

PSYCHIC SENSITIVITY: PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT

By William J Eyre, Terry Porter and Michael J Rush

Project Merlin is an ASSAP initiative consisting of a matrix of modules designed to throw light on the nature of various xenonormal and paranormal phenomena by carrying out appropriate research. The experiment reported here was designed and executed as part of Module 19 – Sensitives and Their Significance (Pincott, 2008), which is specifically concerned with the fundamental question ‘Can sensitives obtain veridical information without using recognised senses or normal modes of communication?’.

BACKGROUND

The Psychic Sensitivity module of Project Merlin gave a team of researchers from ASSAP and CPSG (Chesterfield Psychic Study Group) the impetus to design, execute and analyse the findings of an experiment which was intended to study whether sensitives were capable of acquiring information about deceased people by studying their photographs, with the photographs being obtained and selected in such a way that the use of the normal senses would not be able to elicit that information.

Some readers will identify with the authors’ observation (rightly or wrongly) that people seem to often be as they look, i.e. that people who look aggressive usually are aggressive, that people who look studious usually are studious, etc. So is everyone capable of determining specific characteristics of people by examining their respective physiognomy and / or using normal intuition, etc., or are some gifted people capable of discerning more accurate information whilst looking at those people (or photographs of them) than that which can be obtained by the rest of us? By using groups of sensitive and non-sensitive ppts (participants), this study tried to answer this question.

Study 2 of a previous piece of research (Kelly and Arcangel, 2011) had produced some very impressive evidence that mediums could obtain information about deceased persons by studying photographs of them supplied by ppts who had personally known the deceased persons. The accuracy of the information was determined by sending to each ppt the medium’s reading for the associated deceased person, together with an additional five readings (that were chosen at random and meant for another ppt) and asking the ppt to identify the correct reading. Whilst the method used in the current study is different, the authors were nevertheless interested to know whether their experiment would show a similar result.

AIM AND HYPOTHESIS

The aim of the study was to see whether it is possible to determine information about deceased persons by simply examining photographs of them, such that the information can not be ascertained from the photographs themselves solely by use of the five normal senses.

The operationalised hypothesis was that

a group of ppts who claim to be psychically sensitive will obtain significantly more correct pieces of specific information about a set of deceased persons by

examining their photographs than a control group of ppts who claim no sensitive ability (one-tailed experimental hypothesis).

METHOD

Design

A quasi, single blind, laboratory experiment was to be carried out using an independent measures design.

Participants

It was planned to utilise an opportunity sample of five ppts who were either members of CPSG or known to the Group and who claimed to have sensitive abilities, together with a control group consisting of a self-selecting sample of five members of CPSG who claimed no sensitive ability.

Apparatus

The apparatus required consisted of:

- seven photographs of deceased persons, together with four specific types of information about each such person
- multiple copies of a question-and-answer sheet
- a stop watch
- a supply of pens.

Procedure

Acquisition of Source Materials:

Experimenter 1 (Eyre) initially contacted seven members of ASSAP living remotely from Chesterfield, enquiring as to whether they would be willing and able to supply a photograph of a deceased person known to them, together with the following four pieces of information about the person:

- first name
- main type of occupation
- cause of death
- personality traits

filled in on a question-and-answer sheet supplied by the experimenter. The question-and-answer sheet was as per Appendix A, with Participant No., Photograph Letter, Q1 (question 1) and Q6 omitted. It was explained to the members contacted that the photographs must not depict any image from which an obvious deduction could be made about the required pieces of information, e.g. not show an occupational uniform relating to the person's main type of occupation. The members contacted were asked to declare that they did not personally know any members of CPSG (other than Experimenter 1) so as to minimise the possibility of the ppts having known the photographed persons. Any question-and-answer sheet received where all questions had not been answered was to be discarded.

As not all the members contacted were in a position to be able to oblige, further members of ASSAP were contacted until seven valid photographs and sets of associated information had been obtained. The experimenter marked the back of each photograph received with a discrete letter.

Experimenter 1 passed to Experimenter 2 (Porter)

- the seven photographs in sealed, opaque envelopes (but withheld the associated pieces of information, thus making the experiment single blind)
- the names of all the ppts, with an indication as to which ppt was in the sensitives group and which was in the control group.

