THE 'PSYCHIC PET' PHENOMENON: 
A REPLY TO RUPERT SHELDRAKE

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Rupert Sheldrake (1999a) published a note in the October 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 determine psychically 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 moved 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 came back. The experi-
ment 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 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 pre specification, all sorts of aspects of Jaytee’s behav-
ior 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 
was 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 signal accurately when PS was returning home.

In August 1996 we presented these experiments at the conference of the 
Parapsychological Association (Wiseman & Smith, 1996). By this time RS 
had carried out his own videotaped experiments with Jaytee. In September 1996 he 
reported to RW 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’ wherein 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 video-
tapes 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 ‘patterns’ could simply be the result of Jaytee 
doing very little towards the start of each experiment and then visiting the 
porch more often over time. Such behaviour, which may just reflect Jaytee’s 
becoming more anxious as time goes on, 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.

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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 our submitting our paper to the British Journal of Psychology, RS had not published the results of his own videotaped experiments and thus it was not possible to properly assess the claim that he had found the ‘patterns’ he described in his own data. 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, the experiments appear to contain design problems (Blackmore, 1995).

In early 1997, EW 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 RS, and EW 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 handled by the journalists involved.

Although we believe our account of our findings to the media was accurate, we feel that the way in which RS reports our experiments in his 1999 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 (1999b, p.46):

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.

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, right at the back of the book.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 reasonable and accurate, and that the description of our experiments presented in RS’s book is misleading.

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Editor’s Note

A review of Rupert Sheldrake’s book, Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals, is due to be published in the next issue of the Journal.

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 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 a paper was not accepted for publication (27 August 1999).