

Week 2

ESP



Social Psychology of the Paranormal
OLLI Spring 2026
Barry Markovsky

Why are we covering this topic?

- If real, it would violate physical laws
- Illustrates important points about theory & research
- It's *very* popular



Quick Digression

- Personal experiences can be powerful
- To question them does not diminish them
- We will ask questions about experiences ...
- Even if some of those experiences may be yours

Let's Talk About it First

- What is your ESP experience? (One only.)
- How did it make you feel?
- How does it make you feel today?
- Do you have a possible rational explanation for it?
- Do you want to know about alternative, natural explanations for it?

ESP (“psi”) phenomena

Psi “energy” (?)

Term

- mind → mind telepathy
- object → mind clairvoyance
- mind → object psychokinesis
- future → present precognition
- past → present reincarnation, past life regression
- mind → place astral projection; near-death exps.

Can You Really Test ESP Scientifically?

- Depends on the phenomenon. It must be....
 - Repeatable – naturally or experimentally
 - Falsifiable – clear criteria for success/failure
 - Replicable – by any qualified, impartial researcher

Case: Scopaesthesia

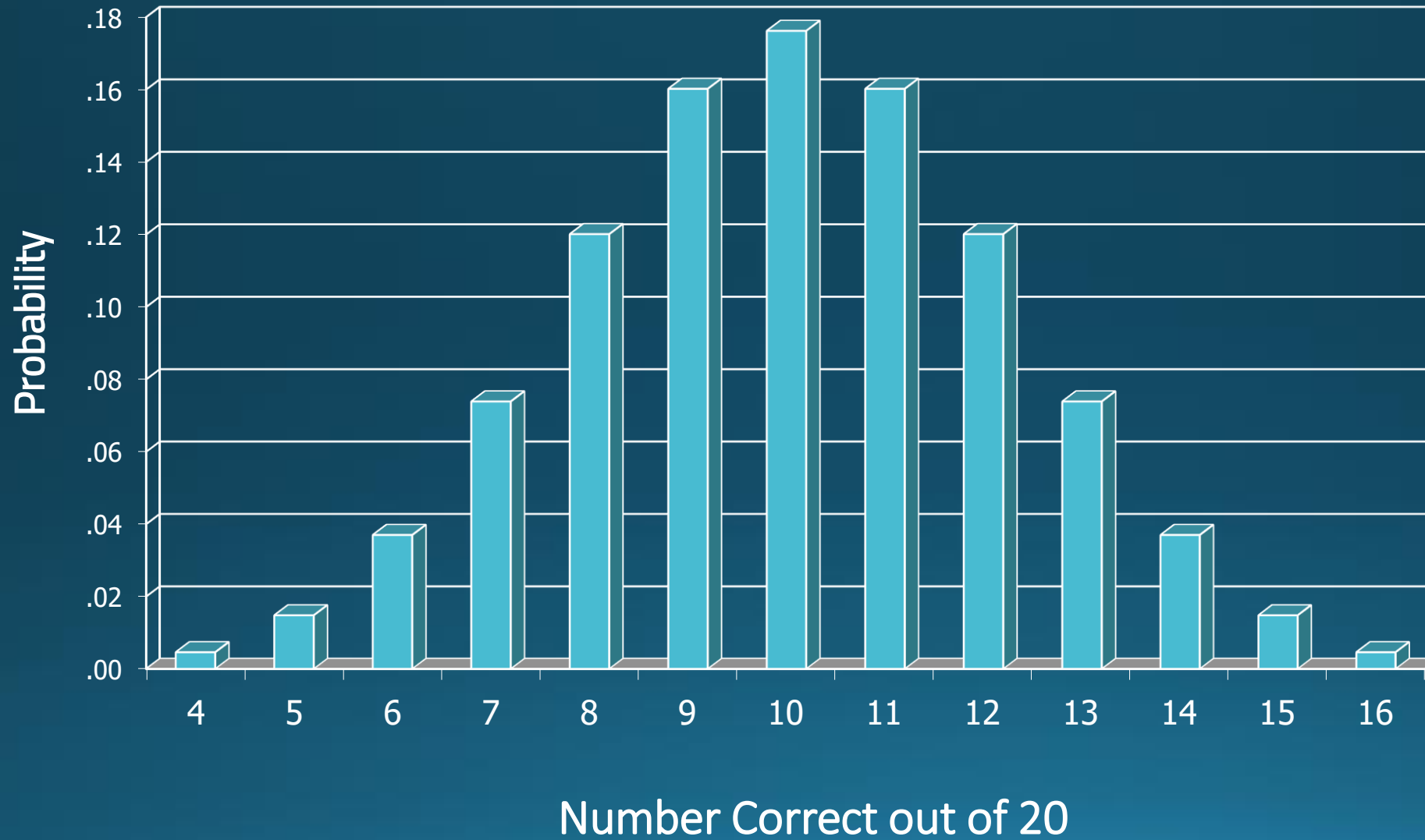
- Typical scenario:
 1. You feel someone staring at you.
 2. You turn around, catch someone staring.
 3. How did you know?
- Classroom testable
 - Not ideal conditions, but informative
 - Method...

Staring experiment

- 2 target subjects up front, backs turned
- 40-70 people stare in unison at one or the other subject
- 15 sec per stare; 5 sec break
- Repeat for 20 trials; randomize target sequence
- 50% (or .50) correct on a given trial via chance alone

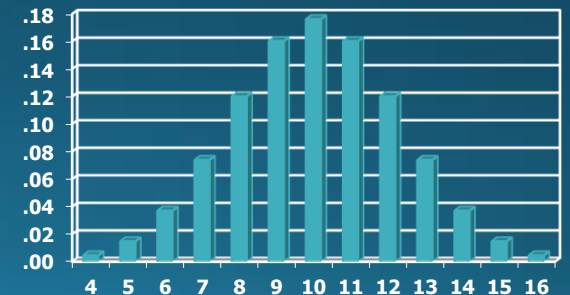


Expected Chance Results



Results

- Never differed from expected by more than a bit
- But it could have! Note:
 - 2/100 subjects should score 15+ correct by chance
 - 2/100 subjects should score 5 or fewer by chance
- Ideally, experiments should
 - test many subjects
 - have many trials
 - be repeated many times



Weaknesses

Statistical

- Sample size issues
- What *would* be “significant”?

Procedural

- Information leakage
- Randomization quirks

Theoretical

- What’s the mechanism?
- Alternative explanations for prior studies

Zener card experiments



- Joseph Banks Rhine
- Big step scientifically
- In the movies



Problems with the Rhine studies

- Botanist, no psych background
- Loose controls
 - Reflections from glasses, see-through cards, facial cues
- Non-random shuffles
 - subjects too hands-on
- Optional starting and stopping
 - file drawer effects; other selection biases

Problems with the Rhine studies

- Little success replicating in other labs
- Rhine & colleagues weren't self-critical
- They did revise based on critiques, but...
- Tighter controls led to poor results
- Parapsychologists today do not cite Rhine's results

Theoretical issue

- For a given event, how to distinguish telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, or PK as its cause?
- Example: Guessing a card correctly. Was it...
 - Telepathy? Clairvoyance?
 - Precognition? Psychokinesis?



SKEPTOID
with BRIAN DUNNING

EPISODE 348

Ganzfeld Experiments

by Brian Dunning

[YouTube Link](#)



LISTEN ON
APPLE PODCASTS



LISTEN ON
GOOGLE PLAY



LISTEN ON
SPOTIFY



LISTEN ON
STITCHER





John Edward Example

John Edward Parody