Conduct of Experimental Session:

The weather contrived against the researchers, with so much snow on the roads of Chesterfield that it would have been impractical for a number of the ppts to have attended the originally planned experimental session. The experiment was therefore rescheduled. Unfortunately, two of the ppts (one sensitive and one control) had to drop out for health reasons at short notice. However, the experiment still took place on the rescheduled date with four sensitives and four control ppts.

Experimenter 2 supervised the session, in which the ppts were seated at tables, with the ppts sufficiently spaced apart so as not to be able to copy answers from one another. The experimenter

- allocated a ppt number to each ppt
- explained the ethical terms of the experiment to the ppts (e.g. the right to withdraw, preservation of confidentiality, notification that anonymised data may be published and the right to access the results after the analysis)
- provided each ppt with a supply of five question-and-answer sheets (as per Appendix A) and a pen
- explained the procedure to be used, including an instruction that the ppts must not write upon or mark the photographs in any way and advice to the control group that they should use their best guess or follow their intuition
- gave the ppts the opportunity to ask for clarification on how to fill in the sheets and
- arranged for five of the seven enveloped photographs to be selected at random, for use during the remainder of the experiment.

Every other ppt around the room (i.e. four in total) was provided with one of the photographs, face down. Each of these ppts wrote the photograph letter and his ppt number on the top of a question-and-answer sheet. When everyone was ready, the experimenter started timing the run of the experiment and requested the ppts to turn over their photographs. The ppts were then given six minutes in which to ascertain the answers to the questions on the sheets and to write down those answers, without talking at all and without using any extraneous devices.

At the end of the timed run, the experimenter passed each photograph on to the next ppt, leaving it face down. He also collected in the completed question-and-answer sheets. The run was repeated, this time utilising the ppts who did not take part in the first run. Those who participated in the first run were able to rest during the second run.

This procedure continued to be repeated in round robin fashion until all ppts had undertaken the experiment with all the photographs. Thus, by the end of the experiment, 40 completed question-and-answer sheets had been collected in.

Experimenter 2 passed to Experimenter 3 (Rush):

- the completed question-and-answer sheets (in a sealed, opaque envelope)
- the five photographs used (in a sealed, opaque envelope)
- a list of the ppt numbers in each of the sensitive and control groups.

Experimenter 1 passed the correct pieces of information about the deceased persons to Experimenter 3 (in a sealed, opaque envelope).

Marking of Question-and-Answer Sheets:

Experimenter 3 checked the photographs for cues, clues or tampering.

Experimenter 3 marked the answers on the sheets by comparing them with the correct pieces of information, awarding 4 marks for each correct answer to Q2 to Q4 and 1 mark for each correct answer to each sub-question within Q5. Thus the maximum marks per sheet were 16.

Experimenter 3 carried out a statistical analysis of the results. If Q1 (“Do you recognise the person as being someone you knew before this experiment began?”) was answered “yes” on any sheet, that sheet was to be discarded for statistical analysis purposes. Q6 (“How confident are you about the answers provided above?”) was always ignored in carrying out the main statistical analysis and only used for a secondary analysis.

RESULTS

Sensitive Group Results

The actual results obtained by the sensitive group were as per figure 1.

Participant No.	Photograph	Q1 Known?	Q2 Name?	Q3 Occupation?	Q4 Death?	Q5 Personality?	Total
1	C	No	0	0	0	3	3
1	D	No	0	4	0	2	6
1	F	No	0	0	4	1	5
1	I	No	0	4	0	3	7
1	J	No	0	0	0	1	1
Participant Score:							22
4	C	No	0	0	0	0	0
4	D	No	0	4	0	1	5
4	F	No	0	0	4	1	5
4	I	No	0	0	0	3	3
4	J	No	0	0	4	2	6
Participant Score:							19
5	C	No	0	0	0	0	0
5	D	No	0	0	4	1	5
5	F	No	0	0	0	1	1
5	I	No	0	0	0	1	1
5	J	No	0	0	0	0	0
Participant Score:							7
7	C	No	0	0	0	2	2
7	D	No	0	4	0	0	4
7	F	No	0	0	4	0	4
7	I	No	0	0	0	1	1
7	J	No	0	0	4	1	5
Participant Score:							16
Group Score:		0	16	24	24	24	64

Figure 1

Control Group Results

The actual results obtained by the control group were as per figure 2.

