THE SHAREFIELD: A NOVEL APPROACH FOR FORCED-CHOICE GESP RESEARCH

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While the Ganzfeld paradigm is still among the most reliable protocols in free-response GESP research, it is in our field's long term interest to continue to explore alternative approaches that are more efficient in terms of data-collection rates. Both the Ganzfeld and other free-response protocols involving noise reduction procedures, are time- and resource-intensive experimental approaches. Despite their respectable effect size, they are not well-suited for process oriented research - especially in a field of limited resources. This may account for the fact that an abundance of non-standard Ganzfeld studies, that do not adhere closely to the original protocol, have emerged in the past few decades. It is argued here that a plausible alternative to the free-response/noise-reduction approach would be one using noise-reduction–or optimization–procedures in a forced-choice context.

As shown by a recent meta-analysis, forced-choice studies, while yielding lower effect sizes, have produced positive results over the course of 70 years. While the trial effect sizes associated with this research is clearly inferior to that of free-response studies, the data collection rate is far higher, and replication rates are still adequate for process-oriented research. Above all, as argued in the present paper, a systematic introduction of participant optimization procedures may considerably improve forced-choice effect sizes. We thus present a novel approach for combining forced-choice protocols and participant optimization procedures, within an automated testing framework. A first study exploring this approach is reported, involving a dyadic-ESP or telepathy protocol named the Sharefield. We outline here some of its most salient characteristics.

No mentation, multiple trials: Unlike free-response approaches, individual trials are short, and involve no mentation period; a full experimental trial, including judging, is completed in two minutes. This allows for multiple trials during a 45-minute experimental session.

An immersive environment: Both participants wear an audiovisual head-mounted display (HMD) which immerses them in a slowly animated starfield and meditative soundtrack. This audiovisual background is present across trials, and across the different phases of each trial (instructions, sending/receiving and judging).

Symmetric participant roles. Participants alternate sender/receiver roles on a trial-by-trial basis; at the beginning of each trial, the software announces the participant's role on his/her screen and accordingly launches either sender or receiver tasks.

Simplified judging task and target sets. Compared to typical free-response studies, the participant's judging task here is relatively simple. Essentially, the percipient's ESP task is to sense whether the agent is experiencing a visually complex and stimulating photograph (randomly selected from an image pool) or a relatively neutral gray form, that remains the same throughout.

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A training process and baseline condition. Participants in a Sharefield session find themselves in a cognitively complex situation–involving multiple trials, alternating sender/receiver roles, and multiple phases within each trial (sending/receiving, judging, feedback, and inter-trial breaks). Furthermore, given the fully automated protocol, they go through the session without any guidance from the experimenter, while potentially in an altered state of consciousness. To better prepare them for all this, we decided to have participants first go through a training session that would familiarize them with the ESP tasks and phases of the protocol. We also conceived this training session as a way to collect data on participants' "baseline" psi performance, which could then be compared to their psi results under the optimization conditions. Thus, the participant pair first went through a 10-minute Non Optimized Experience (NOE) session, that involved the basic ESP task (with alternating sender-receiver roles, judging, feedback etc.), but no relaxation, immersive audiovisual displays, or HMD system (a standard computer monitor was used instead). They then went through a 45 minute Optimization Experience (OE) in which the monitor was replaced by the HMD, and the ESP tasks situated within relaxation suggestions and the immersive audiovisual environment.

We report here the results of the first Sharefield study. Its principal objective was to empirically assess the viability of the overall approach, and thus contribute to the development of future protocols. Nevertheless, we did formulate three formal hypotheses for this experiment: (I) the trial effect size for the OE condition would be statistically significant; (II) the trial effect size for the OE condition would be significantly superior to the NOE effect size; (III) the OE session effect size would be significantly superior to that established for the Ganzfeld.

Twenty-five participant-pairs (50 participants) were run in the laboratory of the Institut Métapsychique International (IMI). Prior to arrival, each completed online versions of two questionnaires: the Big Five Inventory, measuring 5 personality dimensions (Extraversion; Agreeableness; Conscientiousness; Neuroticism and Openness to Experience); and a questionnaire concerning participants' attitudes and experiences as related to psi phenomena, mental disciplines, and dreams and absorptive states. Upon arrival at the IMI, and following introductory procedures, participants were first run through the NOE session; then, following a brief pause, they went through the OE session. Finally, a half hour debrief allowed us to collect qualitative participant impressions concerning their experience of the Sharefield.

None of the three hypotheses were confirmed to a significant degree, though a near-significant trend was shown for Hypothesis II. Post-hoc analyses did produce some suggestive evidence that, in the OE condition, the null averaged trial results may have been due to high variability in scoring (i.e. hitting and missing), rather than a total absence of psi. In particular, we focused on three factors known to impact effect sizes in psi tasks (target quality, subject ability and position effects) and, for each of these, applied two tests assessing scoring variability. We obtained statistically significant results in two of the six tests; by contrast, applying the identical test matrix to the NOE condition yielded no significant results. For the hit rate variability tests in the OE condition, we ran a Monte Carlo simulation to estimate the probability of finding 2 out of any of the 6 tests with P-values of 0.03 and 0.02, or less. The simulation yields a significant overall p-value of $p = .012$.

Post-session debriefings with participants allowed us to establish potential problems with the protocol, at least from an experiential perspective. In particular, over half the subjects reported considerable physical discomfort with the HMD system, and found the trial-by-trial hit/miss feedback stressful and distracting.

These quantitative and qualitative data will be quite useful in terms of our long-term objective, which is to develop a viable tool for process-oriented psi research. Our modular software approach

facilitates implementation of protocol improvements (e.g., with respect to the judging and feedback procedures). More generally, the software allows the creation of protocols addressing a range of research issues. In this context we intend to quickly develop single-subject versions of the software, geared toward clairvoyance or precognition protocols.

Above all, we are encouraged by the successful use of optimization procedures and multiple-trial psi tasks within an automated protocol. The optimization procedures fluidly integrated into all stages of the experimental trials, and participants' reports during debriefings suggest that the relatively sustained rhythm of 20 trials/session did not perturb their experience of the OE. Indeed, nearly all under-estimated the duration of their sessions (a sign that they found the experience engaging rather than tedious) and a clear majority expressed interest in returning for more sessions. This suggests that the general approach is sound, and has potential as a long-term tool for process-oriented research.