

## Psychics Versus UFOs: The New Gender War?<sup>1</sup>

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Nine out of ten American adults admit to having at least some belief in paranormal phenomena. While there is no significant sex difference in amount of belief, females tend to believe in phenomena, such as psychic ability, more than males. Males are more willing to believe in UFOs than are females. One explanation for this sex difference is that men are agentic-instrumental, taking an active approach to thinking and learning, while women are communal-expressive, putting emphasis on emotions. Phase I of this study assessed undergraduates to determine whether the population of students exhibited the sex difference in belief. The goal of Phase II was to attempt to increase belief in psychics among males by providing concrete anchors for them to associate with a (“pseudo”) psychic reading.

### Introduction

It is estimated that nine out of ten American adults admit to having at least some belief in paranormal phenomena (Markovsky & Thye, 2001). With such a large segment of the public accepting parapsychology, it is appropriate to say that paranormal beliefs are an integral part of social life. A paranormal belief system is akin to any other belief system in that it is associated with certain social structures and has particular consequences (Goode, 1999). The social impact theory can be applied to further explain the foundations of paranormal beliefs. According to this theory, parapsychology is a natural result of the social impact that occurs in specific interpersonal situations (Markovsky & Thye, 2001).

While there is no significant gender difference in amount of paranormal belief, an interesting variation exists in the type of paranormal belief. Generally, females tend to believe in phenomena such as ESP (extra-sensory perception) and psychic ability, while males are more willing to believe in UFOs (unidentified flying objects) (Gray, 1990). Houran and Lange (2007) equate this to cognitive differences between men and women, observing that women prefer humanly relevant paranormal phenomena while men lean toward naturally relevant phenomena.

In regard to cognition, Abele (2003) states that men are agentic-instrumental; taking an active approach to thinking and learning. Women, in contrast, are communal-expressive, putting emphasis on emotions (Abele). Therefore, this description of sex differences in thinking and learning is supported by the observation that more females than males tend to believe in psychic phenomena, while more males than females believe in UFOs (Gray, 1990). Therefore, it follows that males are more likely to believe in concrete paranormal phenomena than women, while women will believe more strongly in verbal phenomena than males.

One of the most common examples of verbal phenomena in the realm of paranormal beliefs is psychic readings. According to many skeptics of this phenomenon (e.g., Carroll, 2005b; Randi, 1995; Schick & Vaughn, 2005), individuals who claim to use psychic powers are actually employing a method called the “cold reading” technique. A cold reading employs manipulative tactics that lead a subject to believe that the cold reader possesses psychic abilities and therefore “knows” things about the subject without ever having met him or her (Carroll, 2005b). Cold reading is not quite as manipulative as one may think, however, because often the subject willingly provides the reader with information, both consciously and unconsciously.

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Three factors are eminent in all cold readings. First, the reader fishes for details (Carroll, 2005b). The reader makes a suggestive (but vague) statement and pays close attention to how the subject responds. The reader then plays off of that response to make his or her next statement (i.e. prediction). Often during this phase, the subject will volunteer personal information, and the reader simply agrees by saying something like, “Yes, I can see that” (Carroll, 2005b).

Another factor is that the reader makes statements about the subject that are quite general and could apply to almost anyone. Such a statement produces what is called the Barnum Effect. The effect results because people actively search for personal meaning in vague statements that could apply to virtually anyone (Carroll, 2005a). In this situation, however, the subject usually wants to believe in the reader’s psychic powers and therefore feels as though the statements pertain only to him or her. Furthermore, the reader will often add a question (“Am I right?”) to the end of a statement, encouraging a nod or verbal response from the subject (Carroll, 2005b).

The third factor works most to the advantage of the reader. It should not come as a surprise that some, possibly many, of the reader’s statements will be incorrect. Fortunately for the reader, however, the subject typically ignores, and forgets, these erroneous statements. This tendency in human behavior is known as the confirmation bias (Schick & Vaughn, 2005), in which people are predisposed toward finding evidence that supports a claim or a belief, and ignores or disregards evidence that is counter to that claim or belief. He or she will instead hold on to the “true” statements, thus remaining convinced that the reader does indeed have psychic abilities (Carroll, 2005b).

The present study will test Abele’s (2003) argument that men are agentic-instrumental (“doers”) while women are communal-expressive (“talkers”) by examining males and females within the context of belief in psychic readings. Specifically, it has been shown that more females than males tend to support beliefs in psychic readings (Gray, 1990).

In the present study, the researcher will attempt to increase the proportion of male

believers in psychic readings by emphasizing agentic-instrumental qualities of the experience. If the “doing” aspects of the psychic reading are increased, it is expected that more males will rate the experience as believable than when the “talking” aspects are emphasized.

The present study will be conducted in two phases. The first phase of the study will be to verify that there is an existing sex difference in terms of paranormal beliefs in the population to be sampled. The validity of the second phase of the study will depend on finding differences similar to those reported by Gray (1990).

