# Psychics vs. Non-Psychics in "Face-to-Face" and "Remote" Token-Object Reading Conditions

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Abstract: Psychic reading is a method used to foretell the future of an individual. However, cold reading is a non-paranormal technique used by many self-claimed psychics and mediums to determine details about another person in order to convince them that the reader knows much more about a subject than he or she actually does. We wanted to explore some strategies for using and appraising the so-called "tokenobject" effect common in psychic reading. 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. One of the aims of the study was to determine if the 'psychics' participants could give impressions while touching the objects of two sitters. The experiment was introduced to the participants by telling them that two different conditions, "face-to-face" and "remote" psychometry, were being undertaken using a physical object as psistimuli. The sample consisted of 83 participants. We concluded that those participants who claimed to have psychometry psi ability ("Psychic" group) showed greater psi hitting than "Non-Psychics" in both conditions ("remote" and "face-to-face"). Because face-to-face readings allow for sensory cues, no firm conclusion of "genuine" psi can be justified from such an experiment. Therefore we should treat this significant finding with caution.

**Keywords:** extra-sensory perception, ESP, non-psychics, psi, psychics, psychometry, token-object reading.

## 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; Roe, 1991, 1996, 1998). 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 (Richet, 1922). 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.

Schouten (1993) has suggested that other than experiences of spontaneous psi, the major source of interest in the subject matter of parapsychology is through encounters with professional psychics. Dutton (1988) has similarly argued that "for many people, belief in the paranormal derives from personal experience of face-to-face interviews with astrologers, palm readers, aura and Tarot readers, and spirit mediums" (p. 326). A number of commentators have claimed that clients are typically impressed with the content of the readings they have solicited (Hyman, 1989, p. 346; French, Fowler, McCarthy, & Peers, 1991). Blackmore (1983) noted that "people who consult astrologers, palmists or Tarot readers often claim that the information they are given provides an accurate and specific description of their personality" (p. 97).

A psychic reading is a type of method used in an attempt to foretell the future of an individual. A professional psychic may have one or more specialized areas of expertise such as tarot cards, distant readings (just using the name and the birth data), aura readings or any number of other methods. However, most psychic readings do not usually use any tools and can include face-to-face readings such as in-person readings at home. However, cold reading is a technique used by many self-claimed psychics and mediums to determine details about another person in order to convince them that the reader knows much more about a subject than he or she actually does. A practiced cold reader can still quickly obtain a great deal of information about the subject by carefully analyzing the person's body language, gender, religion and level of education and overall, the manner to speech. The real cold reader usually employs high probability guesses about the subject, quickly picking up on signals from their subjects as to whether their guesses are in the right direction or not, and then emphasizing and reinforcing any chance connections the subjects acknowledge while quickly moving on from missed guesses.

There is some limited empirical evidence to suggest that encounters with psychic readers are typically regarded as quite impressive. Haraldsson (1985) found that of those who had attended a séance, a surprising 83% had found the experience "useful." In Palmer's (1979) student sample, evaluations of the readings were similarly quite favorable, as 67% found the experience to have been very helpful, 22% somewhat so, and 78% claimed to have acted on the advice. None reported the experience to have been harmful. For Palmer's (1979) 'townspeople', 15% found the reading very helpful and 30% somewhat helpful. However, 52% found the experience of no help, and 3% reported it actually to have been harmful.

This generally favorable impression of psychic readings is not thought to be restricted to a small subsection of the population. Encounters with psychic readers are intended here to refer to face-to-face consultations. Attempts to account for the success of psychic readings (e.g., Hyman, 1981; Roe, 1991) often implicitly assume that clients take their readings very seriously. Palmer (1979) gives a very interesting and detailed breakdown of the general impact of psychic experiences upon his respondents' lives, focusing particularly on effects upon their "feelings or attitudes" and important life decisions that they had made. On the basis of Palmer's analysis, it does appear that psi has had profound consequences for some. For example, an astounding 9% of respondents claimed that their experiences had saved them in a crisis, and a further 9% that someone else had been saved as a result of their experience. Unfortunately, Palmer's breakdown does not identify the different types of experience that gave rise to the various effects. It would be informative to see, for example, whether psychic readings have altered participants' perceptions and/or actions in important ways.

