

COMPARING A FREE-RESPONSE PSYCHOMETRY TEST  
WITH A FREE-RESPONSE VISUAL IMAGERY TEST  
FOR A NON-PSYCHIC SAMPLE

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*ABSTRACT*

Research into psychometry, the ability often claimed by psychics to obtain impressions about people from objects that they have owned, has mostly been limited to qualitative analysis because of problems in evaluating free-response material. To date, there has been little interest in exploring psychometry among ordinary people. In this study, a psychometry-based strategy for obtaining ESP hits, using personal objects, was assessed in conjunction with a non-psychometric strategy using picture stimuli in sealed envelopes. Four volunteers served as 'target persons' who carried identical objects with them for fifteen days. Seventy-one participants recruited through advertisements then obtained impressions from the token-object and from a picture sealed in an envelope. The target persons blind-scored the participants' statements. A similar procedure was employed in the non-psychometry condition, a free-response test using visual imagery. The non-psychometry condition resulted in higher scores than those obtained in the psychometry condition ( $p = 0.006$ ). We conclude that this experiment offers some support for the claim that stimulation of visual imagery is more productive of psi than the use of token objects, at least among ordinary people. It may well be that psychometry involves more complex cognitive processes than we have yet considered.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of parapsychological research, psychics have claimed the ability to obtain information about the owners and the past histories of objects by means other than drawing inferences from the observable physical attributes of the objects. This ability is often referred to as 'psychometry'<sup>1</sup> or 'retrocognition'. A less commonly used term (proposed by Richet, 1922) is 'pragmatic cryptaesthesia'. Such claims, supported almost exclusively by anecdotal material, have been difficult to evaluate to determine whether some form of extrasensory perception (ESP) needs to be invoked to account for the results.

Psychometry and precognition usually imply the involvement of the factor of time (past or future events). The term 'psychometry', coined in 1842 by Dr J. Rhodes Buchanan, denotes a type of knowledge, or ESP, in which a psychic or sensitive obtains impressions from a physical object as inductor or instrument (Buchanan, 1885), in contrast to other forms of ESP communication, which may appear more open to conventional explanations, such as the face-to-face 'psychic reading' by a psychic consultant or spiritualist medium (Bentley, 1961; Rogo, 1974; Somogyi, 1974).

Psychometry studies began around 1860. Professor William Denton described psychometry tests performed by his sister, Mrs Ana Cridge (Denton, 1863). F. W. H. Myers wrote that "the objects that have been in contact with organisms

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<sup>1</sup> The term also happens to be used for the theories and techniques of psychological testing.

preserve traces of them, and sometimes it seems as if the inorganic nature could become luminescent, so to speak, with the long history of its past" (Myers, 1903, p. 128).

References to influences originating in objects can be found in Mrs Sidgwick's discussion of Hodgson's reports on séances with Mrs Piper. The longest and most methodical studies carried out employing psychometry were performed by Dr Gustav Pagenstecher of Mexico City with Mrs Maria Reyes de Zierold (Pagenstecher, 1920, 1922, 1924, 1928; Roll, 1967), whose results were so impressive that Walter Franklin Prince, President of the American Society for Psychical Research, visited Mexico and published some additional reports on the subject (Prince, 1920, 1921, 1922). Dr J. Hettinger was awarded his PhD at the University of London for the experiments described in his book, *The Ultra Perceptive Faculty* (Hettinger, 1940), as well as for developing a programme for the investigation of psychometry (Hettinger, 1948).

W. G. Roll (1964, 2004) proposed one line of theory that may explain psychometry, theorising that people and objects generate a 'psi field' in much the same way as the Earth generates a gravitational field; people may also intermingle or impress their own psi fields on objects they have frequently handled. Thus a sensitive may be able to pick up traces from this field by handling an object, or to come into the direct psi field of the owner by proxy.