Participant No.	Photograph	Q1 Known?	Q2 Name?	Q3 Occupation?	Q4 Death?	Q5 Personality?	Total
2	C	No	0	0	4	1	5
2	D	No	0	0	4	1	5
2	F	No	0	0	4	2	6
2	I	No	0	0	0	3	3
2	J	No	0	0	0	2	2
Participant Score:							21
3	C	No	0	0	4	1	5
3	D	No	0	4	4	0	8
3	F	No	0	0	4	0	4
3	I	No	0	0	0	2	2
3	J	No	0	0	4	1	5
Participant Score:							24
6	C	No	0	0	0	1	1
6	D	No	0	0	4	0	4
6	F	No	0	0	4	1	5
6	I	No	0	4	4	3	11
6	J	No	0	0	4	4	8
Participant Score:							29
8	C	No	0	0	0	0	0
8	D	No	0	4	4	1	9
8	F	No	0	0	4	0	4
8	I	No	0	0	4	2	6
8	J	No	0	0	4	1	5
Participant Score:							24
Group Score:		0	12	60	26	26	98

Figure 2

Comparison of Results

The sensitive group scored a total of 64 hits, whereas the control group scored a total of 98 hits.

The mean score for the sensitive group was 16, whereas the mean score for the control group was 24.5.

Had the sensitive group scored more highly than the control group, it was intended that a one-tailed T-test be applied, to compare the means and standard deviations of the two sets of results, in order to see whether the difference in group scores was statistically significant. However, in the event, it can clearly be seen that the sensitive group did not score more highly than the control group.

DISCUSSION

The experimenters were surprised to find that the control group obtained a higher number of hits than the sensitive group, suggesting that psychic sensitivity could not be brought to bear in the scenario around which this experiment was designed.

Although the purpose of the experiment was to compare the results of a sensitive group with those of a control group (rather than comparing them with chance results), it may nevertheless be of interest that the distribution of hits tended to follow, for the most part, that which would be expected by chance for each of the seven questions and each of the groups (figures 3 & 4), although the control group's high degree of accuracy in determining cause of death (Q4) is an unexpected outlier. Q2 (the person's name) had the lowest probability of a hit by chance, Q3 (occupation) had a 1/12 probability of a hit by chance, Q4 (cause of death) had a 1/4 probability of a hit by chance, and Q5a-d (personality) each had a 1/3 probability of a hit by chance.

