

COMPARING PSYCHICS AND NON-PSYCHICS THROUGH
A 'TOKEN-OBJECT' FORCED-CHOICE ESP TEST

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ABSTRACT

Psychometry is the process by which a psychic or sensitive claims to be able to receive impressions about a person or event using a 'token-object' as inductor or instrument. In this study we investigated whether there were significant differences between 'psychic' and 'non-psychic' people — as measured on an extrasensorial experiences and abilities questionnaire — in their ability to gain accurate impressions using a token object. Seventy-four participants (age range 18–78; $M = 48.23$; $SD = 14.53$) were recruited through media advertisements. The experimenters employed blind coding and recoding procedures, and let the participants touch the objects to obtain impressions. Six trials were completed. Participants were categorised as either psychic, 'ESP skilled' ($N = 44$), or non-psychic, 'ESP experients' ($N = 30$). The ESP skilled group scored higher psi-hitting than the ESP experients group, who scored at the level of mean chance expectation. The difference between groups was significant ($z = 1.73$; $p = 0.041$, one-tailed). It can be concluded that those participants claiming an ESP ability tended to obtain higher psi-hitting in the forced-choice response test (using a token-object) than those claiming only ESP experiences. Further data analysis revealed high variability between the two groups: participants who claimed ESP abilities generally obtained higher psi-hitting, whereas, among the participants who claimed ESP experiences, some scored high psi-hitting, others high psi-missing.

INTRODUCTION

According to Thalbourne (1982), a psychic is someone who possesses some kind of psi ability to a relatively high degree. Boerenkamp (1986) suggests that psychics be defined as persons who believe themselves able to obtain paranormal impressions at will. Despite the fact that psychics were a focus of interest from the beginning of psychical research in the 1880s, the possibilities for meaningful scientific research with them have been limited by the many difficulties associated with studies involving verbal free-response material. For example, rhetorical statements (i.e. statements intended to elicit a verbal response) may be made to a sitter even when the psychic has been informed that the sitter was not acquainted with the target person. It appeared that psychics were accustomed to receiving feedback on a considerable number of items, and they simply ignored the fact that the sitter was unacquainted with the target person, making rhetorical statements, including statements in the form of advice about favourable, neutral or unfavourable states of affairs.

There are currently many active psychics, and it is our experience that people frequently want to know from parapsychologists whether or not they should consult such persons — and if they do, what they might expect and how they might evaluate the statements made to them by the psychic. Many of these psychics use specific methods, such as mediumship (contact with spirits) or psychometry. Psychometry is an anomalous cognition system for psi-detection (Buchanan, 1885; Richet, 1922). Some psychics have claimed the

ability to obtain 'impressions' from objects, these impressions constituting information about the owners and past histories of the objects, additional to what can be inferred from their observable physical properties.

A theoretical framework for psychometry was outlined by William G. Roll (1964), who postulated that every material object possesses a 'psi field'; that events in the history of the 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 the events that have been associated with the object's history.

Normally in studies with psychics the aim is to demonstrate that psychics are able to provide more information about target persons than can be expected by chance. However, in most studies, the experience psychics have in dealing with persons unknown to them cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor when positive results are obtained. We found a number of reports on quantitatively evaluated studies of psychics, ranging from the evaluation of one session to studies involving many years and hundreds of sessions, with psychics such as G. Croiset (Attevelt, 1957; Bender, 1981), E. Garrett (Herbert, 1937), C. A. Liaros (Dean, 1972), W. Elliott (Saltmarsh, 1929), C. Chapman (Schmeidler, 1958), P. Hurkos (Tart & Smith, 1968), R. Warburton (Musso, 1954), M. A. Ravagnan (Fernández, 1963), E. C. Luck (Canavesio, 1948), besides the investigation of statements made by psychics and their strategies for success. These suggested to us that the proper question in an investigation such as the present one—and the only one of practical use—is not whether psychics are able to do better than chance, but whether psychics are able to do better than non-psychics of comparable experience in dealing with target persons.

Boerenkamp (1985a, 1985b, 1985c), for example, studied the effects of certain variables on the content of sessions with psychics, such as (1) the type of inductor in non-feedback conditions, (2) the existence of a target person, (3) the social context in which the psychic communicates his or her impressions, and (4) the actual presence of the target person. Boerenkamp found that the number of statements is directly related to the amount of information available to the psychic. Experimental manipulations scarcely affect the individual preference of psychics for sessions of a certain length. None of the variables studied had a significant influence on the number of statements with positive paranormal value; that is, spontaneous and specific statements which are correct. Only about 1% of all statements seem to be appropriate, which is no more than might be expected by chance. In view of the judging procedures applied, the low percentage does not support a paranormal interpretation. These results, combined with the results in the first subgroup of the experimental series, indicate that experiments with psychics are no more promising than other methods employed in parapsychology.

