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# Baffling Physical Phenomena: Differences in the Phenomenology of Some Famous Physical Mediums

The Spiritualist movement appeared around the middle of the nineteenth century, claiming that communication was possible with those who had died through specially gifted individuals that were called mediums. In the presence of some mediums physical phenomena also occurred that violated well-established laws of nature. Some daring scientists started to investigate the mediums, their claims, and phenomena. That was how psychological research started that has continued to the present day.

Mediums differed widely, some were only mental mediums, and others were primarily physical mediums. Even among the physical mediums there were great differences.

Particularly common were movements of objects, light and heavy, large and small, and over short and long distances. Also noted was the trembling of objects, pulling of curtains, and turning lights on and off, apparently without any normal physical forces being involved. Sometimes things were moved around by requests of those present. Fixation of objects was also observed—objects could not be moved or did not fall off a table when it was tilted.

## D. D. Home and Indridi Indridason

Chemist and physicist Sir William Crooks, one of the early investigators, concluded after his investigation of Daniel Dunglas Home that we were dealing with a *new force*. The Scottish-American D. D. Home (1833–1886) was one of the early prominent physical mediums that soon became a celebrity on both sides of the Atlantic.

Objects not only moved in his presence. They often levitated into the air where they moved around, sometimes as if carried by an invisible hand, or having been thrown by great force. Musical instruments were played upon, even as they levitated and moved around in the air.

Not only objects were levitated. Mediums were sometimes lifted off their chair and into the air. There were claims of fraud. Unscrupulous individuals started to imitate and produce the phenomena fraudulently.

Light phenomena of many kinds—such as flashes of various colors, luminous clouds, pillars of lights—were observed with some mediums.

Sounds were commonly heard: raps and clicks, and knocks responding to sitters' questions. Human voices were heard away from the medium and recognized as of deceased persons. These voices could converse meaningfully with the sitters who recognized them. Even singing was heard, as in the case of the Icelandic medium Indridi Indridason (1883–1912).

With Indridason sometimes a feminine voice of a trained opera singer sang a duet with a dim male bass, both evidently trained professional singers.

Gusts of wind could blow through the séance room, some as if blown out of an invisible mouth.

Fragrances and other smells might suddenly be perceived, sometimes characteristic of a particular dead individual.

Materialization of human forms were seen, or parts of human figures. Sitters at séances were sometimes touched or pulled as if by invisible hands. Sometimes these hands could be touched.

A brief comparison of the characteristics of the mediumship of Indridi Indridason and D. D. Home indicates that:

- Control personalities played an important role in Indridason's mediumship, but little if any role with Home.
- Indridason's séances were held in darkness or near-darkness, although phenomena also occurred spontaneously in full light.
- Home's sittings were usually conducted in normal light. In this respect Home was unique among mediums.



Indridi Indridason



D. D. Home levitating

- Indridason was always in trance during his sittings, and it usually took him a long time to wake up to full normal consciousness. Home was sometimes in trance but often not, or in a very light trance.
- Communications with deceased persons or spirits was much easier with Indridasoni, and mostly through trance speech, direct voice phenomena, or direct or automatic writing. With Home, communications or messages came primarily through the alphabet (planchette) or raps, seldom through trance speech and rarely through direct voice phenomena.
- With Home, communications or messages were short and telegram-like style. They were generally much longer with Indridason and played a greater role. Blank séances, when nothing happened, were infrequent with Indridason, and more common with Home.
- Home's arms sometimes became cataleptic or rigid but there is no mention of that with Indridason.
- There was a period of violent poltergeist assaults with Indridason, but nothing of this sort was reported with Home, although undesirable influences were sometimes mentioned.
- There were several cases of spirit controls speaking in foreign languages (xenoglossy) with Indridason, but none reported with Home.
- Indridason's mediumship lasted only five years (1904–1909). Home's mediumship lasted 25 years (1851–1876). Indridason had a short life and died at the age of 28, whereas Home was aged 53. Both died of tuberculosis, a widespread disease in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century.
- The majority of the phenomena occurring with Indridason also occurred with Home and vice versa.
- Some of Indridason's phenomena are not reported with Home, such as apports, the disappearance of his arm, and surgery-like operations.
- With Home there were phenomena that were never reported with Indridason. Most famous was the astounding earthquake effect (trembling of the floor and room), handling of burning coal, and strange heat radiating from Home's hands.
- In other ways these two physical mediums differed rather significantly. The many phenomena that appeared with each varied quite markedly in their frequency. To provide a better understanding, we took the 24 sittings described by Crookes in *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* and combined them with 24 sittings described by the Earl of Dunraven, by randomly selecting 24 of the 79 sittings in *Experiences in Spiritualism with D.D. Home*.
- In that way we obtained 48 Home séances to compare with Indridason's 47 séances reported in the minute books kept about his séances. Let us see what the analysis reveals.