Informal feedback from subjects during a recent study of the ways in which psychic readings are processed by clients (Roe, 1994, 1998) suggests that they can recognize that readings they have solicited have been of a form which allowed them to be true for many people. Yet they remain convinced that some elements of the reading were especially true of them or their circumstances in a manner that made the reading particularly or even uniquely pertinent to them. The readings generated do not depend upon the reader sensing unique aspects of the client's life and concerns, but rather upon the client's willingness to interpret and elaborate on the limited information mechanically generated by the reader. Explanations of this process typically invoke the Barnum Effect (Roe, 1991; Dickson & Kelly, 1985, p. 367). The effect emphasizes the vague or general nature of the statements in allowing the client to read her own meaning into them, as well as focusing upon characteristics of the client that leave her especially vulnerable to such deception (e.g., Tyson, 1982).

However, if we consider what kind of information we should expect, were the reader to be genuine—that is, readings are derived paranormally it seems likely that he would be strait-jacketed by many of the same factors that underscore the conventional account. Despite being convinced of their own uniqueness, people are actually very similar to one another; they tend to experience comparable events at the same stages in their lives, to focus on similar current problems, and to hold similar aspirations for the future (Sugarman, 1986).

Palmer (1996) did a study with a psychic who gave blind readings to 60 volunteer recipients in groups while holding a concealed photograph of the recipient. Two months later, recipients marked statements from all the readings in their session that applied to them, not knowing which one was theirs. Although other significant findings from the earlier study involving the psychic's mood during the session and recipients' scores on NEO–PI Openness did not replicate, it was concluded that the two experiments were mutually reinforcing as evidence for psi having been present in them. The replication of the sessions effect surprised the author because he had interpreted it in the face-to-face experiment as psychic reader improving her skills in the utilization of sensory cues as the result of immediate feedback from recipients to her statements.

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 press). The results showed that the so-called Psychic group tended to score higher psi-hitting than the Non-Psychic group, who scored at the level of mean chance expectation. 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. In one of these experiments, the aim 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 photographs of people who had died and people who were still living. However, no significant differences were found and neither group obtained psi hitting (Parra & Argibay, 2008).

Therefore we planned to follow the design of our earlier research using a psychometry procedure with a sample of ordinary people (nonpsychics) and a sample of self-claimed psychics. One of the aims of the study was to determine if the participants could give impressions touching the object of two persons, male and female, that is, two trials. Specifically, we wanted to test whether: (1) there is a difference between the scores of the two groups ("Psychics" vs. "Non-Psychics"), and (2) there is a difference between the scores of the two conditions ("Face-to-Face" vs. "Remote" psychometry).

#### METHOD

## Participants

The sample consisted of 83 participants (63% females and 37% males) who were all well-educated and believed in psi. The age range was 18 to 77 years (Mean = 46.44; SD = 14.03). The majority of the participants reported previous personal experiences suggestive of psi, such as ESP sensations around sick people (56%) past place events (50%), token-objects (34%), unknown people (69%) and/or token-photos (38%). Seventy-eight percent of the participants had had some training in meditation or other techniques practicing an internal focus of attention.

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

## Categorization 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 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 sample into Psychics and Non-Psychics: Participants (N = 51, 61%) who indicated 'Yes' on the factor "Extrasensory abilities" were categorised as the Psychic group, and participants (N = 32; 22%) who indicated 'Yes' on the factor "Extrasensory experiences" were categorised as the Non-Psychic group (who had spontaneous psi experiences, but no ability or control over them). Participants who indicated 'Never' on all items were excluded from the sample.<sup>1</sup>

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 every-day circumstances of sessions with clients. 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 unknown to them.

# Localization

The participants met during two-hour workshops free-of-charge organized at the Institute of Paranormal Psychology (IPP) in Buenos Aires. AP and JCA aimed to create an informal social atmosphere, engaging in friendly conversation with the participants before the test. Three rooms were necessary for the test procedure; one for the participants (room A), one for participant/target (room B) and the experimenter AP, and the other for participant/target and the experimenter JCA (room C).

# Test Instructions

Instructions to the target persons (*TP*). They were two adult volunteers, male (50 years old) and female (25 years old), who lead ordinary lives. Both TPs were unknown to AP and JCA; they were recruited through a collaborator of the experiment (JV) at the Institute. After a friendly welcome, the experimenters asked them for an object of either current or previous use. No volunteer experienced any extraordinary events (that we know about) during the course of the experimental series. Explanations of the experiment were given. For instance, TPs were recommended, as much as possible, not to give verbal or non-verbal (mainly gestural) feedback.

