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BRIEF REPORT

Who is calling? An Independent Replication of a Telephone Telepathy Test

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HIGHLIGHTS

Telephone telepathy
An experiment found no overall evidence for telephone telepathy, but people using intuitive thinking performed better than those using rational strategies.

ABSTRACT

We present the results of a new preregistered experiment aimed at testing telephone telepathy. One hundred and seventeen participants were requested to identify which one of two callers was calling to their smartphone. The correct identifications were 294 out of 604 trials, corresponding to 48.6%, slightly below the expected chance of 50%, supporting the lack of any telepathic phenomenon. A subsequent exploratory analysis, comparing the performance of the participants divided according to the cognitive strategies used to solve the task, revealed that participants claiming to have adopted intuitive strategies outperformed the participants claiming to have adopted more rational strategies (56% versus 35.4 %), suggesting that telepathic skills could be enhanced by reducing rational, controlled cognitive strategies.

KEYWORDS

Telepathy, telephone, intuition, cognitive strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The possibility of observing telepathic capabilities in real life is one of the main fields of investigation of Rupert Sheldrake, who, together with his collaborators, has devised a series of controlled telecommunication telepathy experiments since 2003. These experiments were variously based on telephone calls (Sheldrake & Smart, 2003a, 2003b; Sheldrake, Smart & Avraamides 2015), email (Sheldrake & Smart, 2005; Sheldrake & Avraamides, 2009); electronic messages (Sheldrake & Lambert, 2007; Sheldrake & Beeharee, 2009) and SMS messages (Sheldrake, Avraamides & Novak, 2009). With better communications technology and the increased use of smartphones, more sophisticated experiments have become possible. Most recently, experiments were performed using a range of automated telephone procedures (Sheldrake & Stedall, 2024; Wahbeh et al., 2024). The aim of this study is to test telephone telepathy, specifically using the system devised for the fourth of Sheldrake's procedures.

All of these studies are based on the following basic procedure. One of two, three, or four callers are selected at random and asked to focus their attention on the receiver as they message or wait to talk to them. The receiver is asked to guess which of the potential callers is contacting

them before receiving their communication. These studies variously used selected and unselected participants. In the existing study of the procedure used here (Sheldrake & Stedall, 2024), in a total of 266 trials involving participants in the UK and US and two possible callers, a hit rate of 57% was obtained compared to the chance expectation of 50% ($p = .01$). In the replication using a similar procedure (Wahbeh et al., 2024), in a total of 289 trials with preselected roles, a hit rate of 50.9% was obtained compared to a chance expectation of 33.3% ($p < 0.001$). Here, there were again two possible callers, but also an option to guess that no one was calling. This was guessed by less than one third of the callers, and when trials involving this guess were removed from the analysis, a hit rate of 56.3% was obtained compared to a chance expectation of effectively 50% ($p = .02$).

Thus significant results have been obtained in two cases, using the same or similar procedures to the one used here. Based on the hit rates obtained in these, our hypothesis is that the percentage of correct guesses by the receiver reaches a value of at least 55%.

METHODS

The study was preregistered on the Koestler Registry (http://www.koestler-parapsychology.psy.ed.ac.uk/Documents/KPU_Registry_1048.pdf) before data collection.

The participants were all adults selected by a research assistant using personal contact. Most of them were students at Padova University. Each participant in the role of receiver was requested to contribute for six trials. The planned initial number of participants in the role of receivers was 100 to contribute a total of 600 trials. As some receivers did not contribute six trials, further participants were recruited (as planned) to arrive at the total of 117 participants contributing 604 trials. Before the test, each participant was asked to complete an informed consent form.

The following basic procedure was used:

1. The test subject registers for the test and selects two friends. He/She provides her own phone number, and those of her two friends. This initiates a *test*.
2. At a randomly chosen time (see below), the system calls a randomly chosen friend (see below) and asks them to think about the subject.
3. The system then calls the subject and asks them to guess who is calling. The guess is made via a keypress and recorded.
4. The subject is then connected to their chosen friend in a conference call, and the two can talk until this ends.
5. 2-4 constitute a *trial*, and in a test, six trials are attempted.
6. If the chosen friend does not answer in a given trial, the trial is postponed for 10 minutes and then reattempted. A trial will be postponed once, and if the friend does not answer a second time, it will not complete.
7. Depending on whether the chosen friend and/or subject answer their phone and follow the test procedure, a trial may or not complete. A test will therefore consist of some number of complete trials.