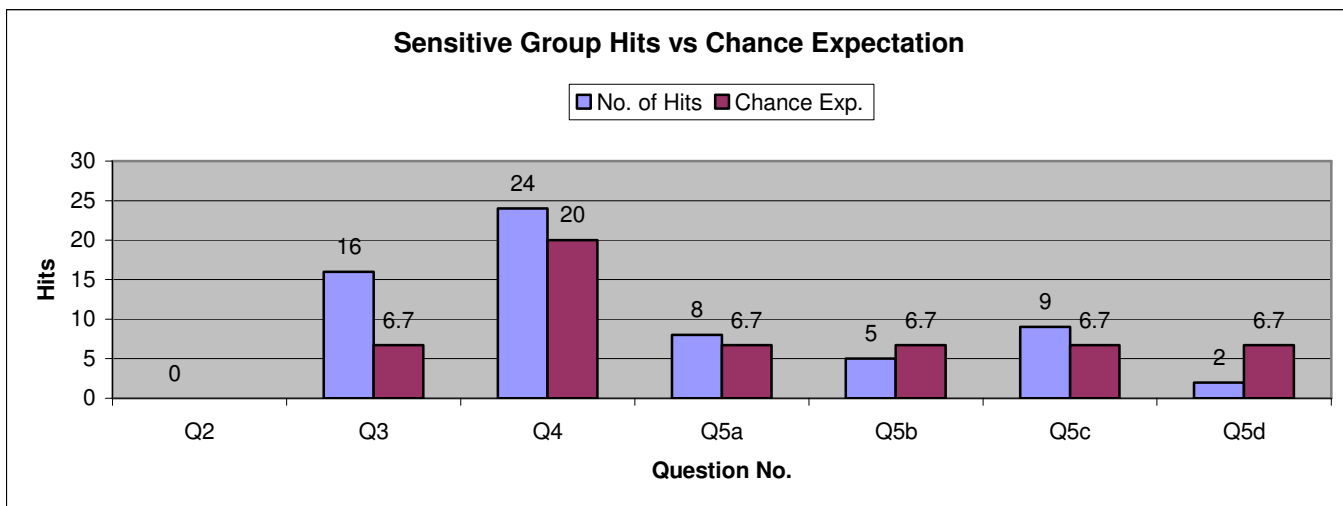


Figure 3

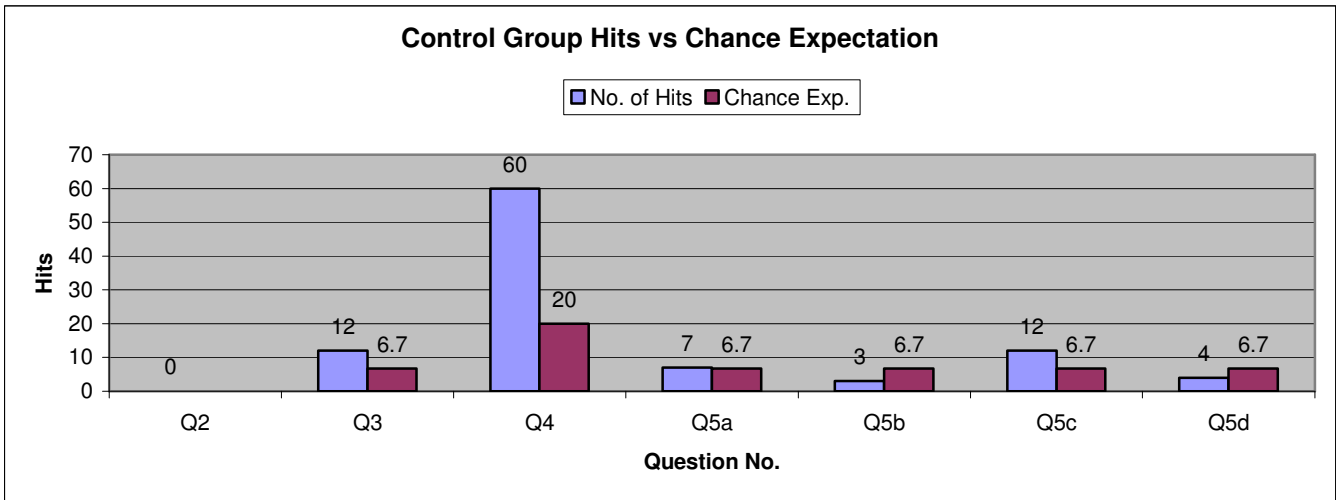


Figure 4

One of the differences between this study and Kelly and Arcangel's is that in their study, the ppts had experienced "significant losses" and actually *wished to contact* the photographed persons, whereas these criteria did not apply in the current study. So it is conceivable that this could have contributed to the lack of success of the sensitive ppts in the current study.

Several ppts from both groups left multiple questions unanswered. The questions were either left blank or two answers were provided for the same question. These questions were considered to be unanswered. However, the number of unanswered questions was roughly equal between the control and test groups, so any statistical effect should be negligible.

It appears that ppts in the sensitive group tended to be more confident about their performance, even though this was not borne out by their actual scores (figure 5). Ppts in the control group seemed less confident about their performance and tended to underate their actual scores (figure 6). However, a T-test for this difference is not significant, with $p=0.27$.

