

The 'Psychic Pet' Phenomenon: A reply to Rupert Sheldrake

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Rupert Sheldrake (1999a) has published a note in the previous issue of the Journal criticising our research into the 'psychic pet' phenomenon. Certain points arising from this criticism have also been included in his recent book, *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals* (Sheldrake 1999b). This paper outlines why we believe his criticisms to be invalid.

In his 1994 book 'Seven Experiments That Could Change The World', Rupert Sheldrake (RS) urged the public to carry out experiments to help discover whether pets might be able to psychically determine when their owners are returning home. In April 1994, RS was contacted by Pam Smart (PS), who was interested in taking part in this research because she thought that her own dog, Jaytee, might possess such abilities. Between May 1994 and February 1995 RS and PS carried out an observational study of Jaytee in which PS's parents noted down the time that Jaytee seemed to indicate that PS was returning home (Sheldrake 1999b).

In November 1994 the Science Unit of Austrian State Television carried out one of the first formal experiments with Jaytee. The experiment used two film crews. One crew followed PS as she walked around her local town. The second crew remained in her parents' house and continuously filmed Jaytee. After a few hours the crew accompanying PS decided to return home. At that moment Jaytee went to the porch and remained there until PS returned back. The experiment received considerable media attention (e.g., Matthews, 1995) and was shown on several popular British television programmes. RS was

interviewed on many of these items and made positive comments about the results of the experiment.

Because the media were making strong claims for Jaytee's psychic abilities, the first author (RW) contacted RS in early 1995, and expressed an interest in his research. RS and PS kindly invited him to conduct his own investigations of Jaytee, and so the authors carried out four experiments between June 1995 and December 1995.

Before conducting our first experiment we realised that, to avoid possible post hoc data selection, it was necessary to determine the criterion that would count as Jaytee's 'signal' that PS was returning home. This was important because without such prespecification, all sorts of aspects of Jaytee's behaviour might be interpreted after the fact as a signal. Following conversations with PS we agreed that the criterion for our first experiment would be the first time that Jaytee went to the porch for no apparent reason.

In his recent commentary, RS criticised our use of this criterion and suggested that we should have plotted our data in such a way as to examine the overall pattern of time that Jaytee remained at the porch. However, our experiments set out to test the claim that Jaytee clearly signalled PS's journey home by going to her parents' porch for no apparent reason. Testing this claim did not require plotting our data and looking for a pattern, but instead simply involved determining whether Jaytee's 'signal' matched the time that PS started to return home. This was the only claim that had been made about Jaytee's abilities at the time of our experiment. RS had yet to complete his own videotaped experiments with Jaytee (carried out between May 1995 and June 1996) and had not informed us that he would be looking for these patterns in his data. Indeed, it is not clear whether his decision to look for such patterns had been made at the time that we were conducting our experiments. We therefore believe that the claim we tested, and the methods used to test that claim, are fully justified.

During our first experiment Jaytee visited the porch 13 times. The first time that he went there for no apparent reason was over an hour before PS started to return home. After the experiment we reviewed our videotape of Jaytee with PS. She remarked that Jaytee only stayed at the porch for a fairly brief period of time during his 'signal' and suggested that a better indicator might be when he remained there for a longer period of time. There were three occasions when Jaytee stayed at the porch for more than 2 minutes and two of these were close to the time that PS started to return home. As a result we agreed to alter our criterion for the next experiment, so that Jaytee's signal was considered to be the first time that he inexplicably visited the porch for more than 2 minutes.

During this second experiment Jaytee visited the porch 12 times. The first time that he visited the porch for no apparent reason, and stayed there for over two minutes, was almost twenty minutes before PS started to set off home. After this experiment PS noted that there were many summertime distractions nearby (e.g., the neighbour's bitch on heat) that may have been causing Jaytee to provide 'noisy' data', and thus we agreed to postpone the next two experiments until the winter. We returned in December 1995 and carried out two more experiments using the same criterion. In both experiments Jaytee failed to accurately signal when PS was returning home.

