

Reading Faces: An Experimental Exploration of Psychometry Using Photographs and Names

BY ALEJANDRO PARRA AND JUAN CARLOS ARGIBAY

ABSTRACT: Psychometry describes a type of anomalous cognition which permits a psychic to experience such impressions using a physical object. A number of psychics have gained a reputation as psychic detectives using such things as photographs, a town map, or a piece of clothing. In fact, many people seem to have a high opinion of the abilities of psychics, but a person's face is an important source of information for identifying others, and conveys significant social information, probably due to its important role in the psychological processes involved in social interaction. The aim of the present study was to compare a group of ordinary people (non-psychics) with self-claimed psychics in order to determine if participants were capable of distinguishing between living and dead people from photographs of same. The sample consisted of 169 participants divided into two groups: "psychics" ($N = 74$) and "non-psychics" ($N = 95$). No significant differences were found. Those participants who claimed to have psychometric ability (that is, were able to pick up impressions from an object by being in physical contact with it) neither obtained psi hitting, nor demonstrated greater variability in their psi hits. One possible interpretation would be that some of the participants in this group had difficulties with correctly interpreting the psi signal.

Keywords: psychometry, psychics, non-psychics, photographs, token objects, anomalous detection.

INTRODUCTION

A common procedure for self-claimed psychics to gain extrasensory or psi impressions is to use an object as an inductor (photographs or token objects) (Rogo, 1974). The use of an inductor is by

no means a requirement, and many psychics provide impressions about target persons without the use of any object, instead using, for instance, the name and age of the target person. The term “psychometry” describes a type of anomalous cognition which permits a psychic to experience “impressions” using a physical object as inductor, in contrast to other forms of ESP communication which lack physical contact, such as the psi-reading face to face or through control spirits (Buchanan, 1885; Pagenstecher, 1922).

The Russian-born psychic Stephan Ossowiecki, one of the most famous psychometrists, claimed to be able to see people’s auras and to move objects through psychokinesis. The alleged psychic gifts of this chemical engineer enabled him to locate lost objects and missing people, and he assisted in several criminal investigations. In 1935, he participated in a test, devised by a wealthy Hungarian named Dionizy Jonky, which involved a sealed package. Jonky, a stranger to Ossowiecki, determined that this test be conducted eight years after his death. Fourteen photographs of men were then placed in front of Ossowiecki, one of which pictured Jonky. Ossowiecki picked out the correct photo. Next, Ossowiecki accurately described many details of Jonky’s life and correctly identified the man who had held the package for the past eight years (Stevenson, Barrington, & Weaver, 2005).

In the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Croiset gained a reputation as a psychic detective using psychometry. Police departments in his native country, the Netherlands, and other European countries often sought his help in solving some of their most bewildering cases. In one noted instance, he was even asked to assist in the search for a missing four-year-old girl from Brooklyn, New York. Without leaving Holland, Croiset was given a photo of the girl, a map of New York City and a piece of her clothing. He correctly described that she was dead, the location of her body and the man who murdered her. His information led the police to the girl’s body and to the murderer, who was convicted of the crime (Anderson, 2006; Pollack, 1964).

It seems that many people have high opinions about the abilities of psychics. A reason for this might be that psychics actually have extrasensory perception (ESP) or psi ability which they apply during consultations. Most studies in the past tried to answer the question: Are the statements of psychics about the target person, who is unknown to the psychic, correct more often than can be expected by chance? Less often is the following, related, question asked: If this is the case, is it necessary to attribute a paranormal explanation to the result? After all, the real issue is whether these data warrant a paranormal explanation or whether familiar psychological processes will suffice (Kierulff & Krippner, 2004).

The face is often an important source for identification with others and conveys significant social information (Nelson, 2001; Bruce & Young, 1986). Probably because of the important role it plays in social interaction, psychological processes involved in face perception are present from birth, and known to be complex, and involve large and widely distributed areas in the brain. Whilst there is no question that the majority of face perception skills developed by adults are not present in babies, there is evidence of an innate tendency to pay attention to faces from birth. It is known that early perceptual experience is crucial to the development of visual perception and this orientating 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 seven distinct types of information that we derive from seen faces, labelled pictorial, structural, visually derived semantic, identity-specific semantic, name, expression and facial speech code. Recognition of familiar faces involves a match between the products of structural encoding and previously stored structural codes describing the appearance of familiar faces held in face recognition units.

Another possibility is that expertise in perceiving faces of particular individuals is associated with an increased ability to extract information about the spatial relationships between different features. Psychics and clients must both be sincerely impressed on occasion by the achievements that confirm the psychic's belief in his or her abilities. In addition, one should not underestimate the experience psychics might gain in their profession. Undoubtedly, some psychics who specialize, for instance, in locating missing persons, may have a much larger experience with such cases than the average police officer. Whatever the source of their statements, their experience and expertise in certain areas might make it worthwhile to consult them for advice, even if they were to make no genuine paranormal statements in a given session.