The first attempt to disprove the 'telepathy theory' of psychometry was made in experiments with the Polish clairvoyant Stefan Ossowiecki, who was to demonstrate his abilities at an international conference on psychical research in Warsaw in 1923 (Barrington, Stevenson & Weaver, 2005). As a test, Eric Dingwall, Research Officer of the Society for Psychical Research, prepared a picture of a bottle in a frame, dated it 22 August 1925, wrote a sentence on the back of the picture and sealed it in three separate envelopes, each within the other. This packet was sent to Warsaw. Dingwall remained in England, to counter the theory that Ossowiecki was telepathically tapping his mind. Ossowiecki was given the object and concentrated on impressions received from its contents. He was able to draw the bottle accurately, read the date, but not the month, and divine that there was writing on the drawing, but not what it said. This experiment is impressive but, since we now have considerable evidence of long-distance ESP, the test did not completely eliminate the possibility of telepathy.

W. H. C. Tenhaeff's major contribution to the study of psychometry was not on how it works, but rather on what causes it *not* to work (Tenhaeff, 1972). He believed that suggestive images could be derived from the object itself. For example, a knife could evoke scenes of a stabbing which might be wholly a fantasy suggested by common associations with the object. Secondly, telepathy from the owner of the object may put the psychic 'off the track'. Thirdly, since psychometrists tend to report that they try to capture psychically induced mental images which they then interpret, they may in fact misinterpret these images or even mistake non-psychic images for psychic ones.

Osty, a physician and later Director of the Institut Métapsychique International, discusses in his book, *Supernormal Faculties in Man* (1923), the remarkable results he obtained from several sensitives. Osty found that neither he nor his subjects were able to judge the accuracy of their impressions: "There

is only one way to assess their value—to write down the gist of the words spoken and compare this with the facts” (p.213). This makes sense if the images evoked are the subject’s own.

Most of these studies of psychometry have been case studies rather than quantitative experiments. Because of the problems in evaluating free-response material, it is very difficult to research this ability. However, researchers such as Tenhaeff, Osty and Roll have attempted to make some sense of all this material by undertaking a qualitative analysis of psychic readings. These studies, however, have concentrated on the nature of the object used during psychometry or on the abilities of the psychic.

Where parapsychologists have been interested in psychometry, they have concentrated their attention upon gifted subjects (mediums and sensitives), and there has been little interest in investigating psychometry among ordinary, non-professional people, as has been done with some success in the study of other forms of ESP; for example, with ganzfeld ESP research. Research with ordinary people might well reveal new aspects of the ESP process, such as the distribution of psychometry as an ability.

The ostensible ESP responses produced by mediums and sensitives are usually verbal utterances and, occasionally, drawings or enactments by which the subject attempts to describe some target person or situation. The assessment of probabilities by subjective judgment represents an uncertain and undesirable element in a statistical analysis. This type of material is much more difficult to appraise statistically than ESP card-guessing trials. Pratt (1969) replaced this with a procedure whereby the probability of each statement was determined by the group of target persons participating in the tests. In these experiments, where Mrs Eileen J. Garrett was the subject, there were fifteen target persons, who took turns to occupy a room adjacent to Mrs Garrett while she produced a series of statements after being provided with a target object. After all the sessions had been completed, the target persons studied all the statements and indicated for each one whether or not it applied to their own circumstances, but while being unaware of which statements had actually been made by Mrs Garrett when they had been the person in the next room. On the basis of these reports, it could be determined which statements were true for one, two, three, four, or more, of the target persons, and they could be assigned probability values accordingly. Using Fisher’s method for combining probabilities, Pratt then arrived at a total result.

