

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Finding Or Imagining Flawed Research?

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Dear Editor:

The article “Finding and Correcting Flawed Research Literatures” by Delgado-Romero and Howard (2005) provides an ironic example of flawed research. I will restrict my comments just to their treatment of the ganzfeld telepathy test.

Delgado-Romero and Howard (2005) were motivated to reexamine the ganzfeld effect because they suspected that the previous meta-analytic estimates of the hit rate in that experiment were biased by the filedrawer effect. They were apparently unaware that, in 1975, the officers of the Parapsychological Association (an affiliate of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and principal international scientific organization interested in these topics) adopted a policy specifically opposing the selective reporting of positive outcomes, precisely to avoid the filedrawer problem. In addition, because there are so few investigators in parapsychology, it has been possible to survey virtually everyone who had ever conducted a ganzfeld test to gauge the actual size of the filedrawer. In 1980, such a survey was undertaken by an outspoken critic of this research. That survey concluded that “the bias introduced by selective reporting of ESP ganzfeld studies is not a major contributor to the overall proportion of significant results” (Blackmore, 1980, p. 217). Analyses of potential filedrawer biases in later meta-analyses of this literature have repeatedly confirmed that filedrawer effects cannot plausibly explain the observed significant results (Radin, 2006).

Another motivation cited by Delgado-Romero and Howard (2005) were the “conflicting results” (p. 298) of two positive and one negative meta-analysis of the

ganzfeld literature. And yet, as they noted in their footnote 2, the reportedly negative meta-analysis combined studies in a nonstandard way that underestimated the overall level of statistical significance. When the same methods used in previous meta-analyses were applied to the studies in the negative meta-analysis, they too showed a significant positive outcome ($p < 0.05$). Thus, Delgado-Romero and Howard's reasons for questioning the ganzfeld literature were motivated, in one instance, by lack of knowledge of the relevant literature, and, in the other, by ignoring their own footnote.

We may forgive these lapses in motivational justification, for many scientists find it difficult to accept that telepathy might be true. But the next lapse is not so easily pardonable. To test their skepticism, they conducted a series of eight new ganzfeld experiments. Their experiments resulted in a significantly positive overall hit rate of 32%, which is exactly the same hit rate found in a meta-analysis of 88 ganzfeld experiments consisting of 3,145 trials conducted from 1974 to 2004 (Radin, 2006, p. 120). One might expect that their own confirmation of the ganzfeld effect would have settled their suspicions, but instead it brought into sharp focus their actual concern: that the empirical evidence for telepathy was "precariously close to demonstrating that humans do have psychic powers" (Delgado-Romero & Howard, 2005, p. 298).

Without delving into why such evidence would be so disturbing, Delgado-Romero and Howard (2005) then introduce an ad hoc "psychic theory" (p. 298) to explain the hit rate fluctuations in their ganzfeld tests and to motivate their final, conclusive experiment. Their theory, which is stated without supporting evidence or citations, assumes that it takes two psychics to successfully send and receive telepathic information. If one or both of the pair are not psychic, then they will only achieve chance results. Based on this theory—which assumes that being psychic is a stable state, unlike virtually every other known form of human performance—they predicted that by selecting pairs that produced a hit in a previous experiment, then running them repeatedly through a new experiment, that the resulting hit rate ought to be extremely high.

Instead, they report a hit rate of only 13%, which led them to two conclusions: First, based solely on this experiment, they could now justify why they "do not believe that humans possess telepathic powers," and second, that the highly significant hit rate estimate based on 88 previous experiments, and their own series of eight experiments, must be due to a mysterious "crud factor" (Delgado-Romero and Howard, 2005, p. 300). These conclusions are dubious because (a) they failed to report that the 13% hit rate they found in their final experiment was significantly below chance, (b) an explanation for prior results based on a theory of crud is hardly persuasive, and (c) their proposed psychic theory was unjustified and exceedingly implausible, based on previous empirical studies.

In sum, Delgado-Romero and Howard (2005) may have sought to correct what they viewed as a flawed literature on ganzfeld telepathy experiments, but, in fact,

they ended up confirming it. Their final conclusion was based not on the positive results of their first eight experiments, but on a single experiment based on an overly simplistic and ad hoc theory. Were one skeptical of this approach, one might suggest that they stopped after the last experiment because it finally provided the results that they were looking for.

Sincerely,
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