

## Psychic Detection: The Use of Psi in Criminal Investigation

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper surveys the putative phenomenon of psychic detection, that is, the use of psi abilities in criminal investigation. Police attitudes to psychic insights into the solution to a crime, theories of the possible bases of successful psychic detection, and controlled scientific investigation of the efficacy of psychic detection are addressed. Although the empirical literature is not encouraging for the validity of the phenomenon, a constructive suggestion is made for further research.

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It is now commonplace to refer to the contemporary era as the age of information. Thus, there is a strongly endorsed view in our community that many problems in everyday life can be resolved by accessing some appropriate information, a process that is impressively facilitated by the wonders of modern science and technology. On occasion however, it appears that the desired information is simply not available through any normal avenue, and some people may feel a need to consult a professional psychic for assistance. A primary social function of psychics is to provide information that evidently is accessible solely by paranormal means. In essence, clairvoyants depict themselves as a conduit to information that is largely beyond the reach of the average person and even the expert, that is, those who are not psychically adept. One context in which psychics might well provide socially valuable information is in the solution of criminal cases. The objective of this paper is to examine the possibility of using extrasensory abilities (so-called *psi*) in criminal investigation.

There is a long history of criminal cases in which a psychically gifted person is said to have contributed to the apprehension of the perpetrator of the offence (Lyons & Truzzi, 1991). By way of illustration, in 1692 a French wine merchant and his wife were murdered and robbed, and a dowser is said to have used his divining rod to locate and then to identify the three offenders (Wilson, 1984). Prior to the twentieth century many reported cases of psychic detection involved *psychometry*: while holding an object that had been in contact with the victim or the offender, the psychometrist could paranormally obtain information about the crime (Rowe, 1996).

Particularly in contemporary cases however, the predominant method of psychic detection involves clairvoyant visions, that is, waking images or dreams about the crime. For example, Miller (1996, pp. 149-150) reports that while Melbourne detectives were still investigating the abduction (later to be ascertained as the sexual murder) of 6-year-old Sheree Beasley in 1992, the victim's grandfather was told by a woman who "occasionally had visions" that the abductor was a man (which was true) with wavy hair (true) and possibly a beard (not true at the time of the abduction, although true by the time of the trial in 1994), and who had entered Australia via New Zealand from some unnamed country (true). The psychic also had a vision of Sheree playing with toys in a house with a woman present (not true if it was a contemporaneous vision, as Sheree was dead by this time). The name of St. Clair also came to mind (not known to be of any relevance). Additionally, Miller (1996, pp. 148-149) reports that another clairvoyant told Sheree's grandfather that she had experienced a mental image of a small blue Toyota sedan associated with the abduction (true).

As instanced by the investigation of Sheree Beasley's abduction and murder, many of the cases in which clairvoyants volunteer their assistance to police services have a high public profile, that is, they tend to feature relatively horrific crimes that receive considerable and often sensational coverage by the media (Nickell, 1994a). This trend in part may reflect a desire among professional psychics for favourable publicity. Indeed, some of these professionals now vigorously promote their utility in criminal investigations by advertising their services in magazines, through television appearances, and on the worldwide web (WWW). A recent casual scan of the WWW by the author revealed numerous North American websites that promoted psychic sleuths; these included websites for the "Hillhouse Psychic Detective Agency" and for self-declared psychic investigators such as Noreen Renier, Bill Ward, Riley G., and the quaintly named Laurie McQuary. At least in the USA, therefore, psychic detection is becoming a highly professionalised business. These services are offered for the benefit of both police agencies and the relatives of the victims of crime.

Notwithstanding this emphasis on professionalism, informal advice to me from Australian detectives suggests that in this country clairvoyant visions about a crime are reported to police most frequently by people who do not profess to be either a professional clairvoyant or even "psychic". Thus, a person may experience a vision about an ongoing criminal investigation and feel a social obligation to disclose the experience to the relevant authorities, whether or not it is likely to be pertinent to the investigation.