One of the most widely accepted theories of face perception argues that understanding faces involves several stages, from basic perceptual manipulations of the sensory information and personal information (such as age, gender or attractiveness), to being able to recall meaningful details such as the person's name and relevant past experiences of the individual (Bruce & Young, 1986). But the criterion to use when selecting a psychic seems to us to be the expertise and experience of the person with regard to the type of problem about which the client is seeking consultation, rather than an assessment of the psychic's supposed paranormal sensitivity, as indicated, perhaps, by some standard ESP test. However, as to 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 ESP impressions. The first procedure conveys

the psychic's impressions from several sensory cues (possibly with the use of psi); the second procedure conveys impressions from a "static" source of induction (if psi really works, photography will serve as the best evidence).

Note that psychometry-related psi experiences of the type described above are hard to find in the parapsychological literature. However, in their biographies, many psychics report spontaneous cases from the time before they became professional psychics and learned to use their psychic abilities (for a review, see Anderson, 2006; Kierulff & Krippner, 2004; Schmeidler, 1958). On the basis of these accounts, we developed a number of items referring to such experiences. These kinds of intuitive or psychic impressions constitute some indicators for distinguishing psi from pseudo-psi impressions (i.e., fantasies, expectations, beliefs) about the target object.

In the present study, we conducted a series of psychometry-based experimental sessions. We wanted to explore some strategies for using and appraising the so-called "token-object" effect in groups, following three previous experiments (Parra & Argibay, 2007a,b,c). The aim was to compare a group of ordinary people (non-psychics) and self-claimed psychics, using pairs of photographs of living and dead people as targets. Specifically, we wanted to (1) determine if the whole sample of participants score differently with the two kinds of materials (photographs and written names respectively), and (2) determine if "psychics" and "non-psychics" score differently with the two kinds of stimulus (photographs and written names analysed separately).

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 169 participants, 127 females and 42 males, who were all well-educated and believed in psi. The ages ranged from 18 to 76 ($M = 44.89$; $SD = 12.65$). Personal experiences suggestive of psi were reported by the majority of the participants, such as 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%).

Participants were recruited through media announcements in newspapers and an e-mailing 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 have an interview with us in order to obtain more information.

Categorisation procedure

Inspired by a questionnaire about paranormal experiences, the 70-item *Anomalous Experiences Inventory* (AEI; Gallagher, Kumar, & Pekala, 1994), we compiled and re-worded a shorter 17-item scale for use in the present study. 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), and (c) Extrasensory abilities (except item “ESP dreams”).

The participants rated their belief in psi (items 1.1 to 1.6 to be marked ‘Yes’ or ‘No’) 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.

The sample was divided into two groups. Participants who indicated “Never” on all items of the questionnaire were excluded from the sample. Extrasensory experiences were defined as those personal experiences which the participant deemed as 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. We used the following criteria to split the participant group into psychics and non-psychics:

- Participants ($N = 95$; 56.2%) who indicated “yes, sometimes” or “yes, frequently” on the following item were categorised as the “psychic” group: *“Have you had the experience of seeing the photograph of a person not present at that moment and to have vivid impressions about him/her, without previous knowledge or any signs that would permit you to deduce something about that person?”* (This question recruited people who had psi experiences, but no control over that ability.)
- Participants ($N = 74$; 44.3%) who indicated “yes, once” or “yes, sometimes” on the following item were categorised as the “non-psychic” group: *“Have you been or are you able to control your mind, while in contact with the photograph of a person, to obtain vivid impressions about this person, without having previous knowledge or any other indication that would permit you to deduce something about this person?”* (This question recruited people who not only had psi experiences, but had could control over their ability.)

This two-question criterion serves to split psychics from non-psychics in the sample. The procedure was originally explained in Parra and Argibay (2007a).

To increase the validity of the comparisons between the two conditions, we repeated the procedure, using the names and surnames that corresponded to the 104 photographs for the same target persons. The order of handing out the photos was randomized. An electronic random number generator was used to generate random numbers. Furthermore, we decided to apply a between-subjects design (photographs vs. name/surname) for all participants and conditions. To control the possible progressive error of the between-subjects design, a complete between-subjects counterbalance was employed.

Participant Setting

Fourteen separate groups 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. There were between 5 and 10 participants in each group. AP and JCA aimed at creating a friendly and informal social atmosphere.

Target Material

Two co-experimenters (RM and JC), not present during the sessions with the participants, selected a pool of 52 photographs of persons still alive and 52 photographs of persons already dead, and an equal number of names and surnames that corresponded to the 104 photographs from the private archives of the same target persons.

Security Measures

AP and JCA instructed the co-experimenters to select the photos. Before each session, they handed the photographs (52 pairs of photos) in a box to JCA. To avoid direct contact with the original colour photos, 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. Fifty percent (26 photographs) corresponded to different historic moments (older photos, taken during the 1970's) and the other 50% of photographs were of recent date ("new" photos, taken during the 1990's). The pairs of photographs of living/dead people were selected accordingly and the order

of young and old people was counterbalanced. There were thirteen females and males in both groups.

Using a list of random numbers, JCA selected the order in which the two pairs of “old” photographs and two pairs of “new” photographs (male and female) were to be rated by participants. For each pair, JCA put one photo of a living person and another photo of a dead person, in an envelope, which he also replaced for each participant (N trials = 8).