The two conditions under which the psychics are provided with information, either minimal (just one object from a target person and no feedback), or maximal (the target person being present and providing feedback), have a considerable influence on the structure of the behaviour of the psychics, as

compared with standard conditions (i.e. using a photograph and an object from the target person, and feedback given from a person related to the target person). Among other things, if the psychics are provided with minimal information, the number of statements involving advice and the number of statements preceded by a period of silence both increase; if the psychics get maximal information, the number of statements about the future increases, while the number of statements involving advice decreases; the number of statements preceded by a period of silence decreases, but the number of rhetorical statements increases (see Boerenkamp & Schouten, 1983; Boerenkamp, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c).

In this paper, we use the term psychic to refer to (paranormal) abilities to acquire information not known by normal means at the time. We designed a series of psychometry-based experimental studies (see also Parra & Argibay, 2007—in this issue), which allowed us to explore new strategies for using and appraising the ‘token-object’ effect, both individually and in groups. In this case, the aim was to test whether there is a significant difference between psychic and non-psychic people using objects.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 74 participants who believed in psi (70.3% females, 29.7% males; mean age = 48.23, $SD = 14.53$, range 18–78). Some socio-demographical variables are: high school education 49%, Catholic 78%, married 40%, male professionals 17.5% and housewives 16%. More than a third (38%) indicated being very spiritual.

Each participant completed two tests, using a token-object and photographs. Personal experiences suggestive of psi were reported by the majority of the subjects, such as ESP ‘feelings’ around sick people (56%), around sites of historical events (50.8%), around token-objects (34.7%), around unfamiliar people (69.4%), and around token-photographs (38.3%). Seventy-eight percent of the participants had had some training in meditation or other techniques involving internal focus of attention.

Participants were recruited by media advertisements and the mailing list of the Institute of Paranormal Psychology in Buenos Aires. An advert was also placed on the internet (<http://www.alipsi.com.ar>). The advert contained a brief explanation of the ESP test procedure and encouraged all prospective participants to contact us for an interview in order to receive more information about the topic.

Categorisation Procedure

Inspired by other paranormal experience questionnaires (*Psychic Experiences Scale*—Richards, 1990; and *The Anomalous Experiences Inventory*—Gallagher, Kumar, & Pekala, 1994), we devised a 17-item self-report questionnaire. Items included three factors: (a) belief in psi; (b) extrasensory experiences (telepathy, ESP dreams, anomalous cognition events, clairvoyance, paranormal/anomalous feelings or impressions experienced at unfamiliar places or when touching things, and aura visions); (c) extrasensory abilities (similar to b, but excluding ESP dreams). Belief in psi (Items 1.1 to 1.6, to be marked as Yes/No) was very

high for all items on the scale (98.4% responded affirmatively to all items of ESP Belief); Questions 2.1 to 3.5 asked about the frequency of each experience, from 'never', 'once', or 'sometimes' to 'almost always'. We used different formats for Factor 1 and for Factors 2 and 3, in order to split the participant group into psi believers and non-believers, and to differentiate psi believers who reported a number of psychic experiences. Subjects who did not give a positive indication for any item at all for Factors 2 and 3 (i.e. people who believe in ESP, but have not experienced it) were excluded; but since there were very few participants who did not report any psi experiences at all, we did not have a sample with enough cases to make a viable comparison group. Extrasensory experiences were defined as those personal experiences which the participant deemed to be psychic; that is, experiences such as extrasensory perception, mind-to-mind communication, or any form of precognition and knowledge of the future or past by paranormal means. The sample was divided into two groups, (1) ESP experients, and (2) ESP skilled, according to the following criteria:—

- 'ESP experients' group ($N = 30$, 37.15%). Participants who indicated 'sometimes' on *at least* one item of the ESP Experience factor, *or* indicated 'once' on *at least* three items of the ESP Experience factor, *or* indicated 'once' on one or two items of the ESP Ability factor.
- 'ESP skilled' group ($N = 44$, 62.85%). Participants who indicated 'sometimes' on *at least* one of the five items of the ESP Ability factor, *or* who indicated 'once' on *at least* three items of the ESP Ability factor.