The underlying test is developed in the programming language PHP and uses a MySQL database. Phone calls are made via the programmable voice platform Twilio (twilio.com). All random numbers are generated using the mt_rand() function in PHP, which utilises the pseudo-random Mersenne Twister Random Number Generator. The generator is seeded from user time, location and various system variables. The generator is known to be unsuitable for cryptographic applications.

During test registration, the subject provides their name and phone number in a web interface. Their name is spoken during the messages they hear during trials. Optionally, they provide an email address, their gender (Male or Female), and their approximate age (20-29, 30-39, etc.). The subject also provides names and phone numbers for two friends, and optionally their genders and approximate ages. Finally, the subject selects *time slots* in which trials may be attempted. These are one-hour periods and are available from the next complete hour after registration, e.g., if the subject registers at 9.30 am, the first slot will be at 10 am. Slots are available during the next two days, from 9 am until 9 pm. Slots on the day of registration will likewise be available until 9 pm. Once the subject has provided all of the above, they can initiate the test. At this point, all of the information provided is recorded against each participant (one subject and two friends), including who is the caller. The subject is always the receiver. Times are also chosen for six trials in the time slots. This information is not revealed, but it is determined at this point.

Tests are designed to work in a given country, and the subject must choose their test version during registration. Dialling codes are automatically added to the numbers

provided, and therefore the test will not work in a country other than the one chosen. The times of available slots are given in the local time of the chosen country. Each version has its own database.

The system monitors for trials that are due to start, and initiates ones that it finds are due to start. The chosen friend is called and is asked to press 1 to take part. If she does, she is then asked to think about the subject, and then hears 'music on hold' for the time being. The subject is then called and told that one of their friends is on the line, and asked to guess which, via pressing the given keys for the given names. The choice of friends is always alphabetically ordered, so nothing can be inferred from it. Thus, each trial offers a 50% chance of a correct choice. Once the subject has made their choice, they are connected to their friend, after which the two can talk. It is only at this point that the subject knows if they were correct or not. Once the two are talking, the trial is marked as complete. If the trial does not complete for any reason, it is not marked as complete. The choice of friend and the guess the subject makes are recorded during each trial.

All test and trial data are stored in the system database, either during test registration, or during the execution of a trial. MySQL views are used to make the data easily readable for individual trials and tests, as well as provide running totals of the guess success rate. These tables are available in a password protected web interface. Data is also archived by emailing copies of it to a third party every week.

After the completion of a session of 6 trials, each participant was asked to describe the strategy adopted to solve the task with the following question: "*Please describe how you tried to solve the task, either to find an underlying rule or reasoning about the caller's identity or using an intuitive approach, that is trying to guess the caller's identity based on your feelings and guessing abilities*".

All trials were carried out under the control of the research assistant in the receiver's room to prevent conventional communications between the caller and the receiver.

RESULTS

The overall descriptive statistics obtained by all participants are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1. The raw data are available at: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24574174.

The hypothesis that the percentage of hits reached a value of at least 55% is not confirmed. Binomial test 117 participants: 294/604; z = -.61; p = .76, one-tailed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics obtained by all participants.

