

RESEARCH BRIEF:
AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY WITH ORDINARY PEOPLE FOR
TESTING 'SACRED' OBJECTS THROUGH PSI DETECTION

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'psychometry' refers to a type of anomalous cognition (or ESP) which permits a psychic or 'sensitive' to receive impressions using a physical object as an inductor or instrument for information (Bentley, 1961; Rogo, 1974). This confers some methodological advantages over a face-to-face 'psychic reading' performed by a psychic consultant or through control spirits by spiritualist mediums in which some sensory channels may be available to allow fraud or unwitting self-deception (Hyman, 1977, 1981; Roe, 1991; but see also the work of Schwartz, 2002, and Robertson & Roy, 2001).

A quantitative evaluation of the statements of a psychic aims to determine whether these statements are correct more often than can be expected by chance. Although a quantitative evaluation is the best way to obtain an objective assessment of the value of the psychic's impressions, it provides only a limited view of the data. Relationships between apparently unrelated statements, for instance of an emotional nature, can provide a very apt characterization of the target person or the situation, but might not lend themselves well to an objective quantitative analysis.

We use the term 'psychic' in this paper with reference to the paranormal activity of providing information not known at the time and not obtainable by normal means. Psychometry exemplifies this activity and has been defined as an anomalous cognition system for psi-detection (Buchanan, 1885; Richet, 1922). Normally in studies with psychics, the aim is to demonstrate that they are able to provide better information about a specific target than can be expected by chance. However, in our view, the proper question, 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 objects.

The main advantage of experimental research is that in principle the activities of the psychic are under control and that all statements and verbal interactions can be recorded. Even then it is often not easy to assess the value of the statements. When a client interacts with a psychic and comments on the psychic's statements these comments can provide additional information that should be taken into account when evaluating subsequent statements. For quantitative analysis this constitutes such a problem that, as a rule in experiments, such comments are excluded. Therefore these experimental studies are not entirely representative of the conditions under which a psychic normally works.

The aim of a quantitative evaluation of the statements of a psychic is to establish whether these statements are more often correct than expected by chance. A qualitative analysis, based on a subjective interpretation of the

material, might often be more meaningful. However, a significant outcome of a quantitative analysis can be considered as a requirement which has to be fulfilled before a qualitative analysis is allowed. Thus only after it has been demonstrated quantitatively that the statements are especially applicable to the target person does further interpretation in a qualitative and psychological sense seem warranted.

A series of psychometry-based experimental sessions were designed to address these issues. We wanted to explore some strategies for using and appraising the so-called 'token-object effect' (Parra & Argibay, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008). In these studies the majority of participants reported personal experiences suggestive of psi, such as ESP 'feelings' around sick people (56%), around past place events (50.8%), around 'token' objects (34.7%), around unknown people (69.4%), and around '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. Based on these responses we categorized participants as either 'psychics', who claimed personal psi ability, or 'non-psychics', who reported anomalous experiences but claimed no consistent ability.

Weekly two-hour workshops were run at the IPP during which participants initially received some information about the series of tests and completed personality and psychological inventories and questionnaires. They were informed that the psychometry procedure could help stimulate psychic abilities in people during meditative states induced by relaxation exercises that included progressive autogenic phrases.

Four target persons, two males and two females, were each provided with identical key rings made of leather and metal, which they then carried with them about their person so that a psychic connection to the object might develop for participants to pick up on. These four token objects were coded, such that the second experimenter (JCA) and the target persons remained blind to the codes. JCA and the first author (AP) kept paper-and-pencil records isolated, sensory-cues proof during all randomization procedure and handling procedure of the token-objects. AP delivered the token-objects in little boxes to the participants, who remained with eyes closed, quiet, waiting for a few minutes for mentations about the owner of the object. Each participant completed four trials, touching each of the target objects, and recorded his or her impressions. These impressions were given to the target persons, who judged each statement for its applicability to them. Statements were presented in such a way that the judges would not be able to identify which participant had written which statement.