Police nevertheless vary in their receptiveness to such reports. Some leading figures in the American FBI, including Robert Ressler (Posner, 1994; Ressler & Shachtman, 1992) and Vernon Geberth (1996), urge a degree of openness to clairvoyants' offers of assistance in a criminal investigation, and police guidelines for using psychics in this context have been formulated (Hibbard & Worring, 1982). According to Geberth (1996, p. 421), "The use of a psychic can be considered as an

additional investigative aid.” Other police officers, however, are much less receptive. During the search in 1989 for Sydney’s infamous “Mosman granny killer” many dozens of people reported to police that they had had visions of the serial killer, and each of these reports had to be followed up by detectives working on the case. The senior field investigator in the case, Detective Sergeant Dennis O’Toole is said to have remarked, “I don’t think even we knew how many raving lunatics there were out there in the community” (Kennedy & Whittaker, 1992, pp. 136-137). During one criminal investigation in the USA, 600 such reports are said to have been received (Nickell, 1994a), and it is understandable that detectives may resent the substantial workload involved in checking out so many leads that they suspect will be utterly fruitless.

Indeed, information from clairvoyants during a criminal investigation typically is unsolicited. This in itself is an indication of the extent of police scepticism toward information from psychics. Quantitative evidence of the reluctance with which police actively seek input from clairvoyants is provided by two studies undertaken in the USA by Durm and Sweat. Their initial survey of police departments in major US cities found 65% of departments had never used psychics in their investigations at any stage (Sweat & Durm, 1993), and in a follow-up survey of small and medium-sized cities, 72% of police departments had never sought psychics’ help (Durm & Sweat, 1994). While acknowledging that these data also signify that up to a third of police departments have in fact appealed to psychics on at least one occasion, the general trend suggests that most US police services do not value very highly the input from psychics in a criminal investigation. The same situation almost certainly obtains in Australia.

### THEORIES OF PSYCHIC DETECTION

Notwithstanding police antipathy toward the unsolicited contributions of self-declared psychics to an ongoing criminal investigation there are many anecdotes to the effect that such contributions have been effective in the solution of some crimes. Before critically examining the empirical evidence for the occurrence of psychic detection it is appropriate to survey the conceptual framework for this putative phenomenon. How are we to understand the successful solution of crimes through psychic means? In broad terms there are two distinct theoretical approaches to psychic detection, namely, the parapsychological approach and the sceptical approach.

The parapsychological approach encompasses the view that psychic detection is simply as it seems to be, that is, the application of psi abilities to the solution of criminal cases. Thus, individual cases of psychic detection seem to have drawn upon various parapsychological talents such as psychometry, telepathy, precognition, and retrocognition (Rowe, 1996). Although this elementary notion has formed the basis for hypotheses in empirical research (reviewed later in this paper), as far as I can ascertain no commentator has formulated a detailed model of psychic detection under this general framework. Such a model would need to specify the aspects of a crime

that are deemed to be subject to psychic retrieval and the precise abilities of people who are capable of psychic detection of crimes. It would be desirable also for such a theory to be formulated in such a way that it would explain when and why self-professed psychic detectives make *errors* in their solution to criminal cases. Until such a theory is enunciated the empirical study of the parapsychological approach is limited largely to the investigation of the degree of success of a psychic detective under circumstances in which normal processes of inference and acquisition of information about the relevant case are ruled out.

The alternative to the parapsychological approach is the sceptical view. Several sceptical commentators (e.g., Alcock, 1994; Rowe, 1996) have offered relatively detailed accounts of the apparent success of self-professed psychics' attempts to solve criminal cases. Several normal psychological (rather than parapsychological) factors are posited to underlie such performances. Some psychics' solutions are said to be imaginative narratives based on rational inferences from what is already known about the crime (as gleaned from reports in the news media and perhaps from police personnel working on the case), on common social trends, and on popular social stereotypes about the characteristics of criminals. By way of illustration, consider Miller's (1996) report of the clairvoyant's vision of the abductor of 6-year-old Sheree Beasley, as described earlier in this paper. The perpetrator was described by the psychic as a man with wavy hair. As the media were already speculating that the motive for the abduction was sexual, and as in any event most abductors of young children are male, and in addition, as many men can loosely be described as having wavy hair, the accuracy of the clairvoyant's vision in these respects could be dismissed by the sceptical commentator as little more than an informed guess.