In August 1996 we presented these experiments at the conference of the Parapsychological Association (Wiseman and Smith, 1996). By this time RS had carried out his own videotaped experiments with Jaytee. In September 1996 he wrote to RW and noted that he had analysed his own results by plotting the total time that Jaytee remained at the porch during each ten minute period of the experiment. He claimed that his data showed that Jaytee waited by the porch significantly longer during the time period that PS was returning home, and that there was also an 'anticipatory effect' whereby Jaytee also waited a large amount of time in the period immediately prior to PS's return journey. He also noted that, as reported in his recent commentary, he had re-analysed our videotapes of Jaytee and found the same pattern in our first three experiments.

We do not believe that RS's re-analysis of our data provides compelling evidence for the notion that Jaytee could psychically detect when PS was returning home.

First, it appears that RS's observed patterns could easily arise if Jaytee did very little for some time after PS left home and then began to visit the porch more often, and for longer periods, the longer she stayed away. This pattern of behaviour would make sense for a dog waiting for its owner's return and would result in Jaytee being at the window most often when PS is returning, as her journey home will always constitute the final time period in each experiment. It is therefore possible that the pattern that RS describes is not evidence of some inexplicable power of Jaytee to detect PS's return but an artefact of an easily explicable pattern in Jaytee's natural waiting behaviour.

Second, RS's analysis of our data was clearly post hoc and would not provide compelling evidence of psi ability unless it were supported by a larger body of research.

Third, at the time of submitting our paper to the British Journal of

Psychology, it was not possible to properly assess the claim that RS had found the 'patterns' he described in his own data. RS had not then published the results of his own videotaped experiments. Indeed, these experiments have still not been published in a peer reviewed journal, and have instead only appeared very recently in RS's book (Sheldrake, 1999b). This book contains only brief descriptions of the experiments and does not contain many of the details needed for a proper assessment, such as whether RS's method of analyzing his own data was developed post hoc. Moreover, there appear to be design problems in the experiments that might tend to lead artefactually to the patterns in Jaytee's data observed by RS, as pointed out by Blackmore (1999).

In early 1997 RW sent RS a copy of the paper that we had submitted to the British Journal of Psychology. For the reasons given above, this paper did not refer to RS's re-analysis of our data, nor the data from his own experiments.

The publication of our paper in late 1998 (Wiseman, Smith & Milton, 1998) generated considerable media interest. RS has complained that we misrepresented our findings to the media by stating that we did not believe that our experiments supported the notion that Jaytee possessed psychic abilities, and by not mentioning his re-analysis of our data. As noted above, we believe that our methods and results are valid, are not convinced by RS's arguments and are justified in communicating these opinions to journalists. We were, nevertheless, appalled at the way in which some of the newspaper items portrayed PS, and RW wrote to both RS and PS to express his dismay at the wording used by the journalists in these articles. However, we are not responsible for the way in which the media reported our paper and believe that these issues are best raised with the journalists involved.

Although we believe our account of our findings to the media was accurate, we feel that the description of our experiments in RS's book, *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals*, is misleading. RS has presented the results of our work in the main text of this book. However, instead of stating that we had concluded that our experiments did not support the existence of Jaytee's claimed abilities, he described our data as follows:

The pattern was very similar to that in my own experiments, and confirmed that Jaytee anticipated Pam's arrival even when she was returning at a randomly chosen time in an unfamiliar vehicle. (Sheldrake, 1999b, p. 46).

RS only described our actual conclusions (i.e., that we believe that our experiments do not support claims about Jaytee's psychic abilities) in an

endnote, published in a very small font, at the very back of the book (Footnote 1).

In short, we strongly disagree with the arguments presented in RS's commentary. We believe that our experiments were properly designed and that the results did not support the notion that Jaytee could psychically detect when PS was returning home. Moreover, we are not convinced otherwise by RS's re-analysis of our data and reserve judgment about his own experiments until they are published in a peer reviewed journal. We also believe that our comments to the media were responsible and accurate, and that the description of our experiments presented in RS's book is misleading.

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Footnote

1: It may appear from the endnote of RS's book that he has further criticism of our experiments in press with the British Journal of Psychology but, to the best of our knowledge, this is not the case. Although a paper containing criticisms is described in his book as being in press with the British Journal of Psychology, it is noted in The Times Higher Education Supplement that that paper was not accepted for publication (27 August 1999).

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