The results of that study showed that the 'psychics' group scored higher psi-hitting than the 'non-psychics group', who scored at the level of mean chance expectation. The difference between groups was significant ($z = 1.73$; $p = 0.04$, one-tailed). Further data analysis revealed differences in variability between the two groups: participants who claimed ESP abilities generally obtained higher psi-hitting; among the participants who claimed ESP experiences but not ability, some scored high psi-hitting, others high psi-missing. A second experiment (Parra & Argibay, 2007b) compared psychometry using objects against performance on visual targets (pictures), using a similar method to

that described above. The non-psychometry condition ($p = 0.005$) resulted in higher scores than those obtained in the psychometry condition. The difference between conditions (no-psychometry vs. psychometry) was also significant ($z = 2.65$, $p = 0.008$, two-tailed).

A third study (Parra & Argibay, 2007c) explored whether there was a significant difference between psychics and non-psychics in using psychometry for medical diagnosis. Four adult volunteers who suffered from medically diagnosed diseases (viz. diabetes mellitus, hiatal hernia, osteoarthritis, and varicose veins) acted as target persons, who delivered personal objects (combs, handkerchiefs, hair brooches and billfolds), which were coded and recoded blind by the experimenters. Each participant received four pairs of objects (target and control) to be 'touched' and they performed four trials of psychic diagnosis of the target persons, who remained unidentified. Although both groups combined scored significantly above chance ($p = 0.01$), there was only slight support for the claim that the 'psychics' ($p = 0.03$) would score higher than the non-psychics ($p = 0.08$). Although neither group obtained highly significant results, high variability was found, and this was in a positive direction for the psychics and a negative direction for the non-psychics ($p < 0.05$). It appears that psychic diagnosis relates to perceptions of 'information' in and around target persons, and that these may be difficult to translate into physical diagnoses. Also, the psychics and healers were not trained in medical terminology, anatomy or physiology, and therefore they may have had difficulty in providing impressions specific to anatomical structures and quantifiable in conventional terminology.

In a fourth experiment (Parra & Argibay, 2008), the aim was to compare a group of ordinary people (non-psychics) with self-claimed psychics in order to determine whether participants were capable of distinguishing between photographs of people who had died and people who were still living. However, no significant differences were found and neither group obtained psi-hitting.

In the present study we sought to extend this approach by identifying another psychometry task that might distinguish between psychics and non-psychics, and chose to focus on a task in which participants had to decide which of two token objects was originally from a sacred site. According to some traditions, there are in countries such as India, Egypt, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, holy places that represent sacred sites or power-filled energy centres to which many people make pilgrimages. At such sites they may experience a sense of unification with nature, a feeling of bliss, inter-species communication, waking visions, unusual sounds, synchronicities, key memories, or ecstasies (Swan, 1988). People from various cultural groups, and across different periods of history, have attributed similar properties to sacred sites, ranging from inducing encounters with spiritual agencies to anomalous night-time dreaming (see Krippner & Thompson, 1996). It has been claimed that psychics are capable of distinguishing by ESP the 'sacred' nature of these sites (Devereux, 1999).

Therefore we planned to follow the design of our earlier research using a psychometry procedure with a sample of ordinary people (non-psychics) and a sample of self-claimed psychics, but here the token objects would be small samples of material from 'sacred' sites. One of the aims of the study was to determine whether the participants could distinguish between the sacred and the control objects by psychic means. Specifically, we wanted (1) to determine

whether the number of hits differed significantly from mean chance expectation (MCE); (2) to determine whether the participants would be capable of distinguishing between the 'sacred' versus 'control' objects, and (3) to test whether there was a significant difference between the scores of the two groups.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 147 participants (77.3% females and 22.7% males) who were all well educated and believed in psi. The ages ranged from 18 to 76 ($M = 45.85$; $SD = 12.29$). Personal experiences suggestive of psi were reported by the majority of the participants, such as having experienced ESP feelings around sick people (56%), around past place events (50.8%), around 'token' objects (34.7%), around unknown people (69.4%), and around 'token' photos (38.3%). Seventy-eight percent of the participants had had some training in meditation or other techniques involving an internal focus of attention.

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

Categorisation Procedure

A 17-item self-report questionnaire was specially developed for this experimental series (for further information about this instrument, see Parra & Argibay, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008). Items included three types of factors, (a) belief in psi, (b) extrasensory experiences (telepathy, ESP dreams, anomalous cognition, clairvoyance, paranormal/anomalous feelings or impressions of being at unknown places or touching things, and aura visions), (c) extrasensory abilities (covering topics as in *b*, excepting ESP dreams). Belief in psi (items 1.1 to 1.6 to be marked Yes or No) was rated very high for all items on the scale (98.4% indicated all items of ESP Belief). Questions 2.1 to 3.5, which included the frequency of each experience, were marked as either Never, Once, Sometimes, or Frequently.