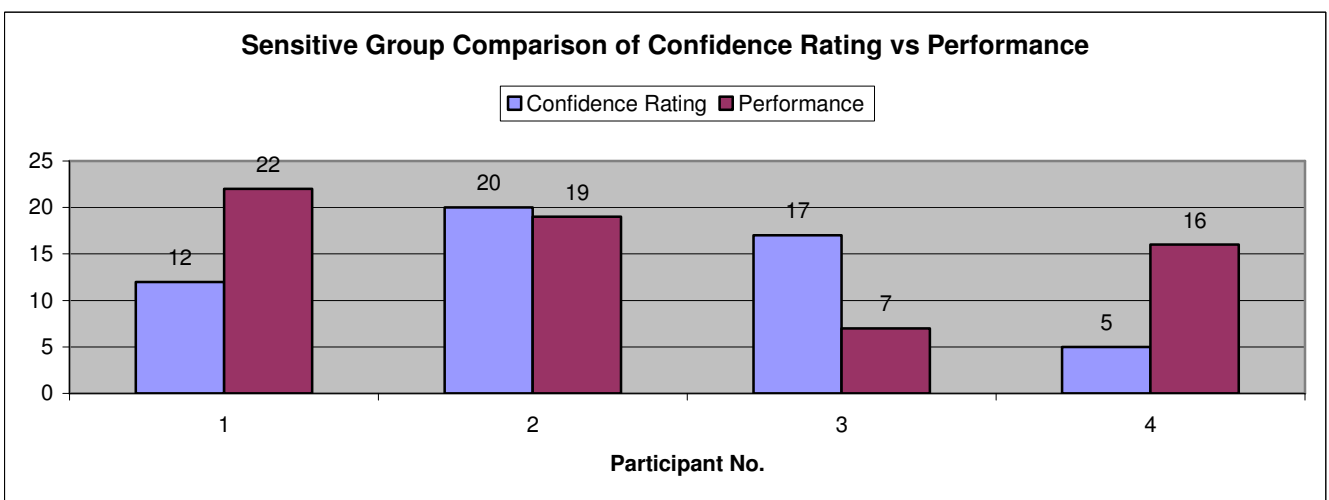


Figure 5

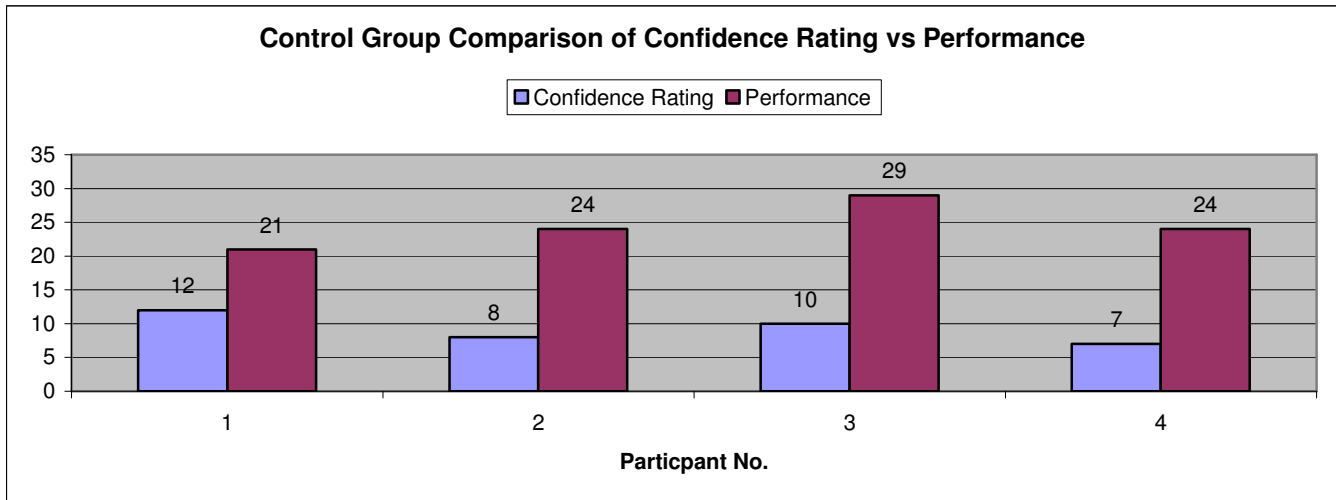


Figure 6

COMMENTARY: METHODS AND ISSUES

It was decided to use, for the most part, multi-choice questions so that the accuracy of the answers could be determined quantitatively, for comparison of means between the two groups of ppts, thus producing a more scientifically valid conclusion. On the other hand, it could be argued that requesting specific information about the deceased persons reduces the ecological validity of the study as in real life, mediums usually produce whatever information about spirits they happen to pick up, rather than seeking specific pieces of information.