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 targets would obviously have allowed for sensory cues from JCA to the participants.) The details of all these procedures were unknown to AP, so that he remained unaware of which photographs corresponded to the alive/dead conditions. 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 was performed using the names which corresponded to the 104 photographs for the same target persons, randomizing their order. A between-subjects design was employed for both conditions (photographs vs. written name) and all participants. To control the possible progressive error of the between-subjects design, we also employed a between-subjects counterbalance.

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.

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 seated in chairs. All participants were present together 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 (however, instructions were also given verbally). Before the completion of the experiment, all participants underwent a nine-minute relaxation exercise using the voice of AP. The participants were informed that we were doing a test of ESP using material said to stimulate extrasensory abilities in people.

The 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 four pairs of photographs to be touched upon for impressions. Afterwards, the participants marked on their answer sheet which test person they thought was still alive or already dead, by writing down the code printed on the photograph. The participants did not mediate any mentations (i.e., verbal reports); they just checked “living” or “dead” for each target. Each participant performed eight trials on a single visit using photographs, and eight trials using written names.

Once the participants had completed the answer sheets for each pair of photographs/names, 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, although their total score was provided at the end of the workshop.

RESULTS

The experiment examined the performance of two groups (‘psychics’ and ‘non-psychics’) using a psychometry procedure with photographs and written names of living and dead persons in a forced-choice ESP test. The number of hits on the eight trials ($N = 16$) was summed up for each participant. A first analysis was carried out to determine if the whole sample of participants scored differently with the two kinds of materials (photographs and written names respectively). Both stimuli were not significant (see Table 1).

Table 1
Score Differences between the Two Targets (Photographs vs. Written Names)

Stimulus	T/P*	MCE	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Photographs	8	4	4.15	1.34	168	.09** (1-t)
Written names	8	4	3.99	-0.05	168	.95 (2-t)

* Trials per participant; ** *p* adjusted = .171

A second analysis (MANOVA) was carried out to determine if ‘psychics’ and ‘non-psychics’ scored differently with the two kinds of stimulus (photographs and written names).

As shown in Table 2, psychics did not score significantly higher than non-psychics.

Table 2
Score Differences between Psychics and Non-Psychics

Stimulus	Group	Mean	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (one-tailed)
Photographs	Psychics (<i>N</i> = 95)	4.09	.34	1, 167	.56
	Non-psychics (<i>N</i> = 74)	4.23			
Written names	Psychics (<i>N</i> = 95)	3.98	.02	1, 167	.87
	Non-psychics (<i>N</i> = 74)	4.01			

There was no support for the hypothesis that the psychic group scored higher than the non-psychic group, both of which scored at chance.

DISCUSSION

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 by being in physical contact with it) did not show greater psi hitting than non-psychics. One tentative interpretation would be that the psi information was blocked by some psychological defence mechanism, in response to a pleasant/unpleasant association to the stimulus (the photographed face or the name). Possibly, these (through resemblance) positively or negatively affectively associated faces or names to other people had a neutralizing effect on the participants’ psi task. Another interpretation of the negative results is that the individuals who believe themselves to be good psychics actually guess rather than perceive extrasensory information, and this limits the possibilities of properly perceiving the psi stimulus.

Finally, the obtained results call for a more phenomenological interpretation, namely, the indications or ways in which the participants

inferred their guesses. For example, a few participants pointed out that there were different symbolizations for the dead and the living target persons, such as crosses, graves, coldness, darkness, profound silence and fear, among other things. A separate article about the phenomenological characteristics of this and other experiments will be published in the near future.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the differences between individuals with high scores compared to individuals who perform at chance level, in terms of perceptual characteristics or personality. Psi hitting could be correlated with certain personality factors (e.g., openness to experience or extraversion) which facilitate the psi task. The results of a number of questionnaires, which were administered for evaluating personality features, will be reported elsewhere. Perhaps this will help us understand which mechanisms are involved in hits and misses for those individuals who use photographs as psi inductors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the BIAL Foundation for financial support of this research project. Thanks also for the generous collaboration of Romina Mielgo and Josefina Caputo, who acted as co-experimenters and provided us with photographs of relatives and friends.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. I. (2006). *Psychics, Sensitives and Somnambules: A Biographical Dictionary with Bibliographies*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Beahrs, J. O. & Gutheil, T. G. (2001). Informed consent for psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 158, 4-10.
- Bruce, V. & Young, A. (1986). Understanding face recognition. *British Journal of Psychology*, 77, 305-327.
- Buchanan, J. R. (1885). *Manual of psychometry: The dawn of a new civilization*. Boston: Press of the Roxbury Advocate.
- Gallagher, C., Kumar, V. K., & Pekala, R. J. (1994). The Anomalous Experiences Inventory: Reliability and validity. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 58, 402-428.
- Kierulff, S. & Krippner, S. (2004). *Becoming psychic*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, New Page Books.
- Nelson, C.A. (2001). The development and neural bases of face recognition. *Infant and Child Development*, 10, 3-18.