We used the following criteria to split the participant group into psychic and non-psychic groups: participants ($N = 25$) who indicated 'yes' on the factor 'Extrasensory abilities' were categorised as the 'psychic' group, and participants ($N = 122$) who indicated 'yes' on the factor 'Extrasensory experiences' were categorised as the 'non-psychic' group (who have spontaneous psi experiences, but no ability or control over them). Participants who indicated 'Never' on all items were excluded from the sample. Our study consisted of a number of sessions with groups of psychics and non-psychics (divided according to the criteria above) in which the participants conveyed their impressions from pairs of samples of water and sand.

Participant Setting

Fourteen separate groups were tested by the first author (AP) and the second author (JCA) at the Institute of Paranormal Psychology in Buenos Aires, in two-hour sessions over a period of two years. There were between 5

and 10 participants in each group. AP and JCA aimed at creating a friendly and informal social atmosphere.

Target Objects

A co-experimenter, not present during the sessions with the psychics and non-psychics, collected samples of sand, taken from the base of the Cheops Pyramid in Egypt, and an equal number of samples from a source of water to which the devotees of Marian apparitions attribute curative properties (i.e. 'blessed' water), taken from a Marian sanctuary in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The little containers were matched with control samples of sand and water from non-sacred sites. JCA also alternated in which side of a small box each member of the pair was placed. The containers were transparent, so that participants were able to see the samples, and they were also free to handle the containers. AP was blind as to which samples belonged to which category.

Security Measures

Before each session, a co-experimenter delivered the test samples in a box to JCA, who then added control samples to the box and coded both types of samples for each test. AP did not know how JCA had coded the two types of test samples (the 'sacred' and the 'control' ones). JCA did not enter the test room during the testing, but remained in a non-adjacent, sound-attenuating room. (The presence of JCA in the same room as the participants and the decoding of the samples would have allowed for sensory cues from JCA to the participants.)

Next, using a list of random numbers, JCA selected the order in which the pairs of samples (the 'sacred' and 'control') were to be rated by the participants. JCA also alternated which side of a small box each sample of the pair was placed on. The details of all these procedures were unknown to AP. Once the experimental sessions had been completed for the whole group, AP handed the samples to JCA, who recoded them as they were originally and returned them to AP. JCA and AP kept separate paper-and-pencil records of all randomization procedures and the handling of the 'sacred' and 'control' samples. This procedure was repeated for each group.

Procedure

Two rooms were required to conduct the experiment: one for AP and the participants and one for JCA. The participants were tested in groups and were seated on chairs. All participants were present together when handling the test samples. AP handed small boxes containing the pairs of samples to the participants. Each pair of samples (one 'sacred' and one 'control') was supplied with an answer sheet including written test instructions (however, instructions were also given verbally). Before the completion of the experiment, all participants underwent a 9-minute relaxation exercise, which included progressive autogenic phrases (using the voice of AP). The participants were told that we were doing a test of ESP using material said to stimulate extrasensory abilities in people due to its 'sacred' nature.

The test instructions to each participant during the test were straightforward: AP asked the participant to "remain with your eyes closed, quiet, and

wait for impressions about the object for a few minutes". AP remained in the room as a silent observer throughout the testing period, which lasted about 40 minutes. Each participant received six pairs of samples to be touched upon for impressions. Afterwards, the participants marked on their answer sheets which of each test sample pair they thought belonged to a sacred place (three of water and three of sand) by writing down the code printed on the sample. They did not give impressions about their mentations; they just marked for the 'sacred' target.

Once the participants had completed the answer sheets for each pair of samples, they passed the test samples on to AP, who handed the boxes and the answer sheets back to JCA for recoding. After having placed the participants' answer sheets in an envelope, JCA passed the test samples for the next participant to AP, but there were sufficient sample pairs for each participant to work with samples that had not previously been handled in that session. This procedure was repeated for each participant. Participants were not given any trial-by-trial target feedback during the testing period, although their total score was provided at the end of the workshop.

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 that (4) their consent had been appropriately documented (cf. Beahrs & Gutheil, 2001). Joining the group was voluntary, and all data collected were treated confidentially.

