

ARE PSYCHICS PERCEIVED TO BE MORE ACCURATE AND PERSUASIVE THAN NON-PSYCHICS?

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INTRODUCTION

Previous research has found that people who claim to have psychic or mediumistic abilities use language in a different manner to people who do not claim to have these abilities (e.g., O’Keeffe & Alison, 2000; Reiser & Klyver, 1982). For instance, O’Keeffe and Alison (2000) found that psychics used a wider variety of linguistic devices, such as ‘fishing’ and ‘staging’ on a psychic detection task than non-psychics.¹ Psychics and non-psychics did not differ in the number of correct statements they produced, but psychics were found to make a higher number of inaccurate statements.² Similarly, work by Wooffitt (2001a, 2001b) has elaborated the sequential turn-taking structure in medium-sitter readings and how this is organised in a manner that makes it more likely that the medium’s statements will be accepted as accurate and obtained from a paranormal source. However, while this previous work has highlighted linguistic devices used by people claiming psychic abilities, to date no experimental research has been conducted to examine if the descriptions or readings given are perceived by the listener as any more accurate or inaccurate than those given by non-psychics. It is this issue that the present research addresses.

The present study used audio excerpts of psychics’ and non-psychics’ descriptions regarding a homicide and asked participants to rate each excerpt for perceived accuracy and persuasiveness. In one information condition participants were told they might be listening to “psychics and non-psychics” and in another to “people who may or may not have experience in helping the police investigate criminal offences”. It was hypothesised that:

(1) Psychics would be perceived as more accurate and persuasive than non-psychics;

(2) Participants who were told that they might be listening to psychics would give lower accuracy and persuasiveness ratings to all excerpts than participants who were not told this.

METHODS

Participants: The study employed a first-year psychology student sample at the University of Manchester. A total of 41 students (39 females, 2 males; mean age 19, SD = 2.66) took part (24 in Condition 1, 17 in Condition 2). Posters within the Division of Psychology asked for participants interested in crime detection to take part in a 1-hour long study during which they would hear different people describe a particular crime and the perpetrator(s), after which they would be asked to fill in a short questionnaire. In return for taking part students received credits (n=4) which they were required to earn via research participation as part of their degree course.

Materials: The present study made use of audio recordings produced in a previous study by O’Keeffe and Alison (2000). In O’Keeffe and Alison’s study psychics and non-psychics were presented with objects or photographs associated with three recent sexual and/or violent crimes. These participants were provided

¹ It is important to note that we do not take such use *ipso facto* to be an intention to deceive or mislead the listener.

² Psychics also produced readings three times as long (in word count) than non-psychics

with minimal detail of each crime and asked to report any impressions about the crime committed and any characteristics of the offender(s). The present study used a selection of the original verbal reports of O’Keeffe and Alison’s participants. The verbal reports of four psychics and four non-psychics for the same case (a homicide) were selected from the total number of psychic (n=8) and non-psychic (n=12) reports available. In order to make these reports as comparable as possible psychics’ and non-psychics’ excerpts were matched for approximate length of reading (on average about 5 minutes duration) and for the reporter’s sex (all descriptions were provided by females).

Participants in the present study listened to each verbal report and were asked to rate it for (i) its perceived accuracy and (ii) its persuasiveness. Each of these was rated on a 7-point Likert scale (where 1 = not at all accurate/persuasive and 7 = very accurate/persuasive). An 8-item Belief in the Paranormal questionnaire was also administered (Musch & Ehrenberg, 2002). Each item was scored on a 6-point Likert scale and therefore the questionnaire had a range of possible scores from 8-48.3

Procedure: Two groups of participants attended a seminar room at different times on the same day in the University of Manchester. Members of each group were given a participant information sheet and a consent form. Participants were then given an opportunity to withdraw from the study (none chose to do so). Following this, participants were provided with two envelopes, each marked with a participant number and an envelope number (e.g. Participant 1, envelope 1; Participant 1, envelope 2). Participants were then instructed to open envelope 1 and fill in page 1 of the questionnaire (age and sex). They were then asked to turn the page and read page 2. This page contained a written set of instructions. Once participants had read these instructions the following statement was read out aloud to participants (for the words which appear in parentheses, Group 1 were read only statement 1, and Group 2 were read only statement 2):

“Over the next hour you will listen to 8 audio recordings [1. of psychics and non-psychics who may or may not have experience in helping the police investigate criminal offences 2. of people who may or may not have experience in helping the police investigate criminal offences,]. Each excerpt will last for a few minutes. In the excerpts you will listen to participants who have been asked to examine photographs from a homicide crime scene. One body was found at the scene. Each participant has been asked to report any impressions they have about the crime, and any characteristics of the offender. After each excerpt you will be asked to indicate on your response sheet how persuasive you think the person’s description is, and how accurate you believe the description to be.”

Participants were then asked to turn to page 3 of their questionnaire and the first excerpt was played. The order in which the psychic (P) and non-psychic (NP) excerpts were heard was randomized⁴: P, NP, NP, P, NP, P, P, NP. The selection of individuals within this sequence (i.e. psychics 1-4, non-psychics 1-4) was chosen at random.⁵ After each excerpt had been listened to participants were given 1 minute to rate the excerpt for accuracy and persuasiveness. After all 8 audio excerpts had been listened to and rated participants were asked to place their completed questionnaire into the first envelope and to seal it. Next, participants were instructed to open envelope 2, which contained the Belief in the Paranormal Questionnaire. Participants then completed this questionnaire, after which they placed it inside the second envelope and sealed it. The sealed envelopes were then collected and participants thanked for their participation.