Movements of objects were more common with Home. They took place at 81% of his séances, and only 55% of Indridason's séances. Most other kinds of physical phenomena also occurred more frequently with Home such as raps, gusts of air, odors, playing of musical instruments, touches by invisible hands, and more.

There are, however, two major exceptions. Direct voice phenomena are the most common phenomenon with

	Indridi Indridason	D.D. Home
Raps or knocks	38%	67%
Gusts of air	9	23
Movements of objects	55	81
Playing of musical instruments	6	44
Levitation of medium	26	8
Light phenomena	28	31
Materializations	15	46
Touches/pulls as if from invisible hands	36	60
Direct voice phenomena	77	8

Table 1. Comparison of the frequency (percentage of sittings) of various major phenomena occurring at Indridi Indridason's 47 séances and Daniel Dunglas Home's 48 séances.

Indridason, as they occur at 77% of the sittings. With Home direct voice is relatively rare; it occurs at 8% of the sittings but sounds of other kinds occur at 33% of his séances. Levitations of the medium are also more common with Indridason, reported at 26% of his sittings but at only 8% with Home. The appearance of lights was similar, observed 28% of the time at Indridason's sittings and 31% at Home's.

These are the physical phenomena. The mental phenomena are much harder to assess in a qualitative manner. We did not attempt such an assessment. However, there is little of this sort with Home. In that respect, Indridason was a more versatile medium.

We recall that philologist and physical researcher F.W.H. Myers placed communicators in three groups: people recently deceased, people belonging to generations more remote and generally of some distinction in their day, and spirits referred to by such names such as Rector, Doctor, Theophilous, and above all, Emperor. With Indridason we find the first two categories, with the third category missing or rarely mentioned. In Home's mediumship the third category is completely missing, and so are distinct personages from a previous generation. With Home the physical phenomena are prominent.

### Rudi Schneider and Einer Nielsen

Home was meticulously investigated by Sir William Crookes. Indridason was just as thoroughly investigated by another highly respected scientist, Dr. Gudmundur Hannesson. He tested and investigated Indridason in numerous sittings through a whole winter. However, before we get to that, let us compare Indridi Indridason with two other famous mediums: the Austrian Rudi Schneider (1908–1957) and the Danish Einer Nielsen (1894–1965). Like Indridason, and unlike Home, both had active control personalities and held séances in darkness or in semi-darkness.

Ectoplasm played a great role in the mediumship of Rudi Schneider and Einer Nielsen but was not observed with Indridason and Home. Ectoplasm was mysterious in the way that it extruded from the mediums' bodily orifices, and from



Rudi Schneider (left) with Harry Price (right)

it partial or full human figures were formed. Shortly after its manifestation, this mysterious substance vanished without a trace.

Rudi Schneider's mediumship started at an early age after his older brother Willi Schneider (1903–1971) had already become a medium. Rudi was thoroughly tested by investigators such as Dr. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929) in Munich, Dr. Eugene Osty (1874–1938) in Paris, and Harry Price (1881–1948) in London, and all imposed strict controls. During some of those investigations, instrumental recordings were made of interference from an “invisible substance” that broke infrared beams projected around objects that were paranormally moved. The interruption of the infrared rays

coincided with the announcement from Olga (Rudi Schneider's control) that “she was going into the ray.” In that way, instrumental verification was obtained about paranormal effects and movements of objects, similar to Crookes' instrumental verification of movements at the sittings with Home. Hundreds of records exist of Rudi Schneider's séances. The German-born British psychologist and psychical researcher Anita Gregory (1925–1984) made detailed analyses of four different phenomena that took place at Rudi's sittings (1968, 1985).

