

Does Your Animal Know You Are Going Out? A Survey in Portugal about Belief in Psychic Pets

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ABSTRACT: Research was conducted on the relations between humans and animals to find out about animal behaviour and the types of beliefs associated with it. A survey in the form of personal interviews was carried out between February and March 2000, and comprised 1014 participants from five different regions of Portugal. R. Sheldrake's (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998) questionnaire was used to examine pet owners' beliefs about "psychic experiences" and the behaviour of their animals. Results showed that the majority of participants: (1) don't agree that their pets get agitated before a family member arrives home, (2) recognise that their animals know they're going to leave, and (3) disagree that their pets respond to their thoughts or silent commands. We advance the hypothesis that biases in environmental stimuli explain these alleged psychic experiences between owners and their pets.

INTRODUCTION

Reports from many pet owners suggest that their animals "sometimes exhibit an uncanny sixth sense" and, in spite of this belief being regularly claimed by the media and literary sources, scientific researchers have neglected such reports. One of the most representative research programs dedicated to this question is the work of Rupert Sheldrake and collaborators involving the use of a standard questionnaire. They (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998) found, with respect to people's beliefs, "the apparent ability of some animals to know in advance when their owner is coming home, to know when their owner is intending to go out, and to respond to

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their owner's thoughts or silent commands" (p. 396). In addition, participants also had beliefs that these seemingly unexplained abilities of the animals could be explained by a "sixth sense" such as "telepathy" and "psychic experiences" (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998).

In 1996, Brown conducted a survey by telephone interview in Santa Cruz, California, with 200 people selected at random from a population of 52,700 people (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998). Also by telephone interview, Smart (Sheldrake & Smart, 1997) collected other data from 394 randomly selected households in Greater Manchester, Northwest England (population: 13,500). Lawlor and Turney (Sheldrake, Lawlor & Turney, 1998) conducted their phone interviews in London between November 1996 and September 1997, with 387 randomly selected inhabitants of the North and East residential area of London (population: unspecified).

The same questionnaire was used in the present study so that the results could be compared. The three investigations were pooled, and the database was divided into dog and cat owners (other species of pet were excluded). There was a significant statistical difference on item responses between both groups, but the analysis was focussed more on the differences between dogs' and cats' behaviours rather than a more general assessment of how many people recognise the *anticipated* behaviour of their pets (i.e., data on dogs and cats combined).

However, Brown and Sheldrake (1998) tested the claims of previous finding that *dogs are more sensitive to their owner's departures and arrivals than are cats*. There was "general agreement with the fact that dog owners tend to have closer relationships with their pets than cats (e.g., Albert & Anderson, 1997), and cats tend to be less sociable and more independent than dogs (Hart, 1995)" (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998, pp. 403-404).

The analyses that were conducted differed between dogs and cats, and these two species of animals have some different behaviours, so the analyses do not say anything about what people effectively believe *in general for all animals*. Thus, we might assess the database to discriminate the percentages of those who agree or disagree with the principal issues to do with the 'anticipation of behaviour' independent of type of pet. To do this, we combined dog and cat owners' answers into a single sample—for example, in Brown's survey (1998) the sample size is 152 cases (69 dogs and 83 cats). Results are given in Table 1, which shows that in the three studies for *Question 3*, respondents had not noticed *the pet getting agitated before a family member arrived home*, and for *Question 5*, the majority agree that the *animal knows [the respondent] are going out before [the respondent] shows any physical signs of doing so*. But for *Question 6*, only two surveys (Brown, 1998; Smart, 1997) show that respondents agree that

their *pets respond to [their] thoughts or silent commands*, while Turney and Lawnor's (1998) surveys show that a great number of people disagree.

Table 1

Dog and Cat Owners' Data Combined: Answers to *Questions 3, 5, and 6*

Survey	N	Question 3			Question 5			Question 6		
		Yes	No	D.K.	Yes	No	D.K.	Yes	No	D.K.
Brown (1998)	152 69d + 83c	57 37.5%	95 62.5%	0	76 50%	25 16.4%	51 33.5%	66 43.4%	23 15.1%	63 41.4%
Smart (1997)	185 122d + 63c				114 61.6%	57 30.8%	14 7.56%	86 46.5%	69 37.3%	30 16.2%
	215 122d + 93c	69 32%	138 64%	8 4%						
Turney & Lawlor (1998)	158 63d + 95c	55 34.8%	103 65.2%	0	91 57.6%	54 34.1%	13 8.2%	63 39.9%	69 43.7%	26 16.5%
Lobo, Razente, & Silva (2000)	536	212 39.6%	308 57.5%	16 3 %	264 49.3%	186 34.7%	86 16%	164 30.6%	249 46.5%	123 22.9%