	Trials	Hits	Hits %
Mean	5.16	2.51	48.6
Median	5	3	50
St. Dev.	.88	1.28	23.7

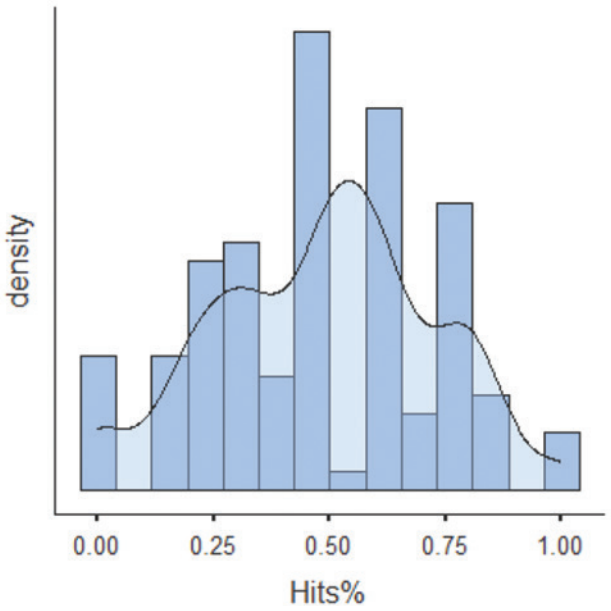

Figure 1. Percentage hits obtained by all participants.

Type 1 strategies were declared by 42 participants. For example: "*I make my choice based on the probability*"; "*I choose at random, as if you were throwing a dice*". Type 2 strategies were declared by 75 participants. For example: "*I used my instinct, first sensation*"; "*I used the first visual image appeared with closed eyes*". The hit percentages obtained by participants divided according to the type of strategy used to solve the task are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Receivers who had adopted type 2 strategies obtained a percentage of correct responses 20% higher than those who had adopted type 1 strategies. They also obtained an average of 56% correct answers, higher than the chance of

Table 2. Descriptive statistics obtained by all participants with respect to the two types of strategies used by the receivers.

Strategies	n	Trials	Hits	Hits %
Type 1	42	209	74	35.4
Type 2	75	395	220	55.7

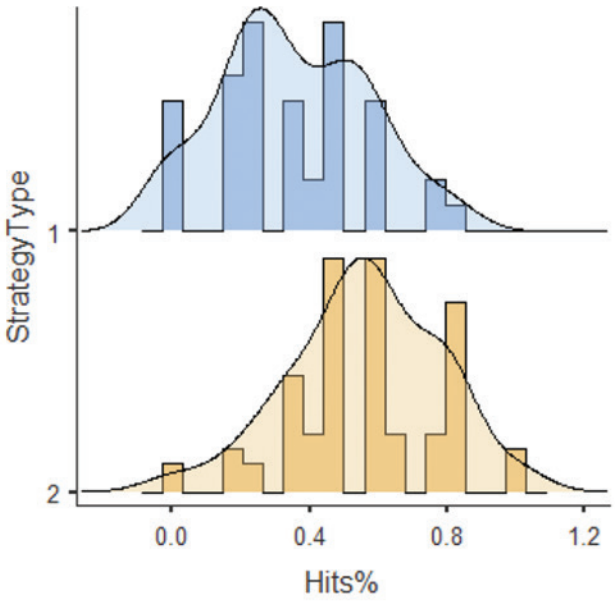

Figure 2. Percentage hits obtained by all participants with respect to the two types of strategies used by the receivers.

50% (binomial test 220/395; z = 2.21; *p* = .027, two-tailed). Furthermore, the use of type 1 strategies seems to penalize the hits score below the chance level (binomial test 74/209; z = -4.28; *p* = .00003, two-tailed).

DISCUSSION

The main hypothesis that a group of unselected participants can guess who of the two callers is calling to their smartphone more than the expected chance was not confirmed. However, a post-hoc explorative comparison between participants divided according to the type of strategy used to solve the task revealed that participants who declared that they had adopted intuitive strategies (i.e., strategies not based on reasoning) obtained a hit percentage of 6% above chance. This last finding, if confirmed in future studies, would suggest that, to increase telepathic skills, it is necessary to adopt intuitive strategies that are not based on reasoning, which seems to suppress this mental capacity. This study may demonstrate a sheep-goat effect, in which those who believe in psychic phenomena perform better in forced-choice tests (Lawrence, 1993). Namely, it may be the case that sheep would take an intuitive approach, whereas goats would take a rational one. Moreover, in the study that is replicated here (Sheldrake & Stedall, 2024), participants were recruited *via* Sheldrake's newsletter and social media channels, and it is therefore possible that this pre-selected for sheep. In future studies exploring guessing strategies, it would be helpful to assess such beliefs.

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