

DIVINATION WITH TAROT CARDS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Three experiments are reported which test the validity of using Tarot cards to produce personality interpretations. When Tarot readings were given face to face subjects rated them very highly, but when given blind (using card order only) they were unable to select their own reading from among nine others. Instead they tended to choose readings which were most general.

People who consult astrologers, palmists or Tarot readers often claim that the information they are given provides an accurate and specific description of their personality. There has been much recent research on the predictive power of astrology (see e.g. Gauquelin *et al.*, 1979; Kelly, 1979) but very little work on other forms of divination. The aim of this study was to find out whether the Tarot cards can provide accurate information about personality.

A pack of Tarot cards consists of 78 cards, 22 major and 56 minor arcana, the latter divided into four suits. There are many ways of 'reading' the cards (see Douglas, 1972; Gray, 1969) but typically the reader asks the subject to shuffle the pack, and to cut it three or more times with his left hand. The reader then lays out a specified number of cards in a prearranged pattern and interprets the position and orientation (upright or reversed) of each card within the whole pattern to provide a 'reading'. In this way readers claim to be able to describe a person's life, his problems, hopes and fears, his personality and even his future. This study is not concerned with prediction of the future, but only with descriptions of the present and past.

Obviously there are many means by which the reader may provide information thought to be accurate by the subject. These include the following:

1. Information may be so general or universally applicable that it is acceptable to anyone.
2. The reader may use cues from the appearance or behaviour of the subject, or obtain feedback from him in response to what he says.
3. The lay-out of the cards may (paranormally) convey genuine information about the subject, or the reader may use psi in some other way.

Three experiments were conducted to try to separate and compare two situations; one in which all the possibilities were available (the 'ordinary' reading) and one in which cues from the subject were excluded (the 'test' reading).

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Subjects were 10 students, 5 male and 5 female, who had taken part in a parapsychology course and expressed a special interest in the Tarot. Experimenter 1 (the author) also acted as Tarot reader in all tests, having had eight years experience of using the cards for divination. Experimenter 2 was a volunteer student.

Each student had an 'ordinary' reading, that is, one carried out in the traditional manner with the reader and subject face to face. Subjects shuffled and cut the cards, the reader (Experimenter 1) laid out 10 in the 'Celtic Cross' and gave a reading. This took approximately 15–20 minutes. After the reading the subject was asked to rate it on a 1 to 7 scale according to how well he thought it applied to him. Answers could range from 1 Not at all, through 4 Average, to 7 Totally. Five subjects had their 'ordinary' readings before the 'test' reading and five afterwards (but before the assessment of the test readings).

Test readings were carried out blind; the reader having only the card order to work from, in two sessions. In the first, in Experimenter 1's absence, Experimenter 2 took each subject in turn into a quiet room to shuffle and cut the pack in the traditional manner. The subject then left and Experimenter 2 recorded his name, assigned a letter randomly to him and recorded the order and orientation of the top ten cards. Experimenter 2 gave Experimenter 1 a list of letters and card orders to work from. Between the two sessions, during the following week, Experimenter 1 laid out each of the ten card orders and wrote out a reading for each; assigning each a new letter.

In the second session, in Experimenter 2's absence, Experimenter 1 gave the subjects the ten readings and asked them to read each carefully and to rate it on the same scale as before. Subjects were then asked to choose which reading they thought was their own and to rank the rest in order of applicability to themselves. This gave a rating and rank for each subject for each reading. Experimenter 2 returned with the lists of names and letters and the results were assessed.

Results

Subjects rated the ordinary readings very highly. No rating was lower than 4 and most gave 6 ($\bar{x} = 5.7$). For the test readings there are two important measures, (1) the rating each subject gave his own reading, and (2) the ratings he gave to all other readings. The means were, respectively 4.1 and 3.2. Note that the test readings were rated much lower than the ordinary ones (4.1 and 5.7 respectively). The difference is highly significant ($t = 3.54$, 9 *df*, $p = 0.003$ 1-tailed) and this shows that a large part of the success of an ordinary reading is attributable to factors absent in the test reading.

More important is to ask whether there is any residual effect after these factors have been eliminated. Comparing the ratings subjects gave their own readings with the mean rating they gave others the difference is significant ($t = 2.13$, 9 *df*, $p = 0.03$ 1-tailed). A similar effect is found for ranks. A sum of ranks of 38 was obtained which is significantly lower than mean chance expectation of 55 ($p = 0.04$ 1-tailed, Morris, 1972 or $p = 0.035$, Solfvin, Kelly and Burdick, 1978). This indicates that subjects ranked their own readings higher than expected by chance.

Discussion

The results appear to show firstly that face-to-face readings were far more successful than blind test readings and secondly that even when normal cues were removed subjects were still able to pick, to some extent, their own readings. However, there are two reasons for doubting the second conclusion. First it depends on the use of 1-tailed tests. These were planned because it was thought

that differences in the opposite direction would be meaningless. However, it could be argued that 2-tailed tests should always be used in parapsychological experiments because of the difficulty of predicting scoring directions. Second, there may have been dependencies in the ratings and rankings. Kennedy (1979) has pointed out that if judges know each other they may be influenced by their knowledge of the preferences of other judges, so allowing for dependency which invalidates the statistical analyses used here. A second experiment used subjects who did not know each other.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Ten subjects and an assistant experimenter were recruited by an advertisement in the University student magazine. There were 8 students and 2 others, and the assistant was a student. None was previously known to me and they had little, if any, knowledge of the Tarot. The procedure was the same as for the previous experiment.

Results and discussion

The mean rating for ordinary readings was 5.4 which is a little lower than before but not significantly so ($t = 0.82$, 18 *df*, $p = 0.43$). This compares with a mean rating for subjects' own test readings of 3.3 and a mean rating for all others' readings of 3.2. The difference between ordinary and test readings is again large ($t = 3.71$, 9 *df*, $p = 0.005$) but there is no significant difference between ratings given to own and others' readings ($t = 0.21$, 9 *df*, $p = 0.84$). This indicates that there is no residual effect for the test reading. This could be attributed either to the absence of the artifact which was present in experiment 1, or to the difference in atmosphere, interest or motivation amongst the subjects. A third experiment was carried out with subjects who did not know each other but nevertheless were involved in parapsychology and likely to be enthusiastic about the outcome of the experiment.

EXPERIMENT 3

Method

This experiment was made possible by Jo-Marie Haight who offered to act as Experimenter 2. The method was similar to that used previously except that Experimenter 1 was in England and Experimenter 2 in Durham, North Carolina. The materials had to be sent by post and of course no ordinary, face-to-face readings were therefore possible.

Experimenter 2 chose 10 subjects whose identity was not known to Experimenter 1 until after the experiment was over. They were all involved in parapsychology in the U.S.A. She obtained card orders for each, assigned them letters and sent the list to Experimenter 1. Experimenter 1 made readings for them, assigned each a new letter and returned them to Experimenter 2 for distribution to the subjects with instructions for rating and ranking. Nine subjects completed the task and returned the data to Experimenter 2. She forwarded it to Experimenter 1 together with the letter code so that the results could be assessed.