We designed a series of psychometry-based experiments which allowed us to explore new strategies for using and appraising the effect of using a token object or something else, both individually and in groups. ESP hits were compared in order to assess psychometric versus non-psychometric procedures with ordinary people. In this study, the aim was to explore whether there is a significant difference between the outcomes of ESP tests using objects—the ‘token object’ effect—and using images sealed in envelopes as stimuli. Another purpose was to publish a full description of the research design employed, in the hope that it might be of value to other researchers. The experiment was also meant to illustrate how parapsychological testing procedures may be adapted to the particular needs and abilities of the subject sample—adaptations which, unfortunately, are rare in contemporary parapsychological research

(for some examples of the use of psychometry in the field of crime solution, see Reiser & Klyver, 1982; Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe & Wagner, 1979; Wiseman, West & Stemman, 1998).

The theoretical basis of the present experiments is Roll's (1964) 'psi field' theory: that events in the history of an object leave traces in its psi field; that these traces constitute stored information which is retrievable under the right conditions by certain sensitives, using some form of ESP; and that these traces give an object 'psychic distinctiveness' to a sensitive in direct proportion to the distinctiveness and intensity of the persons (owners) and events which have been associated with the object's history. Informal observations of some sensitives and the 'folklore' of psychical research suggest that photographs in particular have traces associated with the persons or events depicted in them. The nature of psi fields, and the mechanism whereby information is retrieved from them, will not, however, be dealt with here.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 71 participants (63.4% females and 36.6% males) who were all well-educated and believed in psi. The age range was 18 to 77 years ( $M = 46.44$ ;  $SD = 14.03$ ). Each participant undertook two tests, one using a token-object and the other using photographs. The majority of the participants reported previous personal experiences suggestive of psi, such as ESP sensations around sick people (56%) or at sites of historical events (50.8%), or with token-objects (34.7%), unfamiliar people (69.4%) or token-photos (38.3%). Seventy-eight per cent of the participants had had some training in meditation or other techniques involving an internal focus of attention.

Participants were recruited by media advertisements and a mailing list. An advertisement was also published on the internet (<http://www.alipsi.com.ar>). The advertisements contained a brief explanation of the ESP test procedure and encouraged potential participants to contact us for an interview in order to receive more information.

### *Localisation*

The participants met once a week, during two-hour workshops organized at the Institute of Paranormal Psychology (IPP) in Buenos Aires. In total, meetings of fourteen separate groups were conducted, free of charge, by the authors (AP and JCA) over a period of two years. Each group comprised 5–10 participants. The participants were given some preliminary information about the tests. The authors, AP and JCA, aimed to create a friendly and informal social atmosphere, engaging in conversation with the participants before the tests. All the participants worked their way through personality and psychological inventories and questionnaires, the results of which will be published elsewhere. And, as a part of the recruiting procedure, the participants completed Consent Forms.

### *Test Instructions*

*Instructions to the Participants.* The experiment was explained to the participants by telling them that two different ESP tests were being undertaken,

with two types of psi-stimulus: one using a physical object (psychometry condition), and the other using pictures or photographs (non-psychometry condition). Participants were informed that both situations could stimulate psychic abilities in people, and that the aim of this research was to explore the two situations in one project, so that their relative importance could be evaluated. Before the start of any session, under either condition, the participant underwent a 9-minute relaxation exercise, which employed progressive autogenic phrases (Jacobson, 1974) read by one of the authors (AP). The order in which the psychometry and non-psychometry conditions were tested was counterbalanced among the groups of participants.

*Instructions to the Target Persons.* The experiment was explained to the target persons. These were four adult volunteers, two males and two females, who led ordinary lives. None of them experienced any extraordinary events (that we know about) during the course of the experimental series. On Day 1 they were each given a leather and metal key ring, which had been acquired from a gift shop, and instructed to carry this with them for fifteen days; on Day 16, they returned this object in a box to AP.