*Instructions to the participants.* The experiment was introduced to the participants by telling them that two different conditions, "face-to-face" and "remote" psychometry, were being undertaken using a physical object as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> We developed a number of items referring to such experiences, because in their biographies, many psychics report 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 pseudopsi impressions (i.e., fantasy) about the target persons.

psi-stimuli. Participants were informed that both situations could stimulate psychic abilities in people, and that this research was exploring both situations in one research project, so that their relative importance in stimulating psychic abilities could be evaluated. Before the start of each session, under both conditions, the participants underwent a nine-minute relaxation exercise (in group), which employed progressive autogenic phrases (Jacobson, 1974) read by one of the authors (AP). The instructions and relaxation exercises were delivered in a slow, soothing but confident manner with classical music played from a CD (Antonio Vivaldi's *Double concerto*, Largo G Minor) in the background. The auditory stimulation was given for a few minutes.

The order of condition testing ("face-to-face" and "remote" psychometry), were counterbalanced among the groups of participants, so that each participant was firstly tested under "face-to-face" condition, and after "remote", and vice versa. Participants were all present together in room A, and they were randomly selected to enter to rooms B and C using a list of randomly number identification. Each participant was called using an intercom set. For both conditions, the order to enter room B and room C was also randomized, so that each participant met, first male TP, and then female TP, and vice versa. Participants did not know that the objects belonged to both TPs (the same ones), although both TPs carried on their person two different objects (two for female and two for male), all the time during the experimental series. Two were used for "face-to-face" reading (handkerchief and comb for male) and two for "remote" reading session (hair brooch and billfold for female). Since the "face-to-face" condition implied having visual contact with the TP, participants were made aware that no interaction should be allowed; so that TP do not give verbal or nonverbal (as far as was possible) feedback, name and age will be no informed. and no questions will also be allowed. The experimenters were blind to who belonged to the Psychic and Non-Psychic groups. Randomization procedures were run before each experimental session. Random numbers were generated by a web-based program (www.randomizer.org).

*"Face-to-face" condition.* Each participant was tested individually. Participant and TP were seated in chairs, both face-to-face (no desk between them). Each experimenter was in a session room, together with one of TPs, but he did not interact with them. For each workshop, in order to minimize the possible "psychological" influence of the experimenters, experimenter presence was also counterbalanced. In room A was JCA together with female TP, and in room B was AP together with male TP for a number of sessions (JCA was also with male TP, and AP was with female TP in other groups).

Each experimenter delivered one object to the participant in a small box, and he/she handled the object. The experimenters asked them to verbalize as much as possible the owner's impressions of the object. Once the participant felt that he/she had obtained information about the female or male TP, he/she talked his/her impressions. Participants gave impressions while touching the objects, and each participant completed two trials (one for female and one for male). The experimenters tape-recorded all statements, although under this condition both TPs had also listened to all the statements made by each participant.

"Remote" condition. Each participant was also tested in individually so that the TP was not present during the session. Participant and the experimenter (JCA or AP) were seated in chairs, both face-to-face in the session room B and C. In room A was JCA together with the TP's object (female) and in room B was AP together with TP's object (male) in a number of sessions (JCA was also with male TP, and AP was with female TP). Each experimenter delivered one object to the participant in a small box, and he/she handled the object. The experimenters asked them to verbalize as much as possible the owner's impressions of the object. Once the participant felt that he/she had obtained information about the female or male TP, he/she talked about his/her impressions. Participants gave impressions while touching the objects, and each participant completed two trials (one for male and one for female). The experimenters tape-recorded all statements.

## Judging Procedure

The TPs were instructed to carefully rank each participant's statement according to what they considered matched their own psychological, physical, or any other trait described by the participants under "remote" (blinded) condition and "face-to-face" condition. A rank of '1' was assigned to the participant whose description corresponded most often to the target person's own impressions; a rank of '5' was assigned to the participant whose description corresponded to the matched the participant whose description corresponded to the participant whose description corresponded to the participant whose description corresponded the least often, according to them.

Also, the target persons were instructed to assign a score of '5' if the participant had not given any statement at all. TP's were aware that participants had been blind to both token-objects, under both conditions, and belonged to the same TP each time. The number of statements on the forms ranged from five to fifteen. TPs also blind scored the participant's statements, although in "face-to-face" condition TPs were aware who the participant was.

## Consent Form

Participants signed an appropriate consent form, using language they could reasonably understand. The form specified that the person (1) had the capacity to consent, (2) had been informed of all significant information concerning the procedure, (3) had freely and without undue influence expressed consent, and that (4) consent had been appropriately documented (Beahrs & Gutheil, 2001). The statements were confidential.

