

Psi and Death of the Person-Target: An Experiment with Highly Emotional Iconic Representations

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ABSTRACT

A number of psychics have gained a reputation as psychic detectives using such clues as photographs, a town map, or a piece of clothing. In fact, dowsing has long been espoused as a technique for helping individuals to utilize untrained psi abilities, in terms of unconscious muscular movements, while the pendulum acts as an amplifier of subconscious ideomotor movements. The aim of this study was to compare mental and motor conditions using images of dead people as targets. In one iteration, photographs were used of the person-targets in order to determine if the participants scored differently when using mental or motor procedures. In another, the same approach used highly emotional iconic representations, that is, images of people who had committed suicide. The sample consisted of 214 female and male participants (*Mean age* = 43.84; *SD* = 13.40) who had reported personal experiences suggestive of psi. Four trials were performed for the "mental" (psychometry) procedures and four for the "motor" (pendulum) procedures. After a number of security measures, including randomized procedures and control groups, the results showed that the "mental" (psychometry) condition scored significantly above chance ($MCE = 2$; *Mean Mental* = 2.39, $t = 4.55$; $p < .001$), and also scored significantly higher than the "motor" condition ($p = .004$). In the second group of trials, the results also showed that the "mental" condition scored significantly above chance (*Mean Mental* = 2.14, $t = 1.44$; $p .075$); however, in this group, the "mental" condition did not score significantly higher than the "motor" condition. We conclude that the study offers support for the claim that iconic representation through psychometry is psi conducive. However, in the second analysis, one tentative interpretation would be that the psi information was blocked by some psychological defense mechanism in response to an unpleasant association with the stimulus.

Key Words: psi, psychometry, iconic representations, emotional target

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Introduction

The use of an inductor is by no means a requirement for evidence of psi, and many psychics provide impressions about target persons without relying on any object, using instead, for instance, a photograph of the target

person. This type of anomalous cognition, which permits a psychic to experience "impressions" using a physical object as an inductor, is in contrast to other forms of psi communication that lack physical contact, such as a psi reading face-to-face or through control spirits (Pagenstecher, 1946; Rogo, 1974). The first use of the term *psychometry* was by Joseph Rhodes Buchanan (1889), who described this psychic process based on the idea that objects contain impressions that can be "read" by some people with a high degree of psychic ability.

Since then, although it is extremely hard to verify that someone actually has psychometry, there are instances when police

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investigators have turned to self-claimed psychics with pieces of evidence and asked them to try to identify the location or identity of the criminals involved. European psychics Stephan Ossowiecki (Stevenson, Barrington, & Weaver, 2005) and Gerard Croiset gained a reputation as psychic detectives using psychometry, because police departments in many European countries sought their help in solving some of their most bewildering cases (Anderson, 2006; Pollack, 1964). There are many instances on record in which corpses have been traced through psychometric influence. Attempts have also been made to employ psychometry in criminology, with varying results. Richet (1923, p.123) narrates the experience of a Dr. Dufay with a nonprofessional psychometrist called "Marie." He handed her something buried in several folds of paper. Marie said that the paper contained a necktie that had killed a man. Indeed, the necktie had belonged to a prisoner who hanged himself because he had committed a murder, killing his victim with a gouet (a woodman's hatchet). Marie indicated the spot where the gouet was thrown on the ground. It was found in the place indicated.

Many psychometrists in the Spiritualist community have asserted that they are simply instruments and that spirits do the reading. Trance mediums often ask for objects belonging to the dead to establish contact, as was the habit with Leonora Piper. But other psychics, like Pascal Forthuny (Osty, 1932), repudiated the theory of spirit intervention and considered psychometry a personal gift, a sensitivity to the influence that the objects possessed.

Don *et al.* (1990) recorded multifrequency (delta, theta, alpha, beta) EEG data from psychic claimant Mel Doerr, during psychometry readings in which he attempted to describe an unknown person while holding an object belonging to him or her. Although his ESP scores were at the level of chance, Doerr showed significantly more EEG activity in his right hemisphere when correctly guessing the gender of the owner of the psychometric object. In contrast, there was more left hemispheric activity during incorrect guesses.