The choice of questions asked about each deceased person was made to add an element of ecological validity because those particular pieces of information (first name, occupation, cause of death, personality traits) are the typical pieces of information that a mental medium tends to provide when giving a reading about a deceased person and for this reason, equal weighting (i.e. marks out of 4) was given to each of these pieces of information. On the other hand, one could argue that providing a photograph of the deceased person, as opposed to providing a live sitter, reduces the ecological validity of the study, as most reputable mediums would argue that there is no way to contact a specific spirit and that it is up to the spirits themselves to decide who is to communicate with the medium.

The foregoing comments about the ecological validity of the current study need to be kept in perspective, however, as the study was not specifically designed to test the ability of mediums *per se* but was simply looking at the ability of psychic sensitives at a more generic level. On the other hand, Kelly and Arcangel's research was aimed more specifically at studying the abilities of mediums and, in a mediumistic context, their method of providing general textual readings, to be selected by the ppts from a selection of readings, is more ecologically valid and still provides a quantitative method of measuring the results.

Although the protocol stipulated only that every other ppt would take part in each run of the experiment, as it happens, this resulted in all the sensitives taking part in every other run and all the non-sensitives taking part in the alternate runs. An issue arose during the conduct of the experiment with one of the sensitives vocalising her irritation that the photographs had been handled by other people prior to being given to the ppts, thus

possibly causing the wrong 'energies' to be picked up, despite instructions being given that the experiment should be conducted in silence. As this vocalisation occurred during a sensitives run, this could to some extent have reduced the concentration of the sensitive ppts and partly explain why they achieved less accurate results than the control group, i.e. this could have been a confounding variable. The sensitive's complaint does not seem to be particularly valid, as the photographs had been computer printed by Experimenter 1 anyway and had never been handled by the persons that they depicted. However, a lesson learned is that the experimenters should have made it clearer to the ppts at the outset that their personal psychic / mediumistic ability was not being tested in the experiment.

The small sample used (even smaller than that planned) limits the generalisability of any conclusion drawn. Because of their professional contacts, Kelly and Arcangel were able to use a larger sample of psychics in their experiment.

CONCLUSION

It was concluded that the experiment showed no evidence for persons claiming an ability in psychic sensitivity being any more adept at determining information about deceased persons by examining their photographs than persons claiming no ability in psychic sensitivity.

REFERENCES

Kelly, E W and Arcangel, D (2011) 'An Investigation of Mediums who Claim to Give Information About Deceased Persons'. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, January 2011.

Pincott, H (2008) 'Module 19 – Sensitives and Their Significance'.

APPENDIX A: QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SHEET

The design of the question-and-answer sheet was as follows:

PROJECT MERLIN

MODULE 19

CPSG PHOTOGRAPHS EXPERIMENT

Participant No.:

Photograph Letter:

1	Do you recognise the person as being someone you knew before this experiment began?	
---	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--

2	What is the first (i.e. Christian) name of the person?	
---	--------------------------------------------------------	--

3	What was his / her main type of occupation? (Tick one row only)	Director / Manager	
		Medical	
		Teaching	
		Armed forces	
		Engineering	
		Commercial	
		Retail	
		Skilled manual worker	
		Unskilled manual worker	
		Housewife	
		Other occupation	
Had no occupation			

4	What was his / her cause of death? (Tick one row only)	Illness (prior to age 70)	
		Accident	
		Violence (e.g. murder, suicide, killed in battle)	
		Other (e.g. old age)	

5	Which personality traits did the person have? (Tick each row once)	Strict		Average		Easy going	
		Introverted		Average		Extroverted	
		Cheerful		Average		Miserable	
		Cared mainly for others		Average		Cared mainly about himself / herself	

6	How confident are you about the answers provided above, on a scale of 0 to 4, where 0 = not at all confident and 4 = very confident?	
---	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--