Notes: D.K. = 'Don't Know'; *Question 3:* Have you or anyone in your household ever noticed the pet getting agitated before a family member has arrived home?; *Question 5:* Would you agree or disagree that your animal knows you are going out before you show any physical signs of doing so?; *Question 6:* Would you agree or disagree that your pet responds to your own thoughts or silent commands?

Table 2 gives results for telepathy beliefs (*Questions 7 and 9*). In two surveys (Smart, 1997; Turney & Lawnor, 1998), people overwhelmingly agree that *pets are sometimes telepathic*, whereas in Brown's (1998) survey a great number of people 'don't know' (D.K.). Psychic experiences in the same two inquiries (Smart, 1997; Turney & Lawnor, 1998) show that the majority of people never had such psychic experiences (*Question 9*), while in the Brown interview the majority of people did have psychic experiences 'sometimes'.

Table 2

Dog and Cat Owners' Data Combined: Answers to *Questions 7 and 9*

Survey	N	Question 7			N	Question 9			
		Yes	No	D.K.		Freq.	S'time	Never	D.K.
Brown (1998)	152 69d + 83c	57 37.5%	36 23.7%	59 38.8%	200	18 9%	93 46.5%	89 44.5%	
Smart (1997)	185 122d + 63c	89 48.1%	67 36.2%	29 15.7%	178	22 12.4%	74 41.57%	82 46%	
	215 122d + 93c								
Turney & Lawlor (1998)	158 63d + 95c	70 44.3%	66 41.7%	22 13.9%	387	23 5.9%	125 32.3%	239 61.8%	
Lobo, Razente, & Silva (2000)	536	102 19%	281 52.4%	153 28.5%	1014	15 1.5 %	101 10%	720 71%	178 17.5%

Note: D.K. = 'Don't Know'; S'time = Sometime; *Question 7:* Would you agree or disagree that your pet is sometimes telepathic?; *Question 9:* How frequently have you yourself had what you would consider to be a psychic experience?

Thus, the results show that the numbers of people who assume telepathy and psychic abilities in their pets may be relatively few in number, and in fact in those three survey papers there is insufficient commentary explaining the most important factors concerning natural behavioural interaction between pets and owners (i.e., *Questions 3, 5 and 6*). Notwithstanding these facts, the authors emphatically remark:

The fact that some pet owners believe their pets have an uncommon power does not prove that these beliefs are correct [and] . . . do not necessarily imply the existence of a 'sixth sense' or psychic abilities in animals. But they certainly show that many pet owners believe that their animals show such abilities, and the results are suggestive enough to justify further research (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998, pp. 396-405).

The authors also suggest some explanations for the animal's *anticipatory* behaviour as follows: "it depends on the routine times of arrival"; and animals "pick up subtle cues from people at home and know when to expect the return of the absent member of the household" (Sheldrake & Smart, 1998, p. 220). This ability of pets to respond to their owner's thoughts is a popular belief in animal training books. Systematic observations or experimental investigations are necessary to prove that such behaviour could be explained by "sensory information, routines or subtle cues" or other forms of communication thus far unknown to science (Brown, & Sheldrake, 1998, p. 396).

Psychology has several viewpoints about the subtle influence of cues through external events, in which the main explanation for the phenomenon is *operant conditioning*. There is a perceptiveness to cues and signals with potential meaning and the probability of positive or negative reinforcement and, it helps to develop *anticipatory* responses to the occurrence of certain events, in our case, two owner's actions: (i) *about to leave home*; and (ii) *about to arrive home* (Jahoda, 1969; Leherpeux, 1988; Mazur, 1997; Vyse, 1997).

Problems in Past Research and Hypotheses

What is the major explanation for the results of past research? There is at least one possible psychological hypothesis, which concerns the influence of *bias in environmental stimuli*. Perhaps a cultural tendency to avoid or neglect observations of particular *cues* in everyday life prompts people to give a culture-specific opinion about the behaviour of their pets. Studies of regional differences may indicate this cultural tendency.