Basically, we did not find any specific instruments in the literature designed for assessing individual cases of psychometry as a spontaneous psi experience. Many people report psychometry-related psi experiences, such as face-to-face telepathy when meeting a person for the first time, vivid impressions when in a previously unknown place, without any clue that would allow deducing something about an event that occurred there, receiving anomalous information from an object, or other psychic experiences. We developed a number of items referring to such experiences, because in their biographies many psychics report having experienced a number of spontaneous cases before they became psychics and learned to use their psychic abilities (for a review, see Kierulff & Krippner, 2004). These kinds of intuitive or psychic impressions constitute some indicators for distinguishing psi from pseudo-psi impressions (i.e. fantasy) about the target persons. The items also provide descriptions of the content of sessions, when psychics apply their assumed psi abilities, under conditions which as much as possible resemble the everyday circumstances of sessions with clients (Boerenkamp, 1985a). Our study consists of a number of series of sessions with a group of psychics and non-psychics (divided according to the items of the questionnaire) in which the participants conveyed their impressions about persons unfamiliar to them. The statistical rationale for the three factors is that these factors build on theoretical expectations. Inter-correlations between Factors 2 and 3, before the division into groups, were highly significant.

Localisation

Over a period of two years, AP and JCA conducted free-of-charge bi-monthly workshops with fourteen separate groups of the recruited participants. Each group consisted of between 5 and 10 participants. Participants also took part

in weekly two-hour workshop activities. The participants were given some introductory information about the test series. AP and JCA aimed to create a friendly and informal social atmosphere, engaging in conversation with the participants before the test.

Test Instructions

Instructions to the Participants. The procedure of the experiment was explained to the participants. We told them that we were doing an ESP test in which we used an object, and that the test can stimulate psychic abilities in people. Before commencing any session, each participant underwent a 9-minute relaxation exercise, which included progressive autogenic phrases using the voice of one of the authors (AP).

Instructions to the Target Persons. The experiment was explained to the target persons. These were six adult volunteers, three males and three females, who led ordinary lives and were not publicly known. 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. The procedure was repeated with all groups.

Psychometry Procedure

The six token-objects to be given to the target persons were randomly selected from a pool of a hundred identical ones and coded as 1–6 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 1–6. 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 each participant during the test were simple: AP asked him or her to "remain quiet with your eyes closed, and wait for a few minutes for mental images to appear". AP remained in the room, silently observing, throughout the experimental session, which typically lasted 60 minutes. Each participant received six objects to be 'touched' or held in their hands. Afterwards, the participant marked four items on a form, such as (1) gender, (2) age, (3) height, and (4) weight of each target person. Each item was presented in terms of a two-way response so that the hit rate could be easily quantified ($p = 0.5$). Items were randomized on the form and randomized for all participants. A form with six trials was used for each participant.

Once the participants had completed both forms, AP gave back the boxes and the forms to JCA for coding. JCA put the forms of the group participants in envelopes before the judging procedure. The forms were individually signed by the participants. No information was given about the target persons, who remained anonymous, and participants were not given any trial-by-trial feedback about the target person's data during the experimental session. The total scores were returned at the end of the workshop series. As a part of the recruiting procedure, the participants had filled in a Consent Form.

RESULTS

This experimental study compared two groups ('psychics' and 'non-psychics') using a psychometry procedure with a token-object in a forced-choice response test. We can see from Table 1 that there was some support for the prediction that the psychic group (ESP skilled) would score higher psi-hitting than the non-psychic group (ESP experients), who in fact scored at the level of mean chance expectation (MCE). We found a significant difference between the clusters, ESP skilled and ESP experients, in a positive direction for the ESP skilled ($z = 1.73$; $p = 0.041$, one-tailed).

Table 1
Number of Hits (and Percentage Hit Rate) for Psychometry Impressions Produced by ESP Skilled and ESP Experients

| | WHETHER HITS | | TOTAL | z-score* | p (1-tailed) |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------|----------|-----------------|
| | YES | NO | | | |
| ESP Skilled | 145 (54.92%) | 119 (45.07%) | 264 | 1.54 | 0.06 |
| ESP Experients | 83 (46.11%) | 97 (53.88%) | 180 | -97 | n.s. |

* Yates's correction for continuity was applied.

An additional analysis was performed in order to show the difference between the two groups (see Table 2).

Table 2
Experimental Variability and Theoretical Variability: Differences Between the Two Groups

| | Experimental variability | Theoretical variability | p* |
|----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------|
| ESP Skilled | 43 | 66 | 0.65 |
| ESP Experients | 61 | 45 | 1.36 |

The difference between the groups was also significant ($F = 2.10$, $p < 0.05$, two-tailed). There is some support for the claim that ESP Experients have

higher variability than the ESP Skilled. Although neither of the two groups obtained independently significant results compared with MCE, the ESP Experiences group showed the higher experimental variability ($p < 0.05$), while the ESP Skilled group showed experimental variability at the level of MCE. This means there were subjects who obtained scores above chance level, while others—even when they obtained results which deviated from those expected by chance—went in the opposite direction, that is, below MCE.

