

Articles Received

PERCEPTIVE PETS WITH PUZZLING POWERS: THREE SURVEYS

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Introduction

Pet owners often comment on the perceptiveness of their animals. For example, some cat owners say that their animals seem to know when they intend to take them to the vet, and disappear, even when the person has tried to give the cat no clue. And some dogs are said to know when their owners are about to return, sometimes half an hour or more in advance, even when the person comes at an unusual time or in an unfamiliar vehicle (Sheldrake, 1994). Many pet owners ascribe such kinds of perceptiveness to telepathy or a mysterious 'sixth sense'.

Such phenomena have, so far, been neglected by biologists and psychologists. One reason for this neglect may be the taboo, widespread among scientists, against taking seemingly 'paranormal' phenomena seriously. Another may be the taboo against taking pets seriously (Serpell, 1986).

I and my colleagues have recently carried out three surveys to find out what proportion of pet owners have experienced a perceptiveness in their pets that might go beyond the known senses. We asked a series of questions, listed below, in telephone interviews with people in randomly sampled households. The same questionnaire was used in three separate surveys in widely different locations: Ramsbottom, a small town near Manchester, England (Sheldrake and Smart, 1997); Santa Cruz, a university and beach town in California, USA (Brown and Sheldrake, 1998); and London, England (Sheldrake, Lawlor and Turney, 1998).

Of course, what people believe about their pets' abilities may not be true. But it may not be false either. Only empirical investigations can shed further light on these phenomena.

Methods

The households to be sampled were selected at random from local telephone directories, and the interviewer began as follows: "My name is I'm doing research on unexplained powers of animals, and would like to ask you a few questions." The respondents were first of all asked if they had pets, and if so what kind. If they had a pet or pets, they were then asked the following questions, to which they could answer 'Yes', 'No' or 'Don't know' for Question 3; or 'Agree', 'Disagree' or 'Don't know' for Questions 5 to 8:

3. Have you or anyone in your household ever noticed the pet getting agitated before a family member has arrived home?

4. [If "yes" to question 3] How long before you/they arrive is the pet agitated? (0-5 mins/5-10 mins/10-20 mins/20 mins or more/don't know)

5. Would you agree or disagree that your pet knows you are going out before you show any physical signs of doing so?

6. Would you agree or disagree that your pet responds to your own thoughts or silent commands?

7. Would you agree or disagree that your pet is sometimes telepathic with you?

8. Would you agree or disagree that any of the pets you have known in the past were telepathic?

9. How frequently have you yourself had what you would consider to be a psychic experience? (never/sometimes/frequently)

In London, 387 households were surveyed, of which 180 (46.5%) had pets, slightly below the UK national average of 50% (Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, 1995). Cats were the most common pets, in 95 households (25%), followed by dogs in 63 households (16%). In Ramsbottom, out of the 394 households surveyed, 202 (51.3%) had pets; 122 (31%) had dogs and 93 (24%) cats. In Santa Cruz, of the 200 households surveyed, 132 (66%) had pets; 83 (42%) had cats and 69 (35%) dogs.

Results

In most respects, the three surveys were in remarkable agreement. Summaries are shown in Tables 1 and 2, and fuller details and analysis can be found in Sheldrake and Smart, 1997; Brown and Sheldrake, 1998; and Sheldrake, Lawlor and Turney, 1998. These are the principal findings:

1. 45-52% of dog owners and 14-31% of cat owners said their animal anticipated the arrival of a member of the household (Table 1). In all locations, more dogs than cats were said to show this anticipatory behaviour, and in London and Ramsbottom this difference between dogs and cats was highly significant statistically. About a fifth of the animals that showed anticipatory behaviour were said to do so more than 10 minutes before the person's return.
2. A majority of dog owners (65-73%) and 32-47% of the cat owners agreed that their animals anticipated their going out before they had shown physical signs of doing so (Table 1). In all locations these differences between dogs and cats were statistically significant.
3. 43-53% of dog owners and 23-41% of cat owners agreed that their animals responded to their thoughts and silent commands (Table 1). The dog-cat differences were statistically

significant in Ramsbottom, but not in London and Santa Cruz.