The face is often an important source of identification with others, as it conveys significant social information (Nelson, 2001; Bruce & Young, 1986). It is known that early perceptual experience is crucial to the development of visual perception; this orienting

response undoubtedly encourages the rapid development of face-specific skills such as the ability to identify friendly others and relatively complex pre-verbal communication. There are, in fact, seven distinct types of information that we derive from seen faces: pictorial, structural, visually-derived semantic, identity-specific semantic, name, expression, and facial speech code (Bruce & Young, 1986). One of the most widely accepted theories of face perception argues that understanding faces involves several stages, from basic perceptual manipulations of the sensory and personal information (such as age, gender, or attractiveness) to the ability to recall meaningful details such as the person's name and relevant past experiences of the individual (Bruce & Young, 1986).

Dowsing – the supposed evocation of unconscious responses by use of ideomotor responses magnified by a pendulum – has long been espoused as a technique for helping individuals to utilize untrained psi abilities. Carpenter (1852) and, more recently, Spitz (1997) repeatedly described the pendulum's use in dowsing in terms of unconscious muscular movements. Eastwood (1993) suggested that the pendulum simply acts as an amplifier of subconscious ideomotor movements, so that they can be more easily detected. The question is whether a percipient is better able to locate the target paranormally when asked to imagine it (the "mental" way of receiving) or when asked merely to designate it directly with a simple motor response (the "motor" way of receiving). This influence, or emanation, was likened by Wasielawski (1929) to the "*rhabdic force*" that he believed bends the rod of the dowser.

Regarding the material inductor used by self-claimed psychics, there is a difference between face-to-face readings (a common procedure for most psychics) and using photographs in order to gain psi impressions. The first procedure conveys the psychic's impressions from several sensory cues. The second procedure conveys impressions from a "static" source of induction. In a previous study, Parra and Argibay (2008) compared a group of ordinary people (N = 74) with self-claimed psychics (N = 95) in order to determine if participants were capable of distinguishing between living and dead people from their photographs. Although no significant differences were found, when using a psychometry procedure with the photographs

and the written names of living and dead persons, photos tended to score higher ($p = .09$) than written names.

In a previous study, Parra and Argibay (2012) compared two procedures – mental and motor – using images of the faces of persons as targets, where, instead of using personal objects, they used photos from four adult volunteers who suffered from medically diagnosed diseases. Our results using both procedures were significantly above chance, which supported the claim that the mental procedure (a combination of impressions, feelings, intuition, and imagery) through iconic representation is psi conducive, most notably in a positive direction for the mental rather than the motor procedure.

Aims

Following on a number of previous experiments (Parra and Argibay, 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2012), ordinary people (non-psychics) were tested using photographs of the faces of people still alive or already dead. We wanted to explore two strategies for using and appraising the so-called token-object effect.

Two studies were performed. The aim again was to compare two procedures – mental and motor – using images of dead people as targets. In one iteration, photographs of the faces were used along with the nicknames of the person-targets. Specifically, we wanted to determine (1) if the participants scored differently with the two kinds of *stimulus* (photographs of living and dead people), and (2) if the whole sample of participants scored differently with the two kinds of *procedures* (mental and motor).

In the suicide condition, the same aims were carried out using images of people who had killed themselves – that is, images with high emotional (negative) charge – compared with “control” images of people who had died a natural death. According to certain traditions, for example, places where there have been suicides, murders, or wars are said to carry negative emotional “energy imprints.” Some psychics claim that, when individuals have suffered from prolonged negative experiences like depression connected to suicidal ideation, emotional turmoil, or bad health, their living spaces and photographs register these imprints and can affect those who subsequently come in contact with these objects or places (Kierulff &

Krippner, 2004). In fact, they claim to feel the highest levels of depression, abasement, or melancholy vis-à-vis the photographs of people who committed suicide, adding that these feelings are clearly different from those inspired by people who have died naturally (i.e., from illness).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 214 participants (74% female and 26% male), all of whom were well-educated and believed in psi. Their ages ranged from 18 to 83 ($M = 43.84$; $SD = 13.40$). Before taking part in the study, the majority of the participants reported personal experiences suggestive of psi, in the form of having experienced ESP feelings around sick people (58%), around past place events (50.8%), around “token” objects (34.7%), and around “token” photos (38.3%), when they filled out a questionnaire (one that had been used previously) about psychic experiences and abilities (Parra & Argibay, 2007a; 2007b).

