16	23
Unknown	32	—



The number of male agents reported exceeded the number of females; sixty-three males compared to nineteen females were identified as agents. This sex difference was evident for male as well as female percipients, as 77 percent of each sex reported contact with males but only 23 percent reported contact with female agents. Another prominent feature of the agents was how many (whose cause of death was known) had suffered violent deaths, i.e., 23 percent with twelve accidents, three suicides, and one homicide. This percentage far exceeds the 8 percent incidence of violent deaths in the general population in Iceland [19]. This finding is comparable to the findings of the early British researchers who found that 27.5 percent of the agents had died violently [5, 20]. The high percentage of agents who suffered violent deaths is in line with a popular belief found in many countries that persons suffering violent deaths tend more frequently than those dying from disease to be involved in apparitional experiences. Psychological research has also shown that alleged deceased communicators through spiritistic mediums have frequently died violently, and children claiming memories of a past life also frequently report having died by accident, murder, or suicide [20, 21]. The predominance of male figures is to some extent explained by the fact that 83 percent of the agents who died violent deaths were males.

A further feature is the so-called crisis-apparitions, i.e., when an apparition is seen close to the time of the agent's death (technically, within twelve hours before or after) without the percipient knowing that this person is about to die or has died. Five crisis-apparitions were among our cases. One was described above. A brief account of another follows:

The percipient visits his sister at a remote farm where both of them had been brought up and where the sister is still living. They are sitting quietly in the kitchen after lunch when the percipient suddenly sees a man pass by the window. The percipient sees his face and clothing well but does not immediately recognize him. He tells his sister that a guest is coming. When no one knocks on the door, they go out and look around but find no one. There are no trees near the farm; there is good visibility; and it is unlikely that anyone could disappear suddenly. As the percipient describes the man further to his sister both of them recognize him as an old friend living in a village several miles away. Later the same day they learn that this man had died about lunchtime in his village. This happened in the autumn of 1964.

In forty-three cases another person was reported to have been present when our interviewees had their encounters with the dead. In about one-third of these instances it was reported that the other person had shared the interviewee's experience. This is similar to the figure found by British researchers [6].

We tried to investigate further these thirteen presumably collective experiences of the dead. Witnesses of six of the experiences had either died, were living overseas, or could not be traced. Thus, we were only able to interview the seven other persons who had been present in these seven collective incidents. The testimony of all seven, at least in a general way, confirmed the reports of

our interviewees as to the content of the observation. They also interpreted the incident as an encounter with a deceased person.

## DISCUSSION

Interview data that we and others have collected show that a fair proportion of the general population have at some time in their life interpreted some experience as a personal encounter with a deceased person. Self-report data are beset with well-known limitations. Experiences may be inexactly or wrongly reported, there may be unconscious distortions of memory over time or misinterpretations of normal perceptions, and mistaken identity may be the cause of some of the reported experiences. There can, however, be little doubt that a large number of them are of hallucinatory nature.

Recent research has indicated that grief, ethnicity, and sex can be contributing factors in the occurrence of these experiences. Our survey shows that grief explains personal encounters with the deceased only to a small extent in the normal population. These experiences can apparently occur to a considerable portion of the normal population, and under a variety of conditions.

Some of our cases were apparently collective, and some reportedly conveyed information unknown to the percipient. The number of cases of this kind which allowed an investigation into their evidential quality were too few to reveal any meaningful result. However, what little evidence we obtained tended to support the findings of the early British researchers that some apparitions of the dead are collective, also that disproportionately many experiences of the deceased and dying occur at the time of death of the agent without the percipient knowing of that person's impending death.

These findings, weak as they are, may permit us to ask if some, or any, of these experiences may possibly be something more than "just hallucinations." In a brief paper dealing with a survey, no one case can be described and evaluated in such detail as to do any justice to the evidential aspect of the best of these cases. Reports of two extensively researched recent cases of apparitions attempt to deal with such a controversial, but intriguing, and hence interesting question [22, 23].

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