In Table 2 we compare the frequency of the four phenomena that Anita Gregory lists for Rudi Schneider and the same phenomena occurring with Indridason and Home. By the time Schrenck-Notzing investigated Rudi, his abilities had started to fade. We therefore include the last column showing earlier sittings that took place at his home. Movements were most common with Rudi, visible materializations with Rudi and Home, levitations of the medium with Indridason, and experiences of touch with Home. These four phenomena were common to all these mediums. With Schneider, Anita Gregory does not mention the phenomenon of direct voice that was so prevalent with Indridason.

Einer Nielsen is the best known Scandinavian physical medium, and his mediumship started when he was a young man, as it did with Home and Rudi Schneider. With Einer Nielsen, human figures were formed from ectoplasm that extruded from his nose and mouth. Movements and levitations of objects were also observed, as well as levitations of his body. He was investigated by experienced researchers, such as Schrenck-Notzing in 1921 and very thoroughly by the engineer Fritz Grunewald, professor Christian Winther, and K. H. Krabbe later that same year (Grunewald, 1922).

Before the beginning of the séances, Nielsen was fully undressed. Both before and after the séance, all bodily orifices including his rectum, were examined. He was then dressed in a tricot; his hands and head were also covered with semi-transparent material that was sown to his tricot. Nielsen was then placed in a closed, transparent box-like structure (cabinet). In spite of all these precautions, ectoplasmic forms were produced both inside and outside the cabinet. The conclusion by both teams was that the phenomena were genuine.

A University Committee in Oslo attempted to investigate Nielsen in 1922. They treated him harshly, observed no phenomena, and concluded that previously observed phenomena

Séances with:	Indridi Indridason	Daniel Dunglas Home	Rudi Schneider	Rudi Schneider
	Minute Books	Crookes / Dunraven	Schrenck- Notzing	Sittings at his home
	N = 47	N = 48	N = 84	N = 173
	%	%	%	%
No phenomena	0	Many	25	7
Movement of objects	55	81	74	89
Visible materializations	10	58	37	52
Levitation of medium	26	13	4	22
Sitters touched	36	67	8	25

Table 2. The frequency of four different phenomena taking place at the séances of Indridi Indridason, Daniel Dunglas Home and Rudi Schneider.



Einer Nielsen levitating in a séance

were fraudulently produced (Universitetskomiteen i Kristiania, 1922). Parallel to this investigation there was a Norwegian Society for Psychical Research investigation that was also extremely critical (Norsk selskab for psykisk forskning, 1922). Here, as in the Grunewald investigation, Nielsen had to change clothes, all bodily orifices were examined, and nothing was found. In the first three séances, ectoplasmic human-like forms appeared, but none in the fourth séance. In that last séance, some smell of feces was perceived, and Einer did not want his rectum examined, but his anus was later examined. When his tricot was examined after the last séance, a 12 mm wide and 6 to 8 mm long hole was found near where his head cover was sown to his tricot. Traces of feces were found on Einer's hand and at his anus along with a 3 cm long thread. When his rectum was examined, nothing was found. This committee concluded that Einer Nielsen must have been able to free his hand from the tricot, take some material from his rectum, get it through the tiny hole, portray it as an ectoplasmic form, and then swallow it. None of this was directly observed but assumed to have taken place and is therefore a highly dubious conclusion. On this assumption, the committee concluded that the phenomena were not genuine. The world press announced Einer Nielsen as a fraud.

Anthropologist and psychical researcher Eric Dingwall (1890–1986) wrote in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (1922, pp. 327–328): "...it is difficult to accept the committee's findings as to fraud on part of the medium. There is really very little evidence to indicate that the medium acted as the committee allege."

Einer Nielsen was invited on three occasions to Iceland, first in 1924 when he held 22 séances of which we have detailed reports (Kvaran, 1924). In light of the Oslo investigations, extraordinary precautions were taken and Nielsen was thoroughly tested. The meetings were held at the home of Einar H. Kvaran, President of the Icelandic Society for Psychical Research. Einer Nielsen also stayed with Kvaran during his visit.