First, what happens in private, personal lives? Theoretically, cues and operant conditioning effectively determine the animal's behaviour, and people effectively give their pets *a cue in spite of not* realising it. People are not aware, because they do not have sufficient scientific knowledge (or empirical knowledge) about the behaviours of their animals, about silent commands, or cues and physical signs of doing so, and so on.

Second, what happens in real life? There are two different environmental structures: (a) in the home—a favourable condition for the occurrence of *cues* given by anyone; (b) owner out of the home and far enough away that sensorial channels of animals do not receive stimuli—not favourable to the occurrence and observation of cues. In the first situation, in the home, there is an animal *together* with its owner, and in the second situation, owner out of the home, the animal is *isolated* from its owner. In

the first situation there is a greater probability of the occurrence of *cues* and environmental bias, and in the second situation there is less, or no probability that such *cues* would occur if the pet is sufficiently far away.

Logically, there will be more cases mentioned in which the animal *knows that its owner is going to leave home*, than when *a family member has arrived home*. Consequently, for any inquiry in the general population, there will be many more cases of observation and frequency reports in the home, where there is an animal *together* with its owner. Therefore, hypothetically, if people have a tendency to avoid observation, or neglect to observe the influence of *environmental stimuli biases*, we would expect a greater number of participants: (a) to disagree that *the pet gets agitated before a family member has arrived home*; (b) to agree that their animals know that *they're going to leave*; and (c) to disagree that *their pet responds to their thoughts or silent commands*.

METHODS

Participants

The sample was comprised of 1,014 Portuguese individuals, who reside in continental Portugal. The total population of the country is 9,592,541. The minimum age of people interviewed was 15 years, and the population (15 and older) is 7,528,000 (General Census of Population and Habitation—March, 2001). Those 1,014 participants were randomly selected from the five principal regions of the country: Greater Lisbon (G.L.; 26.3%); Greater Porto (G.P.; 15%); Internal South (I.S.; 14.4%); Internal North (I.N.; 14.1%); and Coastline (Coast.; 30.2%).

Procedure

Sheldrake's nine-item questionnaire was used (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998, p. 397). All questions were administered (see APPENDIX), but only answers to *Questions 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9* were analysed in the present study. The survey was carried out by direct interviews between February and March of 2000 by 42 interviewers of the Euroteste Company.

The following variables were considered: Sex; Age; Occupation; Population Density. An electronic randomisation process, yielding 79 points of entry across the stratified sample by Region and Density, was used to select residences for interviews. The randomised selection process ensured that there were equal distributions and equal percentages of participants based on Sex, Age and Occupation, as indicated in the following chart:

DEMOGRAPHIC	PRE-EXISTING GROUPS	%
SEX	Male	41.6
	Female	58.4
AGE	15-24 years	15.7
	25-34 years	18.5
	35-44 years	15.8
	45-54 years	14.2
	55-64 years	15.9
	65 years or more	19.9
OCCUPATION	Working	52.1
	Not working	47.9
DENSITY	Less than 2,000 individuals	29.8
	2,000 to 10,000	18.9
	10,000 to 30,000	20.4
	30,000 to 100,000	10.7
	100,000 to 500,000	9.9
	More than 500,000	10.4

RESULTS

The total sample comprised 1014 randomly selected participants from five different regions—536 participants owned pets. From the group of 536 individuals with pets (Table 3), the majority (308, or 57.5%) answered that they DID NOT notice the animal was agitated *before a family member arrived home* (Question 3), whereas 212 (39.6%) answered YES. Our hypothesis was supported.

From the 308 individuals who answered NO, the majority was from the Coastline with 109 (35.4%). For those individuals who answered YES, the majority is from the Coastline with 60 (28.3%), followed by Lisbon with 56 (26.4%). The lowest number of people who answered YES was in Porto, $\chi^2 = (8, N = 536) = 19.98, p = 0.01$. Note that in all but one region, the highest proportion of people did not notice agitation of the pet (only in the Internal South is there approximately the same proportion). But Coastline and Porto regions produced the greatest disproportion of YES and

NO answers. They effectively did not “Notice The Pet Getting Agitated Before A Family Member Has Arrived Home,” whereas the other three regions were less aware of agitation.

Table 3

Question 3: Have You Or Anyone In Your Household Ever Noticed The Pet Getting Agitated Before A Family Member Has Arrived Home?