#### *Psychometry Condition*

*Test Procedure.* The four token-objects to be given to the target persons were randomly selected from a pool of a hundred identical ones and coded as 1–4 by AP. This procedure was blind for JCA, who remained unaware of the identities of the target persons. After Day 16, AP returned the objects to JCA, who recoded them randomly 1–4. This procedure was also blind for AP. Before the experimental sessions, JCA delivered the token-objects to AP in a small box, and AP, who was in contact with every participant during the experimental session, was kept unaware of the numbers by which JCA had recoded the token-objects. Also, JCA did not enter the test room during the experiment, but stayed in a non-adjacent, sound-proof room. Once the experimental session was over, AP returned the token-objects to JCA, who recoded them again as he had found them before the test session. JCA and AP made sure that their paper-and-pencil records were kept isolated and sensory-cue proof during the whole randomization procedure and the handling procedure for the token-objects.

Two rooms were necessary for this test procedure; one for AP and the participants, and the other for JCA. The participant remained seated on a chair. AP delivered the 'token-object' to the participant in a little box. The instructions for the participants during the test were simple: to remain quiet with their eyes closed, and wait for a few minutes for mental images to appear. AP remained silent, as an observer, in the room throughout the testing period, which lasted about 60 minutes. The participants took the token objects in their hands and waited for mental images to appear, holding them there for periods lasting between 23 seconds and 2 minutes. Once they felt that they had obtained information about the target persons through ESP, they wrote down their impressions on a blank form. Each participant completed four trials, so four forms were used by each participant. When they had completed their four trials, they signed each form individually, and AP handed the boxes and the forms back to JCA for coding. JCA put the forms into individual envelopes and then put these into one per participant before the judging procedure. No

information was given about the target persons, who remained unidentified, and participants were not given any trial-by-trial feedback on the target persons' scores during the experimental session. The total scores were revealed at the end of the workshop series.

*Judging Procedure.* AP gave the target persons the forms that the participants had filled in. The target persons were instructed to rank each statement carefully, according to how they considered it matched their own psychological, physical, or other trait described by the participants, assigning a rank of '1' to the description that they felt corresponded most to their own circumstances, and a score of '4' to the one that corresponded least. The target persons were also instructed to assign a score of 4 if the participant had not written any statement on the form, but in fact no such form was returned. The number of statements on the forms ranged from five to fifteen. The target persons did not know who the participants were, but they knew that the statements on one form in every four corresponded to their own token objects. They scored the participants' statements blindly; in other words, they were also unaware of which statement had been made by which participant. When the target persons had completed the scoring procedure, AP put all the forms in envelopes, which he sealed with wax.

#### *Non-Psychometry Condition*

*Test Procedure.* Target pictures were randomly selected from a pool of two thousand well-differentiated images with various themes, including animals, people making things, landscapes and other scenes, religious symbols, caricatures and humorous cartoons. In a double-blind procedure, the images were recorded and selected prior to the experiment by a co-experimenter, JV. Working at home, JV selected four pictures, of which two were then randomly chosen to serve as target pictures. They were printed on glossy paper (from a CD 'clip art' file). Before the experimental session, the target pictures were heavily screened by enclosing them between opaque materials (black cardboard), pressed with two posterboards to avoid marks on the paper print-out, and then put in an envelope, which JV closed and sealed with wax. JV then delivered the envelopes to JCA. Prior to each session, JCA gave AP the envelopes containing the two target pictures for the participant. AP, who was in contact with the participant during the experimental session, did not know which target pictures were in the envelope. JCA and JV kept their paper-and-pencil records isolated. Once the target selection records had been made, they were locked away at a time when the experimenter was out of the room. This procedure was employed for five reasons: (1) the pictures were easily categorized; (2) to facilitate the randomization procedure; (3) target pictures were characterized by their diversity and visual valence to serve as good targets for an ESP experiment; (4) to avoid any sensory (visual) cues; and (5) to avoid any target manipulation, mainly during the target-viewing and judgement procedures.

