READER'S NOTE:

The following paper was prepared for a class at the Rhine Education Center. The assignment was to critically evaluate a published study in the field of parapsychology. I focused on one of Diane Hennacy Powell's studies of telepathy in a non-verbal autistic child from a decade ago. I am well aware that Dr. Powell has continued her research in this area and is planning more rigorous experiments in the future. I hope to see solid results from her future work, but the following paper had to be confined to the published material available at the time of writing.

A Skeptical Look at a Telepathy Experiment

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A Skeptical Approach to Parapsychology
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D.H. Powell's telepathy experiment with the nine-year-old "Haley" was first presented to the annual conference of the Parapsychological Association in 2014. Her Fall 2015 article in *EdgeScience* (Powell, 2015b) is the most complete written version of the experimental design, procedures, and results.

This study has importance for the field of parapsychology due to the potential "unlocking" of a cohort of gifted subjects capable of producing *repeatable*, statistically significant results. The popularity behind the recent *Telepathy Tapes* podcast (2024-present) has brought this 2014 study and its informal successors into the light of scrutiny (Jarry, 2024; Marshall, 2025).

A Promising Approach

As a preliminary matter, investigators of all persuasions should commend this attempt to examine widespread claims of recurrent psi among a particular population. As Kelly and Locke write in a 2009 prospectus on the future of psi research: "many of the field's historically strongest experimental outcomes had in fact been obtained in repeatable fashion from a small number of exceptional subjects who had somehow found their way into our laboratories." One considers the profound impact had by the infamous Pearce-Pratt series of ESP tests early in the career of J.B. Rhine (Feather & Schmicker, 2005).

Consequently, Kelly and Locke (2009) recommend a focus on locating "gifted" individuals and training "ordinary" individuals in proof-oriented psi research. Speaking in the context of highly-hypnotizable participants, they argue that work should be done with each of these participants "intensively, rather than on a mechanical one-shot basis" and that we should "adapt our test methods to the characteristics of the hypnotic state." Perhaps similar priorities could be projected onto autistic individuals surrounded by claims of telepathic sensitivities.

Kelly and Locke (2009) further point out that historically researchers have "too often looked for psi where it was experimentally convenient for us to look, rather than where the phenomena are inherently more likely to be found." This laconic approach is an experimental design example of the availability bias and may have resulted in the ignoring of promising cohorts of psi research participants who present logistical difficulties for empirical testing. The behavioral issues with autistic children who "tend to be obsessive compulsive and throw tantrums when their routine is disrupted" (Powell, 2015b) are a potential factor behind the lack of empirical research on the alleged telepathic abilities of this group.

The Experiment

Dr. Powell (2015b) mentions that she was limited to three days of testing. This allowed her to devise two discrete sessions with one therapist and one session with another therapist. There were some design differences between the sessions (e.g., feedback being withheld in the first session but provided in the second session), but the overall method was for the therapist to be provided with randomly selected words, pictures, numbers, and equations which Haley was meant to telepathically "read" and reproduce. Haley provided the answers by pointing to letters on a stencil (held by the therapist sitting on the other side of a divider) before typing them into her electronic device. The reported results of high levels of success on reproducing numbers between eight and nineteen digits long are, needless to say, beyond any sort of chance expectation.

The debate rages on as to whether any form of facilitated communication and/or rapid prompting represents nothing more than the subconscious (or conscious) work of the facilitator (Schlosser et al.; Hemsley et al.) or genuine communication from the autistic individual (Heyworth et al.; Jaswal et al.). For our purposes, we will limit observations to the potential design flaws in Powell's experiment (2015).

Design Weaknesses

Powell (2015a) admits that "The ideal experimental setup was not possible," as "The therapist who knew the answer also needed to hold the stencil. Attempts to change this, such as the insertion of a stencil holder, were too much for Hayley at the time." This situation is regrettable. Reading this detail, Marshall (2025) complains that "when you introduce controls like removing physical touch, the apparent telepathy goes away."

A close look at the video (Powell, 2014) of this experiment reveals that the "divider" separating Haley from her communication facilitator appears unsatisfactory as a true barrier. Haley's head appears to be poised in front of the barrier for large sections of the experiment. It also seems

likely that the therapist can see the stencil during the experiment, ensuring that she is not blind to Haley's answers.

While one could argue that this is important for providing *ex post facto* feedback, it also allows for the therapist to influence Haley's choices either consciously or unconsciously through the ideomotor effect—which has long been proposed as an explanation for the supernormal effects of dowsing, Ouija boards, and similar devices (Parra & Argibay, 2013).

In fact, in one section which Powell (2014) narrates as "100% accurate," Haley touches the (incorrect) "6," yet the therapist does not remove the stencil as normal, instead waiting for Haley to pick the (correct) "7." This casts doubt on the claims made about Haley's high accuracy overall, since it is the type of dynamic one would expect with ideomotor prompting toward the correct alphanumeric characters. Powell's video also mentions that the therapist was required to verbally tell Haley when a decimal or special character (e.g. "=") arose in the equation. This raises the overall question of subtle verbal cueing in general, either in isolation from or in combination with ideomotor cueing.

While it is unlikely that Haley was able to pick up on facial cues (the barrier does seem sufficient for this), the arguably more important ideomotor effect from the therapist's arm and slight verbal cues could be responsible for the success in answers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My recommendations for future study of ostensible telepathic abilities in non-verbal autistic children include the following:

1. Rule out cueing from the ideomotor effect.

As long as a non-blind communication partner is holding a stencil, letterboard, or other communication device, there will always be doubt as to whether the answer comes from the autistic individual or rather this prompted by ideomotor cueing on the part of the communication partner—this is especially the case between two individuals who have spent hundreds of hours together and have learned a "groove" of communication.

2. Rule out verbal cueing

If a form of "rapid prompting" is indeed necessary to keep the autistic participant "on track" (Powell, 2015b), perhaps a blind, third party might be able to provide these regular prompts for the participant to continue typing or pointing. When a non-blind telepathic sender is providing the verbal or tactile prompts, this introduces too many vectors for possible cueing.

3. Keep the telepathic "sender" in a different room from the "receiver."

Charles Tart, a sympathetic observer, writes (2015) that "as long as sensory cues are available from a person knowing the answers being in the same room, they will probably debunk all of these apparent talents." Experimenters should not balk at the idea that the telepathic receiver must be paired with a person of high "affinity," for this has been shown to be a highly psi-conducive factor in the ganzfeld (Feather & Schmicker, 2005). Yet the presence of both telepathic partners in the same room will always leave room for doubt with regard to cueing (conscious or unconscious).

4. Introduce blinding through precognition experiments

If these ostensibly gifted individuals really are displaying telepathic abilities, it stands to reason they might also display precognitive abilities. A simple way of introducing blinding without eliminating the bonded communication partner from the experiment would be to give the answers to the partner *after* each answer. This might provide some preliminary evidence that these individuals are really able to express psi. Once this aspect is proved, we can have more confidence going forward to introduce tighter (yet sensitive) controls to the strictly telepathic experiments.

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