³ An analysis of this will appear elsewhere,

⁴ The order of type of excerpt was randomised by throwing a die (odd numbers - psychic excerpts, even numbers = non-psychic excerpts).

⁵ The numbers 1-4 were assigned to individuals in the psychic and non-psychic group based on the order in which they gave their readings in the original O’Keeffe and Alison (2000) study. The selection of each individual within the psychic and non-psychic sequences was then determined by throwing a die. For example, if the first throw for the psychic group produced number 4, then the fourth reading in the psychic group would be the first excerpt participants heard.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Psychics would be perceived as more accurate and persuasive than non-psychics

In order to examine differences between ratings given to psychics and non-psychics, Wilcoxon signed ranks tests (one-tailed) were carried out on the data. As predicted, participants gave significantly higher ratings of perceived accuracy (median score 15 compared to 11), $z = 4.83$, $p < .001$ and persuasiveness (median score 14 compared to 10, $z = 4.79$, $p < .001$) to the readings given by psychics than non-psychics. The data was then examined for each information condition (summarized in Table 1). Regardless of information condition participants gave psychic readings significantly higher Accuracy and Persuasiveness scores than non-psychics.

Table 1. Summary of Median Scores (With Range) and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests for Differences in Participants' Accuracy and Persuasiveness Ratings Given to Psychics and Non-Psychics Descriptions by Information Condition

Measure	Psychic Information Condition (n=24)			No Psychic Information Condition (n=17)		
	Median Score	Z	P	Median Score	Z	P
Psychic Accuracy	13.5 (11)	4.00	<.001	16.0 (10)	2.76	.002
Non-Psychic Accuracy	10.0 (11)			12.0 (12)		
Psychic Persuasiveness	13.0 (10)	4.08	<.001	16.0 (14)	2.62	.003
Non-Psychic Persuasiveness	9.0 (11)			11.0 (8)		

Hypothesis 2: Participants who were told that they might be listening to psychics would give lower accuracy and persuasiveness ratings to all excerpts than participants who were not told this

Participants' median scores (with range) for each study measure are shown in Table 2, along with the mean ranks and results of 1-tailed Mann-Whitney U tests for the two informational conditions. A total score for psychics and non-psychics was calculated by summing the scores given to the four excerpts for each. As predicted, participants in the Psychic Information condition, gave significantly lower accuracy scores for both psychics ($U=137.5$, $p = .04$) and non-psychics ($U=134.5$, $p = .02$), and lower persuasiveness scores for both psychics ($U=126.5$, $p = .02$) and non-psychics ($U=120.0$, $p = .01$) than participants in the No Psychic Information Condition.

Table 2. Differences Between Information Conditions on the Study Measures

Measure	Psychic Information Condition (n=24)	No Psychic Information Condition (n=17)	P Value
	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	
Psychic Accuracy	18.23	24.91	.04
Non-Psychic Accuracy	18.10	25.09	.03
Psychic Persuasiveness	17.77	25.56	.02
Non-Psychic Persuasiveness	17.50	25.94	.01

To summarize the results, it was found that for both accuracy and persuasiveness ratings, higher scores were given: 1) if the speakers were 'psychics' versus 'non-psychics'; and 2) if the speakers were described as 'people' rather than 'psychics and non-psychics'.

CONCLUSION

As predicted, psychics were perceived as more accurate and persuasive than non-psychics, regardless of informational condition. Participants who were told that they might be listening to psychics gave lower accuracy and persuasiveness ratings to all excerpts than participants who were not told this. These findings should not be interpreted as a greater willingness by participants to endorse psychics: indeed, when participants were informed they might be listening to psychics they gave lower accuracy and persuasiveness ratings than participants not given this information.

Previous research (e.g. O’Keeffe & Alison, 2000; Wooffitt, 2001a, 2001b) has demonstrated how psychics may, *in social interaction*, use particular techniques which enable them to appear more accurate and persuasive, especially in convincing a sitter that they have obtained accurate information by paranormal means. The present study excluded the possibility of social interaction: the psychic and non-psychic participants who provided the original descriptions did so several years before participants in the present study were asked to listen to them and rate them for accuracy and persuasiveness. This suggests that the *language used* and/or the *language use* of the psychic is itself more convincing than the non-psychic: for example it may be content related (what is said) or it may relate to the manner in which things are said (e.g. intonation, hesitation, etc.). This is an important issue for parapsychologists who wish to design experimental tests of psychic ability. Just as experimental designs now routinely try to exclude the possibility of cues from ‘cold reading’ (e.g. the clothes or jewellery a sitter may wear, their apparent ethnicity, age and sex, etc.) the results of the present study suggest some consideration of how a reading is conveyed to a listener is also needed.

Despite the significant finding reported here, there is a need to sound a cautionary note. The accuracy and persuasiveness ratings given by participants, whether to psychics or no-psychics, are relatively low. This may be in part explained by the task itself: participants were asked to make accuracy/persuasiveness judgements about events which they themselves had minimal details. Nevertheless, participants did perceive psychics to be more accurate and persuasive than non-psychics. This suggests the need for further work in order to explore what features of the language used by the psychic is responsible for this effect. While the present research indicates that language use is one aspect which contributes to psychics’ ‘success’, it does not preclude its combination with other strategies, such as cold reading, documented in the research literature as features of psychics’ performances.

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