DISCUSSION

It can be concluded that those participants who claimed to have ESP skills tended to score greater psi-hitting in the forced-choice response test (through the 'token-object effect') than those who claimed only ESP experiences and no ESP skills or abilities at all. Analysis of both clusters separately, although neither showed significant psi-hitting, revealed that participants who claimed no ESP skill scored close to MCE.

Data analysis also revealed high variability differences between the two groups. Participants who claimed spontaneous psi experiences (but no ability over them) had the highest variability in their ESP scores. The difference between the two groups could be due to the fact that those participants who claimed ESP skills were also better at interpreting available psi information than the ESP experiences, whereas some participants who claimed ESP experiences tended to score the greatest psi-hitting. An interpretation of the latter could be that these participants 'decoded' the psi information accurately while other participants decoded it inadequately, obtaining the highest psi-missing scores. In other words, participants who claimed ESP abilities supposedly achieved better results by adequately interpreting the 'psi signals'. Only some of the participants who claimed ESP experiences obtained high psi-hitting scores, whereas others obtained high psi-missing, perhaps due to a lack of proper psi-training with their clients, or as a consequence of lacking personal understanding of their own psi experiences, or insufficient openness to such experiences.

Historically, most research on people who claim to be psychics has yielded non-significant results. Even with a star subject such as Croiset, most experiments failed, and the successful ones rarely exceeded the 0.01 significance level. In comparison with laboratory research with mainly unselected subjects, such as the Ganzfeld studies, studies of psychic claimants are clearly less successful. Although, in principle, anyone may call himself or herself a psychic, with few exceptions the material surveyed is based on work with well-known psychics.

This result is clearly at variance with the popular image of the abilities of psychics. If that image is not based on demonstrable ESP abilities, as the data suggest, then the question remains as to why so many people are impressed by what psychics do. This image is based mainly on a few spectacular cases, often rather selectively and incompletely reported by the media. The sometimes year-long studies of psychics and their failures are rarely mentioned. The popular image of the psychic, at least in Argentina, is often based on a few highly publicized cases concerning a small number of 'star' psychics, together with the endless and often distorted repetition of these few cases in popular TV

programmes (such as *Infito*). This image is probably reinforced by people's personal experiences when consulting a psychic (see Roe, 1998).

Although the psychic acts as if there were a clear switch from normal to paranormal, in both cases mainly normal psychological processes seem to be involved in the psychic-client interaction. It might well be that occasionally paranormal elements emerge. But from the moment the statements of the psychic are labelled paranormal, the nature of the interaction changes. The psychic has to establish authority by providing information which, according to the client, he or she cannot know by normal means. In order to do this, the information has to be verifiable. The psychic therefore rarely confines him- or herself to just telling the client what he or she came for. The bulk of the interaction consists of statements and feedback about matters familiar to the client. In addition, there is another important reason for spending time on matters the client already knows: it serves as an important source for generating feedback; that is, information from the client. This enables the psychic to form an understanding of the background of the problem. Therefore, most statements of psychics are of a rhetorical or open-ended nature. They are not just statements, but rather they are formulated in such a way as to stimulate feedback.

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- 2.4 While being in contact with an object, have you had vivid impressions about that object (or its owner), without having any previous knowledge or any clue that would allow deducing something about that object?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*
- 2.5 When meeting a person for the first time, have you had any vivid impressions about that person, without previous knowledge about that person or any clue that would permit deducing something about that person?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*
- 2.6 Have you had the visual perception of a light or lights, or energy fields around the body of a person, which—as far as you were able to determine—were not due to normal or natural causes?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*

3. ESP ABILITY

- 3.1 Have you been, or are you, able to control your mind to mentally pick up the thoughts or feelings of another person, by only wishing or wanting to do so?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*
- 3.2 Have you been, or are you, able to control your mind, while being in a house or any other place, to mentally pick up an event that happened there, by only wishing or wanting to do so?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*
- 3.3 Have you been, or are you, able to control your mind, while being in contact with an object, to pick up vivid impressions of that object (or its owner) by only wishing or wanting to do so?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*
- 3.4 Have you been, or are you, able to control your mind, when meeting a person for the first time, to pick up vivid impressions about that person, by only wishing or wanting to do so?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*
- 3.5 Have you been, or are you, able to control your mind to pick up a light or lights, or energy fields around the body of a person by only wishing or wanting to do so?
- No, never* *Yes, once* *Yes, sometimes* *Yes, almost always*

Thank you for answering this questionnaire.