Participants were recruited through media announcements in newspapers and an e-mail list. An announcement was also placed on a web page (www.alipsi.com.ar). The announcement provided a brief explanation of the test procedure and encouraged people to arrange an interview with us in order to obtain more information.

Participant Setting

Participants were tested by the first author (AP) and the second author (JCA) at the IPP headquarters in Buenos Aires, in two-hour sessions over a period of two years. We aimed to create a friendly and informal social atmosphere. The potential participants were tested individually (one at a time), for both types of procedural tasks, motor and mental.

Target Material

Three co-experimenters not present during the sessions with the participants selected four photographs of persons still alive and another four of persons already dead for the “living/dead” condition; they selected another four photographs of people who had committed suicide (two men and two women) and four of people who had died a natural death (same age and gender as the suicides) for the “suicide/non-suicide” condition. The people



featured in those photographs were unknown to JCA and AP. The person-targets and procedures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Age when the picture was taken.

Nickname	Age*	Target	Procedures
Marco M.	66	deceased	motor
Miguelina	70	alive ("control")	motor
Enrique P.	64	deceased	mental
Alborada M.	67	alive ("control")	mental
Enrique N.	68	deceased	motor
Magdalena V.	66	alive ("control")	motor
Roberto M.	59	deceased	mental
Josefina C.	78	alive ("control")	mental
Mabel P.	32	suicide	motor
Natalia C.	27	non-suicide ("control")	motor
Sergio P.	18	suicide	mental
Natalia S.	21	non-suicide ("control")	mental
Pablo C.	24	suicide	motor
Alicia D.	23	non-suicide ("control")	motor
Enrique G.	22	suicide	mental
Mercedes A.	27	non-suicide ("control")	mental

Security Measures

AP and JCA instructed the co-experimenters to select the photos from their own personal collections and other sources (especially the suicide ones). Before each session, they gave the photographs, in pairs and in a box, to JCA. To avoid direct contact with the original photos (e.g., their colors) and to preserve their print style, JCA scanned the photographs in black and white and then printed them on high-quality glossy paper. JCA also coded the pairs of photographs of living and dead people in a manner unknown to AP.

Using a list of random numbers, JCA selected the order in which the two pairs of photographs were to be rated by participants. For each pair, JCA put one photo of a living person and another of a dead person in an envelope. The order of photos inside the envelope was also counterbalanced. JCA did not enter the room during the testing, but remained in a non-adjacent, sound-attenuating room (The presence of JCA in the same room as the participants who were decoding the targets would obviously have allowed for sensory cues from JCA to the participants). The details of all these procedures were unknown to AP, so he remained unaware of which photographs corresponded to the living/dead targets. Once the experimental sessions had been completed for the whole group, AP handed the

photographs back to JCA, who recoded them as they were originally and then returned them to AP. This procedure was repeated for each group.

Following the security measures described above, an identical procedure, randomizing the order, was performed with the non-suicide photos, whose models had suffered natural deaths (e.g., from cancer, a cardiac attack, or non-intentional death). Due to the fact that more young people commit suicide than older people (Serfaty, 1998); in order to avoid sensory cues, we selected photographs of people who had died naturally of the same age and gender as those who had killed themselves. For the living/dead condition, the mean age of the living was 70.25 years, and of the dead, 64.25 years. For the suicide/non-suicide condition, the mean age of the suicides was 24.00 years and of the non-suicides, 24.5 years. We inserted a column with the age of each target into Fig.1. Both studies, with the photographs of living/dead people and suicide/non-suicide people (Studies 1 and 2), were also counterbalanced for each session. Because the same participants took part in both studies, we balanced the living/dead and suicide/non-suicide people when they arrived at the Institute for the experiment, so half of the participants started with Study 1, and the other half with Study 2.