Answer	G.L.	G.P.	I.N.	I.S.	Coast.	Total
Yes	56	19	32	45	60	212
No	61	55	39	44	109	308
Don't know	3	1	5	2	5	16
Total	120	75	76	91	174	536

However, the majority of the 536 individuals (i.e., $n = 264$, or 49.3%; see Table 4) agree with *Question 5* that their *animal knows that they are going out before they show any physical signs*, as against 186 (34.7%) who disagree. The hypothesis was supported.

The remaining 86 (16%) didn't know. But there are regional differences—in Lisbon the majority of people agree 66 (55%) while in the Coastline, the majority 77 (44.3%) disagree as against 64 (36.7%) who agree, $\chi^2 = (8, N = 536) = 28.36, p < .001$.

Analysing region by region, in Lisbon the majority ($n = 66$; 55%) of people agree; in the Coastline, the majority ($n = 77$; 44.3%) disagree (the Coastline region also has the majority of those who don't know [33, or 38.4%]). But the region with the largest percent-difference between those who agree or disagree is the Internal South with 61 (67%) who agree against 15 (16.5%) who disagree. Here there is a great difference and it is suggested that there may be a regional cultural tendency for these people to observe their animal's behaviour more so than people in other regions. This hypothesis needs to be tested through further research. Sociologists might suspect that these people have a particular interest in their pets' behaviour compared to owners from other regions, but reasons for that interest need to be determined.

Table 4

Question 5: Would You Agree Or Disagree That Your Animal Knows You Are Going Out Before You Show Any Physical Signs Of Doing So?

Answer	G.L.	G.P.	I.N.	I.S.	Coast.	Total
Agree	66	35	38	61	64	264
Disagree	41	27	26	15	77	186
Don't know	13	13	12	15	33	86
Total	120	75	76	91	174	536

In relation to *Question 6* about *silent commands* (see Table 5), out of 536 individuals, the majority ($n = 249$, or 46.5%) disagree, as against 164 (30.6%) who agree, and 123 (22.9%) who don't know. The hypothesis was supported.

Of the 249 who disagree, 96 (38.6%) were on the Coastline. The Greater Porto region ($n = 21$; 28%) and the Coastline region ($n = 44$; 25.3%) are the regions where the percentages of those who don't know are higher than those who agree. But in both cases the majority effectively disagree.

Table 5

Question 6: Would You Agree Or Disagree That Your Pet Responds To Your Own Thoughts Or Silent Commands?

Answer	G.L.	G.P.	I.N.	I.S.	Coast.	Total
Agree	49	18	17	46	34	164
Disagree	49	36	42	26	96	249
Don't know	22	21	17	19	44	123
Total	120	75	76	91	174	536

Lisbon was completely indifferent. From a total of 120, 49 participants (40.8%) agree, 49 (40.8%) disagree, and 22 (18.3%) don't know. In the Internal South there were 46 (50.5%) people who agreed as against 26 (28.6%) who disagree, and 19 (20.9%) who didn't know. The

Internal South expressed the greatest certainty about the matter, as it did for *Question 5*.

Analyzing individual regions: In Porto, 21 (28.0%) and in the Coastline 44 (25.3%), the percentage of those who don't know is higher than those who agree. The region where the highest difference in percentages is the Coastline, with 96 (55.2%) that disagree, and 34 (19.5%) who agree, followed by the Internal South, with 46 (50.5%) individuals who agree against 26 (28.6%) who disagree. These differences are significant, $\chi^2 = (8, N = 536) = 39.43, p < .001$.

What is the explanation for the great number of owners who don't know? At least for the Coastline and Porto it can be taken as a lack of information and observation about their animal's behaviour. And the Lisbon statistics shed some light on the matter—people don't know because they do not observe their own capacity to send *silent commands* in their everyday life, and consequently they cannot give concrete responses.

But the Internal South is a different region. They represent only 17% of the sample, but Spearman tests on all regions showed that in this place there exists first, a moderate positive correlation between *Question 3* and *Question 6*, $r_s(89) = 0.49, p < .001$; and second, a moderate-to-strong positive correlation between *Question 5* and *Question 6*, $r_s(89) = .62, p < .001$. For the other four regions, the same two correlations were significant (with one exception: Greater Porto, *Question 3* with *Question 6*), but all correlations were weaker than those of the Internal South. In relation to the “telepathy” question (*Question 7*) the Internal South was indifferent (see Table 6), so telepathy could not be the preferential alternative explanation for the animal's behaviour exclusively.