In phase two of the study, participants will either be tested in the “verbal” or the “concrete” psychic reading group. Volunteers in the “concrete” group will be asked to hold, and concentrate on, a solid object (e.g., a small crystal on a chain, a crucifix, rosary beads) during the reading. Participants in the “verbal” condition will sit for what would be considered a typical reading. That is, although the concrete objects will be present, they will not be used as tools of interaction with the participants. Instead, participants will sit relatively passively while they hear their readings.

The investigator’s main prediction is that male participants in the “concrete” group will believe more strongly in the reading than male participants in the “verbal” group. This prediction is based on the fact that males seem to need solid evidence around which they build a paranormal belief (Gray, 1990). For female participants, however, the concrete objects may be distracting; therefore, the investigator is open to the possibility that female participants in the “verbal” group will show a stronger belief in the reading compared with the females in the “concrete” condition. This prediction is based on the fact that females relate more to spiritual and communicative paranormal phenomena.

## Method

### Participants

In phase one of the study, 77 traditionally aged college students were evaluated from Robert Morris University (RMU) located in Moon Township, Pennsylvania. In phase two of the study, 12 RMU participants were recruited from general psychology classes. Some of the students

# Sex and Psychic Beliefs

earned extra credit from the professor of the class in which the study was conducted. The students were enrolled in undergraduate general psychology classes during the spring semester of 2008.

## Design

The main study (phase two) used a 2 x 2 between subjects design. The independent variables were Sex (male, female) and Condition (verbal, concrete). The dependent variables were the mean score on the post-reading belief survey as well as the participants' report of the perceived value of the reading received.

## Procedure: Phase I

The goal of this portion of the research was to establish that previously reported sex-differences in belief were represented in the population.

A paranormal belief survey was distributed to 77 undergraduate general psychology students at Robert Morris University (RMU).

The survey used a 7-point Likert scale for students to indicate their beliefs. The findings were consistent with previous research showing sex difference in belief.

## Procedure: Phase II

Participants were tested in either a "verbal" or a "concrete" psychic reading group.

Participants in the "concrete" group were asked to hold and concentrate on a solid object (e.g., a small crystal ball on a chain, a crucifix, or rosary beads) during the reading.

Participants in the "verbal" condition sat for what would be considered a typical reading.

Although the concrete objects were present, they were not used. Participants sat relatively passively while they heard their readings.

One participant was tested at a time, and each reading lasted for about 15 minutes.

Following the readings, volunteers completed a 10 item survey to measure the degree to which they believed their psychic readings.

After this, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask additional questions about their participation as well as the research itself.

Volunteers were then thanked and asked to keep the details of the research to themselves until the end of the semester.

## Results

Two 2 (Sex) x 2 (Condition) analyses were conducted. One based on an average belief score, the other was performed on the amount of money participants believed the reading was worth.

### Belief

The results indicated a significant interaction,  $F(1, 9) = 19.25, p < 0.05$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, males showed the greatest difference between concrete and abstract readings.

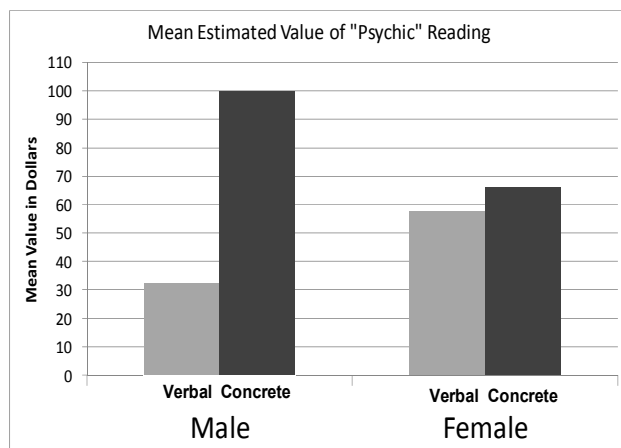
Figure 1: Mean number of names generated for all conditions.



### Money

The results indicated a significant interaction,  $F(1, 9) = 19.85, p < 0.05$ . As can be seen in Figure 2, males showed the greatest difference between concrete and abstract readings.

Figure 2: Representation of race and gender in all commercials presented during Super Bowl 2008.



### Conclusions

The present findings confirmed the prediction that males in the concrete condition would exhibit higher levels of belief than males in the verbal condition.

The results are also consistent with Abele (2003) who argued that males are generally agentic-instrumental (“doers”) while women are generally communal-expressive (“talkers”).

### Observations

Cold reading is an extremely effective and easy to use tool for convincing people that psychic abilities are real.

Females are more interactive and willingly provide more information than males.

While all participants were surprised to learn that the reader was not psychic, males tended to be more resistant to the truth than females.

Upon learning the truth about the “psychic” reader’s abilities, they reduced their estimate of the value of the reading.

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