4. 42-59% of dog owners and 25-35% of cat owners said that their pet was sometimes telepathic with them (Table 1). The dog-cat differences were statistically significant in Ramsbottom and London.
5. These claims about perceptive behaviour nearly all concerned dogs and cats. No hamsters, gerbils, rats, tortoises, lizards, goldfish or stick insects were said to show any of these kinds of responses. Taking all three surveys together, 4 birds out of a total of 30 were said to anticipate their owners' arrivals (a parrot, a parakeet, a cockatoo and a cockatiel), 1 rabbit out of 32, and a ferret.
6. About half the people who currently own pets in all three locations said they had known telepathic pets in the past (Table 2).
7. The percentage of pet owners who said they had had psychic experiences themselves ranged from 39% in London to 64% in Santa Cruz (Table 2). At all three locations, significantly more 'psychic' pet owners said that their pets showed perceptive behaviour than 'non-psychic' pet owners. Nevertheless, the general pattern of response from non-psychic pet owners was similar to that of psychic pet owners, with a higher proportion of dogs than cats said to show perceptive behaviour.

Table 1. Responses of pet owners about dogs and cats in surveys in London, Ramsbottom (Rbtm) and Santa Cruz. Percentage of respondents giving a positive answer ("Yes" to Question 3 and "Agree" to Questions 5-7).

Question	DOGS			CATS		
	London	Rbtm	S Cruz	London	Rbtm	S Cruz
3. Know when returning	52	46	45	23	14	31
4. Respond < 10 mins before	21	16	19	19	23	22
5. Know when going out	73	69	65	47	32	37
6. Silent commands	43	53	46	38	23	41
7. Telepathy	59	54	42	35	25	34

Table 2. Responses of pet owners to questions about telepathy with past pets and their own psychic experience. Percentage of respondents giving a positive answer ("Agree" to Questions 8; and "Sometimes" or "Frequently" to Question 9).

Question	London	Ramsbottom	Santa Cruz
8. Telepathy with past pets	46	53	49
9. Own psychic experience	39	54	64

Possible biases

As in other surveys based on questionnaires or interviews, the answers may have been subject to a variety of biases. Here are three possibilities:

1. The way the questions were asked may have encouraged respondents to give positive answers in an attempt to please the interviewer. Conversely, people may have been reluctant to give positive answers about their pets and about themselves when talking to a stranger. But these possible sources of bias cannot account for the striking differences in answers about dogs and cats.
2. People who are very fond of their pets may have exaggerated the animals' powers, or been victims of wishful thinking. Conversely, people who pay little attention to their animals may not have noticed their perceptiveness. Moreover, animals may respond less to people who show little interest in them. But again, these possible biases cannot explain why the reports about the behaviour of dogs and cats were so different.
3. People who believe in psychic phenomena may be more likely to say their pet is psychic. Conversely, people who disbelieve in psychic phenomena may be less inclined to report seemingly psychic responses in their pets. And in fact 'psychic' owners generally gave more positive responses to questions about their pets than 'non-psychic' owners. But even among 'non-psychic' owners, 35-42% of dogs and 17-25% of cats were said to be telepathic.

Nevertheless, in spite of such possible sources of bias, the general pattern of results was quite consistent, and leads to three main

conclusions. First, perceptive pets are common. Second, more dogs than cats are responsive to their owners' intentions and anticipate their comings and goings. And third, many dog and cat owners believe that their animals are sometimes telepathic with them, even if they themselves have never had an experience they regard as psychical.

The need for empirical investigations

Obviously, some of the experiences that seem to imply the existence of a 'sixth sense' or psychic powers could turn out to be explicable in terms of routines, body language or subtle cues of which people are unaware. For example, this may often be the case when animals pick up a person's intention to go out. But the ability to anticipate a person's homecoming 10 minutes or more in advance seems hard to explain in conventional terms, unless the person's returns follow a routine pattern, or unless someone at home knows when they are due back and unconsciously communicates this anticipation to the animal. Of the phenomena studied in these surveys, this is also the easiest to investigate empirically, because of the separation between person and animal.

Empirical investigations have already begun with a dog that seems to anticipate his owner's returns by waiting at a particular window, overlooking the place where she arrives by car (Sheldrake and Smart, 1998). In observations on 101 homecomings at various times of day, we found that this seemingly anticipatory behaviour did not always occur; the dog failed to react on 14 occasions. But on 87 occasions he reacted 10 minutes or more before his owner's returns. We also found that he still responded when his owner returned at randomly selected times, unknown to anyone

at home, and by unusual means, for example by travelling in a taxi (Sheldrake and Smart, 1998). In our ongoing investigations we routinely record the dog's behaviour on videotape.

Investigations of such phenomena can be carried out relatively inexpensively, and these surveys show that seemingly perceptive pets are common. This hitherto neglected area of research has the potential to grow into a fascinating new field of anthrozoology, with far-ranging implications for biology and psychology.

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