Consent Form

Participants signed an appropriate consent form, in easily comprehensible language. The form specified that the person (1) had the capacity to consent, (2) had received all significant information about the procedure, (3) had freely and without undue influence expressed consent, and (4) had had the consent appropriately documented (Beahrs & Gutheil, 2001). Joining the group was voluntary, and all data collected were treated confidentially.

Task procedures

Once the participants had completed the answer sheets for each pair of trials, they passed the envelopes to AP, who handed them and the answer sheets back to JCA for recoding. This procedure was repeated for each participant. Participants were not given any trial-by-trial target feedback during the testing period. The trials were performed in a counterbalanced way, four using the "mental" procedure and four



using the “motor” procedure. Both procedures, mental and motor, were also counterbalanced:

1. *Mental procedure.* Experimenters asked the participants to “remain with eyes closed, quiet, waiting for intimations about the object during a few minutes.” Participants remained with their hands over the stimulus photograph, waiting to receive impressions. The aim of the mental procedure was to obtain a combination of impressions, feelings, intuitions, and imagery related to the target photograph. The yes/no responses of the participants were obtained by coding impressions, feelings, and intuitions in order to make sure that they would guess “dead” for the suicide/non-suicide part of the trial.
2. *Motor procedure.* Experimenters asked the participants to “remain with the pendulum in their hand (right or left), quiet, waiting for responses magnified by a physical device, namely, the pendulum.” Participants held the same pendulum between the thumb and second finger of the dominant hand, with about 7 inches of string to the point of the pendulum (a small ball of wood), which was situated about 1/4 inch (0.5 cm) above a stimulus photograph, waiting to receive impressions from the movement of the pendulum. For many of the participants, the yes/no responses were obtained by coding ten (or more) clockwise or counter-clockwise pendulum movements; they counted them themselves, in order to make sure that “living” or “dead,” respectively, would be the guess for the trial. Although the participants came to the experiments with their own beliefs about pendulum movements and dowsing practice, we left them free to count the pendulum movements and to decide the guess for each trial. They were told that

ten or more clockwise pendulum movements would be sufficient.

Experimental Procedure

Two rooms were required to conduct the experiment: one for AP and the participants, and one for JCA. The participants were seated in chairs and tested in groups. All were present at the same time when handling the photographs, but they operated individually; no interaction was allowed. AP handed out envelopes containing the pairs of photographs. Each pair was supplied with an answer sheet including written test instructions (also given verbally). Before the completion of the experiment, all participants underwent a nine-minute relaxation exercise using the voice of AP, which was played by digital equipment. The participants were informed that we were doing a test using material said to stimulate extrasensory abilities in people.

AP remained in the room as a silent observer throughout the testing period, which lasted about 40 minutes. Each participant received four pairs of photographs to be touched for impressions. Afterwards, the participants marked on their answer sheet and on the photo which test person they thought was still alive or already dead, or which was a suicide or non-suicide person, by writing down the code printed on the photograph. In the motor procedure, the participants did not mediate any mentations (i.e., verbal reports); they just checked “living” or “dead” for each target. Participants were told that one would be living and other dead.

Results

Living/Dead Condition

The living/dead condition examined the performance resulting from two procedures (mental and motor) using an approach featuring photographs of dead persons. Four trials were performed for the “mental” (psychometry) procedure and four for the “motor” (pendulum) procedure, so the MCE is $4 \times .5 = 2$ for each approach (Table 2).

Table 2. Psi hitting under motor and mental procedures.