In some cases the reported success of a psychic may be attributed to confabulatory errors of memory. For example, a person's recollection of the psychic's prediction may unwittingly incorporate some information that was actually garnered only at a later time in the course of police investigations. In Miller's (1996) account of the clairvoyant vision in the Sheree Beasley case the abductor was said to have entered Australia from New Zealand, but the psychic "did not know which country he originated from" (p. 149). In an account of the vision solicited at a later date the clairvoyant is reported to have stated specifically that the offender originally was English (Hobbs & Rule, 1997). Whether the distortion of memory here was due to the authors or to the person who described the clairvoyant's vision to them is not known, but clearly the effect of the apparent confabulation was to enhance the level of agreement between the reported psychic vision and the facts of the criminal case.

Other aspects of a psychic's envisaged solution of a crime may be somewhat vague or otherwise capable of favourable reinterpretation after further facts of the case come to light. Alcock (1994, p. 188) terms this process "retrofitting". The clairvoyant in the Sheree Beasley case reportedly determined that the perpetrator "might have a beard" (Miller, 1996, p. 149). When the child was abducted in 1992 the offender was clean-shaven, so strictly speaking this element of the vision was untrue;

the fact that the offender had a beard by the time of his trial nevertheless offers some opportunity for a post hoc rationalisation of the accuracy of the vision in this respect. Thus, the determined advocate of the role of psi in psychic detection could well be tempted to indulge in some retrofitting when defending the evidential value of the above case.

Sceptical views of psychic detection suggest further that some misrepresentation may occur. Thus, self-professed psychic detectives may make misleading claims about their past successes (e.g., Gordon, 1994) or about the endorsement of their alleged psychic powers by experimental parapsychologists (Alcock, 1994). Professional psychic detectives may be especially prone to the common human foible of overstating their investigative successes and minimising their failures; on occasion this tendency may nevertheless be tantamount to fraud (Rowe, 1996). In addition, the news media may tend to exaggerate or even invent reports of the success of psychics in solving sensational cases (Ejvegaard & Johnson, 1981): such stories provide considerable entertainment and thereby help to enhance audience ratings or circulation figures.

Both the parapsychological approach and the sceptical approach to psychic detection are principally designed to address the performance of people who regard themselves as having psychic powers that they can apply to the investigation of a crime. It should be reiterated however, that at least in Australia, most people who report to police a vision or dream relating to a current criminal case probably do not regard themselves as particularly "psychic". Indeed, the irrelevance of most of these reports suggests that the most viable theory here would be one that stresses a proneness to fantasy, a deep sympathy for the victim of the crime and for relatives of the victim, and a strong desire to see the offender brought to justice. The parapsychological and sceptical approaches, on the other hand, are most pertinent to cases in which the psychics' impressions of the crime and the perpetrator appear to have been strikingly accurate. This raises the issue of a rigorous scientific demonstration of the possibility that psi abilities can successfully be applied to the solution of a crime.

#### SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

Much of the evidence popularly proffered for the efficacy of psychic detection comprises relatively informal, sometimes essentially anecdotal, descriptions of psychic impressions relating to a contemporaneous criminal act and a superficial, largely subjective assessment of the congruence between these impressions and the subsequently determined facts of the case (e.g., Friedman, 1982; Tabori, 1974). It must be stressed that the anthologies of such cases are highly selective: the relative incidence of valid and invalid psychic solutions of a crime does not seem to have been precisely documented, but the former are generally conceded to constitute a small minority. Any impression generated by the popularly cited successful cases needs

therefore to be set against evidence of the substantial failure of most other psychics' visions to bear unequivocally upon the facts of a given crime (Randi, 1982).

