

# The Limitations and Potentials of Tarot Readings in Times of Uncertainty

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A collective interest in tarot readers might be considered as a measure of social anxiety (Macdonald, 2021). A rise in this interest has been observed in the present pandemic, and many practitioners have reported an increase in inquiries (Sachdeva, 2020). Usual questions seek definitive answers pertaining to love and career prospects, but during the pandemic, there have been more questions about when this crisis would end, and whether the querents would be safe from it (Woods, 2020). As a guide for those who might be inclined to seek comfort through the tarot, this article explores its limitations and potentials.

Individuals who could not find clarity in science nor comfort in religion often turn to the occult (Sosteric, 2014). The modern use of ancient occult tools and systems in order to assist personal transformation is known as “new age” (Melton, 2016). Here, spiritual wisdom is individualized: what is considered “true” is what one experiences to be true. For some people, the absence of a strict religious doctrine allows for more authentic and dynamic insight (Lockhart, 2020). It is believed that new age followers are mostly women, and an inclination towards alternative forms of spirituality may be a way to challenge the limiting, patriarchal tones of traditional religion (Rose, 1998). Furthermore, Blécourt & Usborne (1999) have observed that women are more likely to consult fortune tellers for issues of well-being as a more approachable alternative to male-dominated fields of academia and medicine.

However, a study by Possamai (2000) has implied that both men and women are likely to enter into new age practices following the same pattern: a spiritual crisis happens, and, having been exposed to new age symbolism, they begin their seeking. Höllinger (2004) identified two kinds of new age followers. Those who belong to the first type are more focused in perfecting themselves through spiritual exercises, psychotherapy, and a disciplined lifestyle. Individuals belonging to the second type are more focused on understanding themselves. These new age followers are more likely to use esoteric methods. Among these methods is the tarot.

Despite its sociological relevance and continuing popularity, serious study of the tarot seems to have been pushed aside (Sosteric, 2014). A possible reason for this is that belief in the supernatural is often associated with lower intelligence (Yilmaz, 2021). This immediately stigmatizes new age followers, and, by association, anyone who attempts any serious study on their practices. This skepticism is not new with regard to a study of a psychology of the occult. Mason (1879) wrote in "Telepathy and the Subliminal Self" that:

The outlying fields of psychology, which are now the subject of psychical research, are comparatively a new and unexplored region, and until within a few years it has been considered a barren and unproductive one, into which it was silly, disreputable, and even dangerous to enter; the region was infested with dream-mongers, spiritualists, clairvoyants, mesmerists, and cranks, and the more vigorously it was shunned the safer would he be who had a reputation of any kind to lose (p. 4).

Ironically, it is probably because of this bias that there is a lack of evidence in the practicality of occult practices. All things considered, perhaps a balanced approach to a study of the tarot is not concerned with its esoteric significance and metaphysical implications, but instead in its psychological viability. After all, many people continue to approach the tarot, especially in times of uncertainty (Singer & Benassi, 1981). This is not a judgment on the apparent gullibility of individuals, but a lingering question about the perceived practical utility of the tarot as a creative method for quasi-spiritual self-understanding.

Lavin (2020) identified two approaches to tarot reading. The “hard approach” places an emphasis on the supernatural, while the “soft approach” mixes spirituality with popular psychology. Proving the sure existence and authority of the supernatural might be a lengthy philosophical endeavor, which might be more appropriately discussed elsewhere. One might instead assume that the supernatural is merely a perception of the mind (James, 1917). In “The Pictorial Key to the Tarot”, the co-creator of the Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck posited that the tarot symbolizes ideas that are universal (Waite, 1911). It is said that through tarot, the hidden truths of the human mind are revealed.

Waite (1911) goes on to discuss its history and describe the possible interpretations of each tarot card. While it has been traditionally used for fortune-telling, the tarot might instead be seen as a tool to access the unconscious. This is more aligned with what Lavin (2020) called the “soft approach”, which stresses the psychological rather than the supernatural. Some might see tarot reading sessions as a cheaper alternative to expensive, lengthy psychotherapy—they might assume that readers employing the soft approach use similar methods, after all. It may be important to note, however, that Evans, Forsyth, and Foreman (2010) have suggested that this tendency to lean on grounded fields of study may be a tactic used by working psychics to enhance their own credibility in order to gain more clients. The querent must therefore be careful with what they ask and discerning with what they hear. That being said, for reasonable and reflective individuals, there may be some merit to the tarot, if only as an entertaining tool to explore one’s own psyche and clarify one’s present life experiences through a prompted narrative. One might learn to use tarot for oneself, which may be an enriching experience, but if one finds that it is easier to look for someone who has supposedly mastered the craft, it might be valuable to remember a few things.

It is yet to be proven whether tarot readers can predict the future. What tarot cards can perhaps offer are prompts for self-reflection, which lead to present clarity that may guide future actions. The unconscious speaks through familiar metaphors; thus, in order to communicate with the unconscious, one might also use metaphors (Bulatao, 1992). These images can be interpreted using a psychological lens, following the Jungian tradition (Nichols, 1980; Pilard, 2018). Tarot symbols represent universal archetypes,

and reading them is a dynamic process that involves merging memory, present consciousness, and dreams of the future (Semetsky, 2010a). In “Holistic Tarot”, Wen (2015) argues that using tarot as a way to see the future might be a futile endeavor. That is, one does not have to believe in magic to actually be able to use the tarot for practical purposes. Wen goes on to say that magical associations might be reaching too far, considering the fact that there are many grounded psychological explanations for its apparent effectiveness, among which is the principle of projective methods of psychological testing (Wen, 2015).

Although there is a lack of empirical studies with regard to tarot sessions as a possible alternative to therapy, many tarot readers consider their work a form of healing. However, they position themselves in the space between science and faith: they can’t carry the psychological burden of being mental health professionals, nor the moral burden of spiritual directors (Lavin, 2020). With that in mind, what tarot sessions might offer is comfort, whether or not this comfort is illusory. It is also possible for tarot readings to provide an avenue to bring subconscious issues to the fore, in order for the querent to be able to face them. In other words, there is a potential for it to be used as a way to safely and creatively face traumatic experiences (Semetsky, 2010b).

Though they may not actually be psychic, what many tarot readers might be is empathic, which may allow them to properly interact with the querent’s present emotions (Parra & Giudici, 2020). The querent cannot expect the tarot reader to read their minds, but they might expect a kind of intuitive understanding. That being said, one’s belief greatly influences the perceived accuracy of personal readings, despite vagueness and overt generalizability (Tobacyk et al., 1988). Furthermore, although approaching empathic tarot readers may provide some emotional support amidst a global crisis, it is not a substitute for rigorously studied psychotherapy (Cartwright, 2020; Macdonald, 2021).

To conclude, despite its accessibility, it would seem that there are many ethical issues to consider in seeking and giving a tarot reading. The lack of studies on its therapeutic usefulness might be one thing to consider; its unregulated nature might be another. While there may be many well-intentioned readers, it would be prudent to warn the querent of potential

fraudsters. Seeking a reading from someone trustworthy may be a source of immediate comfort, but it is important to be reminded that licensed mental health professionals are more equipped to treat chronic and potentially-dangerous psychological conditions.

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