Procedure	N	TP	MCE	Mean	SD	One-sample t-test	p	Effect size r
Mental	214	4	2	2.39	1.27	4.55	< .001 (1-t)	.21
Motor	214	4	2	1.98	1.38	0.14	.882 (2-t)	.0068



As shown in Table 2, the mental condition scored significantly above chance (Mean = 2.39, $t(213) = 4.55$; $p < .001$), but the motor condition scored *MCE* (Mean = 1.98, $t(213) = .14$, $p = .882$).

A second analysis was carried out to determine if participants using the mental and motor procedures scored differently with the two kinds of stimulus (living/dead persons). As shown in Table 2, the “mental” scored significantly higher than the “motor” procedure: “Mental” = 2.39 vs. “Motor” = 1.98, $t(213) = 2.95$, $p = .004$ (Table 3).

Table 3. Score differences between mental and motor procedures.

Procedure	Mental	Motor	t-test	p	Effect Size r
Mean (SD)	2.39 (1.10)	1.98 (1.04)	2.95	.004	.14

Suicide/Non-suicide Condition

The suicide/non-suicide condition also examined the results of two procedures (mental and motor) using an approach featuring photographs of persons who had committed suicide and others who had had a natural death (non-suicide). Four trials were performed for the “mental” (psychometry) procedure and four for the “motor” (pendulum) procedure, so the *MCE* is $4 \times .5 = 2$ per each procedure (Table 2, above).

As shown in Table 4, the two procedures scored marginally significant above chance: Mean “mental” = 2.14, $t(213) = 1.44$; $p < .075$; and Mean “motor” = 2.07, $t(213) = .85$, $p = .196$.

Table 4. Psi hitting under motor and mental procedure. ES; Effect size.

Procedure	N	TP	MCE	Mean	SD	One-sample t-test	p	ES r
Mental	214	4	2	2.14	1.42	1.44	.075 (1-t)	.06
Motor	214	4	2	2.07	1.35	0.85	.196 (2-t)	.04

A second analysis was carried out to determine if participants using the mental and motor procedures scored differently, but no significant differences were found them (Table 5).

Table 5. Score differences between mental and motor procedures.

Procedure	Mental	Motor	t-test for paired samples	p	Effect size
Mean (SD)	2.14 (1.10)	2.07 (1.04)	.47	.635	.02

Discussion

We conducted a number of trials of psychometry with a group of ordinary people. In both studies, the aim was to determine if the participants scored differently with the two kinds of procedures (mental and motor). In the first study, using photographs of living and dead persons, we conclude that it offers support for the claim that iconic representation through a mental procedure (psychometry) – implying mental (visual) representation of the person-target – is psi conducive. In this case we found a significant difference between the mental and motor procedures, notably in a positive direction for the psi impressions/imagery. In the suicide/non-suicide condition, however, which used photographs of persons who had committed suicide, we conclude that this experiment does not offer support for psychometry.

In the latter case, one tentative interpretation would be that the psi information was blocked by some psychological defense mechanism (i.e. an excessive fear of death, feelings of sadness) in response to a unpleasant association with the stimulus. It is possible that these negatively affectively associated suicide photographs had a neutralizing effect on the participants’ psi task. Many of them reported feeling a nervousness that suddenly overpowered them, followed by a flood of emotions. It might be that the nervousness was a form of discomfort, with the experimenter looking over their shoulders while they were taking the test. In fact, many participants told us that, after taking part in the suicide condition, they usually felt depressed or sad. This becomes very confusing, since some untrained participants may not understand what is happening to them and try to own those feelings by attempting the reason behind them. So it is not surprising that some participants become in some way depressed after the experiment that used photographs of people who had killed themselves, as happened after each session.

Finally, the obtained results call for a more phenomenological interpretation, namely, of the indications or ways in which the participants made their guesses. For example, a few participants pointed out that there were different symbolizations for the dead target persons, such as crosses, graves, coldness, darkness, profound silence and fear, among others.



Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the differences between individuals who had high scores compared to those who performed at a chance level, in terms of their perceptual characteristics or personality. The results of a number of questionnaires, which were administered for evaluating cognitive, perceptual, and personality features, are reported elsewhere.

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