More fundamentally, as no control had been exercised over the psychic's opportunity to obtain information about the crime by normal means, reports of apparently successful cases have little value as scientific evidence of the paranormality of psychic detection. This is not to deny that the anecdotal literature might be helpful in ascertaining the phenomenology of psychic detection as a human experience, but this case material can never be properly regarded as conclusive for the issue of paranormality. Indeed, the lack of adequate documentation and independent corroboration of the large majority of these cases has made them highly vulnerable to fatal debunking by sceptical commentators (for examples see Hoebens & Truzzi, 1985; Nickell, 1994b).

Phenomenology: an account of an experience as the latter is depicted by the person who had the experience.

Principal attention to scientifically controlled investigations therefore is warranted. In some early studies (e.g., Brink, 1960; Tenhaeff, 1955) experimenters invited psychics to use psychometry under laboratory conditions to generate statements about the offender in cases that the police had already solved and for which a conviction had been obtained. The methodology of some of these studies was weak in a few respects; for example, the experimenter sometimes knew the identity of the offender, thereby allowing the possibility that the psychic could capitalise on the experimenter's involuntary facial reactions as a basis for hedging and amending statements about the offender (so-called cold reading techniques; Hyman, 1977). In any event the results obtained by Brink (1960) were null, and although Tenhaeff (1955) reported encouraging observations with a single psychic (Croiset) it is doubtful that these would satisfy strict assumptions required for statistical significance.

More recent studies typically have been much more sound in methodology and statistical treatment. Two of the principal improvements have been to use a number of self-declared psychic participants rather than one individual, and to systematise the measurement of predicted characteristics of the crime and its perpetrator. Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe, and Wagner (1979) tested a sample of twelve psychics for their ability to use psychometry on physical evidence gathered by police in relation to four separate crimes and thereby to identify characteristics of the crime committed, the crime location, the victim, and the offender. The items of physical evidence and case details were provided by an independent investigator who had no part in testing the psychics; conversely, researchers who solicited the psychics' impressions had no knowledge of the crimes. No substantial congruence was evident between the

psychics' impressions and the facts of the cases, although no inferential statistics were computed. The characteristics showing the greatest accuracy were the sex of the offender and the sex of the victim, but common social stereotypes for these characteristics might readily accommodate the observed level of accuracy here.

A follow-up study by Reiser and Klyver (1982) further refined the methodology by incorporating inferential statistical analysis and adding two comparison groups, a sample of college students and one of homicide detectives. The student sample enables a statistical test of whether the performance of the psychics is any more successful than that which could be achieved through perceptive reasoning; similarly, the sample of detectives provides a basis for testing the possibility that the performance of the psychics might be accounted for in terms of their knowledge of criminal behaviour. The double blind procedure devised by Reiser et al. (1979) was retained. Again, the psychics' production of veridical information about the four crimes was not significantly better than that provided by the two comparison groups. Reiser and Klyver further concluded that their study "failed to show that the psychics could produce *any* information relating to the cases beyond a chance level of expectancy" (p. 264).

The studies by Reiser and his colleagues nevertheless feature a fatal flaw (Lyons & Truzzi, 1991). The coding of the participants' statements about the crimes did not distinguish between "no response" and an incorrect response. That is, if a participant simply failed to mention the age and gender of the perpetrator of a crime, their performance on these characteristics were treated in the statistical analysis as "incorrect". It is unclear, therefore, whether the psychic detectives were consistently wrong in their statements about a crime or on the other hand, they simply failed to address the sorts of information that were used in the statistical analysis. There is a methodological lesson here, namely, that reliance on a participant's spontaneous accounts of a given crime does not ensure that all characteristics of interest to the researcher will be addressed by the participant.

In an attempt to circumvent this methodological flaw Wiseman, West, and Stemman (1996) provided a group of professional psychic detectives and a group of university students with a set of 15 statements. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not each statement did pertain to the crime associated with the physical evidence from which participants were to generate their impressions (psychic or otherwise). No significant difference between groups was found in the accuracy of performance on these 15 statements. Again, the findings were null, but there are additional grounds for caution in drawing any strong conclusion from this study. First, there were only three people in each group, so the generality of the study is moot. Second, many of the 15 statements used to characterise the crimes were not ones that police would consider to be of major value to their pursuit of an unknown offender. Thus, the statements included "a link with milk", "victim had son aged four", "perpetrator had many children", and "perpetrator's Christian name begins with S". Thus, the study by

Wiseman et al. might be said to be lacking in generalisability and in ecological validity.