The conditions at the séances were as follows: One corner of the room where the sittings were held was converted into a cabinet with two curtains down to the floor and a slip in the middle so that the cabinet could be opened and made visible. The sitters sat on 12 chairs in one row in front of the cabinet. They held hands during the séance and the harmonium was placed some distance behind them. On it was a red lamp that could emit variable light depending on the wishes of the medium or his controls. The light was always bright enough for the sitters to see each other.

Nielsen was given several sittings to get used to the new environment in which various phenomena were observed, but there were also a few sittings with no phenomena. Then tighter controls were imposed. The investigating committee consisted of two physicians, one Supreme Court judge, and two other persons. First the room was carefully examined, and then Einer was brought in and undressed until he was naked. His clothes were carefully examined piece by piece by each member of the committee; his nose and mouth were examined; and he was brought into the cabinet where his rectum was inspected. Nothing suspicious was found. Then his clothes were given back to him except for the jacket and his tie. (A more detailed description is available from the senior author and published in *Dansk Tidsskrift for Psykisk Forskning* (Haraldsson, 2010).)

After this, other sitters were invited into the séance room; those sitting close to the medium were also inspected. After the séance started, a whitish figure appeared through the opening of the curtains. She was clearly visible with a headscarf, and her skirt was wide and half-length. She disappeared, and then the lower part of the skirt became visible. She appeared again, but her face was unclear. At one time the curtains were opened, and the medium was seen in his chair with ectoplasm from his chest down to his knees, wide at his chest but becoming narrower further down. It was not like a flat piece of cloth or scarf but a thick, shining white mass. Then the curtain was closed again.

Later in the sitting the curtain was lifted at the wall and the sitters nearby saw the medium with ectoplasm from his chest up over his face and above his head. They found no indications of fraud, and there was no smell or trace of feces in any of the Icelandic sittings. All its members signed the report of the committee.

Einer Nielsen also conducted telekinetic sittings where he sat in the middle of a circle with both of his hands held by sitters at his side. Objects on a table and on the organ were lifted and moved around, sometimes touching the sitters. Three times he levitated at such sittings so that those holding his hands had to stretch their hands as high up as they could.

In summary, the sitters made the following observations regarding the forms that appeared: The human forms were of various sizes, tall and short; the hands were also of various sizes, including the hands of small children. Sometimes the lower part of a figure was seen but not the upper, and vice versa. The figures had veils of varying length and sizes. Some of the figures could be seen distinctly, others were nebulous and dark. On a few occasions, the medium was seen with a figure at its side and once with one on each side.

Direct voice phenomena, so common with Indridason, were not observed with Einer Nielsen or Rudi Schneider, nor were the lights of various forms and colors that were common with Indridason. In this way, these mediums differed significantly. In fact, all four mediums, Indridi Indridason, Home, Schneider and Nielsen had their particular characteristics, one type of phenomena occurring with one of them and not or to a lesser extent with the others.

What all of them had in common were inexplicable movements of objects around them, and most important for all of them was contact with those who had died. Spirit communication was central to the Spiritualist movement, in which these mediums played an important role in their native countries and internationally.

## What is the State of Physical Mediumship Today?

The Spiritualist movement has become a part of our history, and physical mediums have become rare species. Just two contemporary mediums come to mind.

Kai Mugge in Germany claimed to be a physical medium who seemed to be genuine in the beginning. He was investigated by two competent investigators, biologist Michael Nahm and philosopher Stephen Braude. Both started their investigations on a positive note. But in the end Michael Nahm concluded that all the phenomena he produced were fraudulent; Braude seems to think that there is, or may be, some residual of genuine phenomena along with the fraud. All in all, a sad case.

Stewart Alexander in the United Kingdom has a reputation for being genuine but has refused to be investigated.

It should also be mentioned that competent researchers interested in physical mediumship are rare, and few seem interested in actively following up potential leads. Furthermore, hostile "skeptics" (pseudo-skeptics or deniers) have become very vocal, and that may have lead some researchers to stay away from potential studies of physical mediumship. These arguments, however, may be more excuses than real reasons for the state of physical mediumship today.

But this dire state can be no indication that the phenomena of the past were not genuine. Some of the physical mediums of the past like Daniel Dunglas Home, Indridi Indridason, Rudi Schneider and Einer Nielsen were so thoroughly investigated, that there can be no question about their genuineness.

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