The participant remained seated in a chair, and AP gave him or her the sealed envelope with the target-picture. The instructions given to the participants during the test were the same as in the psychometry condition: to remain quiet with their eyes closed, and to wait for a few minutes for mental

images to appear. AP remained silent in the room, observing, throughout the experimental session. Two forms were used for each participant. Once the participant had completed the trials, AP gave the envelopes back to JCA for coding. Participants were not given any trial-by-trial target feedback of the target's identity until the debriefing session at the end of the workshop series.

*Judging Procedure.* AP handed the envelopes and the forms to JCA, who opened all the envelopes and sorted the target pictures into sets of four random sequences, re-enclosing them in envelopes and then giving them back to AP for distribution to the participants, who looked at the four pictures in the set, which now comprised the target and three decoys. The participants assessed each picture as though it were the actual target, describing any similarities they perceived between it and their written reports. A score of 1 was assigned to the picture the participant judged as best corresponding to his or her reported experience; a score of 4 was given to the one the participant felt matched it least. The forms were signed individually by the participants. The distribution of the target picture among the three decoys was also randomized, to make sure that neither AP nor the participant knew the position of any image and to avoid place preference during the judging procedure. There was no duplicate of the target set for the judging, which might have involved the target being handled separately from the decoys.

#### *Target Randomization*

Random numbers were generated by a web-based program (<http://www.randomizer.org>) for both kinds of targets, pictures and token-objects. Randomization procedures were run before each experimental session. The order of the target pictures within the target set, as presented to the judge, was also randomized.

## RESULTS

The non-psychometry condition (i.e. with pictures as ESP targets) yielded more hits than the psychometry condition (with a token-object as the ESP target): 34% as against 22.2%, where MCE = 25%; see Table 1). The difference between the target conditions (non-psychometry versus psychometry) was also significant ( $z = 2.65$ ,  $p = 0.008$ , two-tailed).

Table 1

*Comparing the number (and proportion) of direct hits for psychometry and non-psychometry trials (N = 71)*

TRIAL TYPE	WHETHER HITS		TOTAL	z-score*	<i>p</i> (1-tailed)
	YES	NO			
Psychometry	63 (22.2%)	221 (77.8%)	284	-1.03	n.s.
Non-psychometry	49 (34.5%)	93 (65.5%)	142	2.52	0.006

\* Correction for continuity was applied.

## DISCUSSION

In this experimental series two different types of target were used: a psychometry procedure with 'token-objects' and an ESP test with pictures sealed in envelopes. In both cases a free-response procedure was adopted. Our conclusion from this experiment is that it offers some support for the claim that stimulation of visual imagery using pictures is a viable mode for psi, since we found a significant difference between the psychometry (token-object) and the non-psychometry (picture) condition, in a positive direction for the picture condition ( $p = 0.008$ ).

Psi seems to work better in the picture condition than in the token object condition. It may be that a visual condition without a personal object is better suited to the way ESP functions. Furthermore, a visual condition possibly generates more motivation than the 'token object' condition, and this could facilitate the psi task. The non-psychometry (picture) condition probably favours psi because it is conceptually a simpler process. Also, a substantial number of the participants had had some training in meditation or other techniques involving psychic abilities and/or internal focus of attention. However, when recording their impressions, some of the participants had difficulty expressing feelings or sensations, or in forming an impression of the target person (through imagery or any extrasensorial way), or they experienced psychological resistance (fear of psi). Other problems might have arisen from the function of the target persons as judges, such as misinterpretation of the participants' statements.

Taking all this into consideration, we suspect that anomalous cognition by psychometry is a more complex cognitive process than we had considered it to be. It seems to depend not only on the inductor object, but on the particular personality which has impressed it. Although it seems to be a mixture of both clairvoyance and telepathy, we had designed a test with the aim of avoiding a 'clairvoyance' and 'telepathy' hypothesis. Perhaps a psychometry procedure needs the support of a mind-to-mind connection to work better, or some kind of link between the target person, the token-object and the receiver, as is present in a psychometry session with a professional psychic. The psi link could be psychological (i.e. more emotional), physical (i.e. a face-to-face situation) or both.

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