## RESULTS

A repeated measures  $2 \times 2$  factorial design was used. Factor A: Condition test ("remote" vs. "face-to-face") and Factor B: Group of participants: Psychic (N = 51) vs. Non-Psychic (N = 32). Each participant (Psychic and Non-Psychic) was tested under two conditions, so that each participant performed two trials. The dependent variable was the Mean of the TP's score (1-5) in both conditions. Lowest scores are indicating psihitting.

As shown in Table 1, the prediction was correct in terms of the difference between both groups—that is, Psychics scored significantly higher than Non-Psychics. As hypothesized, there was also a significant scoring difference between the two conditions, "face-to-face" and "remote". While the two main effects were significant, there was no significant interaction effect between the two factors.

#### DISCUSSION

The experiment studied two groups (Psychics and Non-Psychics) in two conditions (Remote and Face-to-Face) using a procedure with 'token' objects in a free-response test. It can be concluded that those participants who claimed to have psychometry psi ability (the Psychic group) showed greater psi hitting than the Non-Psychic group in both conditions, Remote and Face-to-Face. Although Face-to-Face was better for both groups than Remote, no interaction effect was found between conditions and group.

Because Face-to-Face readings allow for sensory cues, no firm conclusion of "genuine" psi can be justified from such an experiment. Therefore we should treat this significant finding with caution. However, because Face-to-Face reading is the vehicle by which many persons interact with psychics (thus producing ostensible psi) outside the laboratory, we see the study of Face-to-Face readings as having value in its own right.

Table 1								
Score Differences B	score Differences Between Psychics and Non-Psychics in "Remote" and "Face-to-Face" Conditions	l Non-Psy	chics in "l	Remote" :	and "Face-to-l	Face" Cond	litions	
Group	Condition	F	df	d	Partial $h^2$	Mean	SD	95% Confidence
								Interval
Factor A	Remote	9.64	9.64 1, 81	.003	.106	4.10	0.95	3.89 to 4.31
Condition	Face-to-Face					3.74	1.06	3.51 to 3.97
Factor B	Non-Psychic	5.97	5.97 1, 81	.017	690.	4.15	0.86	3.85 to 4.44
Participants	Psychic					3.69	1.09	3.45 to 3.92
Factor $A \times B$		1.20	1.20 1, 81	.276	.015			
Remote	Non-Psychic					4.27	0.81	3.93 to 4.60
	Psychic					3.93	1.02	3.67 to 4.19
Face-to-Face	Non-Psychic					4.03	0.96	3.67 to 4.39
	Psychic					3.44	1.07	3.16 to 3.73

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We also note that cut-off points used for categorisation into Psychic and Non-Psychic groups are clearly arbitrary, but we justify it for procedural reasons (i.e., to form the two groups in the first place) so as to facilitate categorical analysis. In addition, the target persons were 'blind' as part of the judging procedure in the Remote condition but not the Face-to-Face condition. Of course, this is an inherent limitation of the design due to this inconsistent blinding. Also, many honest psychic readers may, in fact, be cold readers. Although genuine ESP might occur during such readings, any conclusions that might be drawn about the occurrence of genuine ESP in face-to-face readings will be based primarily on whether any relationships uncovered in the Face-to-Face experiment can be replicated in a parallel experiment in which the conditions are blind.

Schouten's (1994) review of the literature led him to conclude that "there is little reason to expect psychics to make correct statements about matters unknown at the time more often than . . . can be expected by chance" (p. 221). Apparent successes by psychics have often been explained not as a consequence of psychic ability, but in terms of the exploitation of common (but subtle) channels of communication using what has been termed 'cold reading'. This procedure has been described in detail elsewhere (Hyman, 1977; Roe, 1991, 1996), and there is an extensive pseudopsychic literature associated with it. Sadly, there has been very little recent empirical work exploring the nature of psychic readings, for example, to determine whether pseudopsychic practices are common, despite claims noted earlier that such encounters can be very influential in providing the basis for paranormal beliefs.

The work described here had a relatively limited remit. Further studies should quantify the impact upon clients of prototypical psychic readings (face-to-face interactions with psychic readers). There is considerable scope for this work to be extended, for example, by adopting a more qualitative approach to explore in greater depth clients' accounts of readings they regard as impressive, or to consider alternative forms of psychic services such as the expanding market for readings by telephone or by mail. Our expectation is that accuracy scores proved to be much stronger and much more reliable in the face-to-face study than in the blind study. If this happens, the experiment could be supportive regarding evidence for psi.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Bial Foundation for financial support of this research project. Thanks are also due to the generous collaboration of Romina M. and Héctor M. who served as target persons.

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