RESULTS

We analysed whether participants were able to identify correctly the sample drawn from a sacred site when presented alongside a control sample that was identical in appearance but not taken from a sacred site. If participants were performing at chance levels then they should be correct 50% of the time. Participants' performance is summarised in Table 1. Although overall scores were slightly above chance, they were not statistically significant (for water, $t(152) = 1.18$, $p = 0.12$; for sand, $t(152) = 0.54$, $p = 0.29$; for both combined, $t(152) = 1.07$, $p = 0.14$).

We analysed whether there were differences in the number of hits overall for psychics ($N = 25$) and non-psychics ($N = 122$). Given the large differences in sample sizes we used Welch's robust test of equality of means. No significant difference was found (Welch = 0.31; $p = 0.58$).

We also examined whether scores differed according to whether sand or water was being used as the target. Participants' scores were compared under both conditions. For this, we used a repeated-measures ANOVA. No significant difference was obtained ($F_{1,152} = 0.26$; $p = 0.61$).

Moreover, we analysed whether the variability of the results differed significantly from what was theoretically expected. For this calculation, we used the total number of hits obtained by each participant in the six trials (water and sand together). The variability of the obtained scores turned out significantly greater than expected by chance ($F_{1,153} = 1.51$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 1

Mean (and Standard Deviation) of Number of Correct Identifications of Sacred Samples by Sample Type and Participant Category (Psychic Versus Non-psychic)

		Participant Group		
		Non-psychic	Psychic	Overall
Sample type	Water (3 trials)	1.59 (0.96)	1.68 (1.06)	1.59 (0.99)
	Sand (3 trials)	1.48 (0.90)	1.60 (1.15)	1.54 (0.96)
Overall (6 trials)		3.06 (1.39)	3.28 (1.88)	3.13 (1.50)

Secondary Analysis

We found it interesting to confirm whether the difference in variability between the groups, which was obtained by Levene's test of equality of variance ($F_{1,145} = 7.09; p = 0.009$), would preserve the MCE for the calculations. There was also a significant difference in variability between the two groups ($F_{1,122} = 1.85; p < 0.05$). Although we obtained a significant difference in variability, we are aware that the results could be due to Type I error or perhaps a consequence of the large differences in sample size. Therefore we should treat this significant finding with caution.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim was to compare a group of non-psychics (ordinary people) and self-claimed psychics, using 'sacred' objects as targets to determine whether the number of hits differed significantly from mean chance expectation (MCE), whether the participants would be capable of distinguishing between the 'sacred' and the 'control' objects, and to test whether there was a significant difference between the psi-scores of the two groups. Participants' scores were compared under both conditions. No significant difference was obtained when sand or water was also being used as the target. It can be concluded that those participants who claimed to have a psychometric psi ability (that is, being able to pick up impressions from an object from being in physical contact with it) showed greater variability in their psi hits.

Like our previous findings (Parra & Argibay, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008), data analysis also revealed high variability differences between the two groups. The variability was greater for the psychic group than for the non-psychic group, so that 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 'psychics' (i.e. participants who claimed ESP skills) being better at interpreting available psi information than ESP 'experients' — whereas some participants who claimed ESP experiences were among the highest psi scorers, others obtained the highest psi-missing scores. One interpretation is that members of the psychics group achieved better overall results by consistently interpreting the 'psi signal'

while only some members of the experience group decoded the signal adequately, 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.

Psychometry might be understood without giving up conventional ideas about memory and mind. The mind is embedded in the environment. Since the environment is composed of animate and inanimate objects, one could argue that the mind must be embedded in these objects too. This means that objects have mental as well as material properties, which raises the expectation that both types of properties can be explored and understood; for instance, Bohm (1980) regarded memory as a special case of this process, Roll (1965, 1979) has proposed that objects contain 'psi fields,' or localized impersonal memory traces of physical and mental events, and Pagenstecher (1922) suggested that objects that had not been involved in traumatic events elicited images of the manufacturing of the objects, that is, of primary events. Arguably, it would be better to try eliciting psi with the kind of profound sacred objects psychics use in authentic cases, but it would be very hard—and beyond the limitations of the present experiment—to design an appropriate experiment which took into account all clues exclusively given by sacred objects in comparison with control objects.

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