<b>Ecological validity: applicability to everyday life</b>
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Although psychic detectives may be called upon to provide information about various facets of a crime (e.g., the present locations of the victim and the perpetrator), the most crucial information from an investigative viewpoint is usually the identity, or at least a description, of the offender. In criminological contexts an attempt to describe the sort of person who has committed an unsolved crime is known as criminal or psychological profiling (Jackson & Bekerian, 1997; Turco, 1990). Thus, a psychological profile comprises a maximally specific biographical sketch that is intended to characterise the perpetrator of a given crime. Such a profile typically comprises identifying personality traits, behavioural tendencies, and demographic characteristics. Notwithstanding some fanciful depictions in the mass media, the evolving techniques of psychological profiling have proved advantageous to police services in many criminal investigations. The empirical investigation of psychic detection therefore might usefully be undertaken in relation to the process of psychological profiling.

To date the only study to take this approach is one undertaken by researchers at the University of New England, that by Kocsis, Irwin, Hayes, and Nunn (2000). Participants were given a detailed report of a previously solved homicide investigation. The case description was based on information in files of an Australian state police service and comprised a scene-of-crime report, a forensic biologist's report, a forensic entomologist's report, a ballistics report, a report of a preliminary post mortem examination, a pathologist's post mortem report, basic details of the identity and background of the victim, a schematic plan of the crime site, and nine captioned photographs of the scene of crime and the body of the deceased, the latter showing the extent of injuries suffered by the victim (but concealing the victim's identity). The case report thus contained a summary of all relevant information available to investigators prior to their determination of the primary suspect. Participants were invited to construct a systematic psychological profile of the offender in this case by completing a 45-item multiple-choice questionnaire surveying physical characteristics of the offender, cognitions related to the offence, behaviours associated with the offence, and personal history of the offender, then to identify which of 300 adjectives descriptive of personality, temperament and character (Gough & Heilbrun, 1983) they envisaged to pertain to the offender.

This systematic profiling task was performed by groups of self-declared psychics, specialist psychological profilers (as an index of excellence), police (to control for the factor of familiarity with criminal behaviour), psychologists (to control for the factor of insight into human behaviour), and students (to control for the factor of intelligent



inferences). There were indications that various aspects of the profiling task were more accurately performed by the professional profilers and the psychologists; the performance of psychics (and rather curiously, that of the police!) however, was poor. In order to control for a possible reliance on popular social stereotypes of criminals, another group of people was asked to complete the profiling task having been given no case material other than the advice that the offender had committed homicide. All groups except the psychics produced a more accurate profile than did the people who worked simply from the knowledge that they were profiling a murderer. The findings of this study suggest that psychics' attempts to construct a psychological profile of an offender can be explained essentially in terms of reliance on social stereotypes of a criminal. Some limitations of the study should nevertheless be acknowledged. Only one case study of one type of crime (homicide) was used for the profiling task, so the generality of the findings across cases and offence categories remains an open question. In addition, although the sample of psychics was recruited from an organisation for psychics, these participants cannot properly be deemed professional psychic detectives.

Notwithstanding the methodological limitations and the caveats applying to specific sets of findings, the empirical literature is not encouraging for efficacy of the psychic detection. Although the occurrence of null results cautions against any definitive conclusion on the validity of this phenomenon, the consistency of findings across studies is sufficient to prompt a verdict of "not proven" in the trial of psychic detection. At the same time the availability of laboratory evidence for the phenomenon of psi more generally (see Irwin, 1999 for a review) might be taken to indicate that one should not rule out the possibility of psychic detection too precipitately. Further research on this topic might usefully look at the phenomenology of spontaneous cases of putative psychic detection in order to generate ideas for more process-oriented investigations.

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