The majority of the 536 disagree (281, or 52.4%) and 102 (19%) agree, but the total of individuals who say that they don't know (153, or 28.5%) is higher than those who agree. Generally, telepathy was not thought to occur between owners and pets. Among those 102 who agree, the majority ($n = 29$; 28.4%) belong to the Internal South, followed by Lisbon ($n = 26$; 25.5%). Among those who disagree, the highest percentage ($n = 104$; 37%) belongs to the Coastline.

Analysing isolated regions, for all individuals, those who disagree is higher in percentage than those who agree, but the highest percentage-difference of these five regions is the Coastline with 104 (59.8%) who disagree against 24 (13.8%) who agree, and in the Internal North with 45 (59.2%) among those who disagree against 10 (13.2%) among those who agree. The results are statistically significant, $\chi^2 = (8, N = 536) = 20.86, p = .008$.

Table 6

Question 7: Would You Agree or Disagree That Your Pet Is Sometimes Telepathic With You?

Answer	G.L.	G.P.	I.N.	I.S.	Coast.	Total
Agree	26	13	10	29	24	102
Disagree	62	37	45	33	104	281
Don't know	32	25	21	29	46	153
Total	120	75	76	91	174	536

In relation to psychic experience, Table 7 shows that of the majority of the 1,014 interviewed, 720 (71%) answered 'never', 178 (17.6%) answered 'don't know', 101 (10%) answered 'sometimes', while only 15 (1.5%) answered 'frequently'. Note that the total number who answered 'don't know' is higher than those who said 'frequently' and those who said 'sometimes'.

Table 7

Question 9: How Frequently Have You Yourself Had What You Would Consider To Be A Psychic Experience?

Answer	G.L.	G.P.	I.N.	I.S.	Coast.	Total
Frequently	6	1		5	3	15
Sometimes	38	12	8	11	32	101
Never	194	110	114	106	196	720
Don't Know	29	29	21	24	75	178
Total	267	152	143	146	306	1014

Compared with the other regions, Lisbon had the highest number of individuals who answered 'frequently' with 6 (40%) and 'sometimes' with 38 (37.6%), while the highest percentage of those who answered 'never' was in the Coastline, with 196 (27.2%), followed by Lisbon with 194 (26.9%). Results are significant, $\chi^2 = (12, N = 536) = 37.37, p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

During development of the three-part hypothesis, two points were noticed: first, the lack of information and perceptiveness by respondents about silent ‘commands’; and second, probably favourable conditions (because pet-owners are at home) that found greater agreement from participants on *Question 5* (Would You Agree Or Disagree That Your Animal Knows You Are Going Out Before You Show Any Physical Signs Of Doing So?). The results for the whole sample confirm the predictions deriving from the theoretical model that suggests that *environmental stimuli bias* underlies ‘anticipatory’ behaviour in pets.

In addition, we found regional differences. Consequently, other regions of the country would probably yield different results from those we found. The Yes/No distribution for *Question 3* for the Coastline and Porto regions were proportionally different compared to the other three regions. The greater proportion of people did not notice agitation of the pet, but only in the Internal South is there approximately the same proportion of yes and no answers.

For *Question 5*, while the majority of regions agree, the Coastline participants disagree (77, or 41.4%). This region also has the majority of those who don’t know (33, or 38.4%), suggesting that these people have no interest in their pet’s behaviour. But in the Internal South, the majority of participants agree, 61 (67%) against 15 (16.5%) who disagree, suggesting a regional-cultural tendency for these people to observe their animal’s behaviour.

In *Question 6*, for Coastline and Porto the percentages of those who don’t know are higher than those who agree. One explanation is that people don’t know because they do not observe their own capacity to send *silent commands* in their everyday life, and consequently they cannot give concrete responses, but that reason alone does not explain why the other regions respond as they do.

The Internal South contradicted (in part) our predictions. In fact, those people agree with the idea that their *pet knows they are going out before they show any physical signs of doing so* (Q5), and recognize at same time that the *pet responds to their thoughts or silent commands* (Q6). It would be of interest to determine the *causal factor(s)* underlying the behaviour of this group of people’s pets (e.g., did the pet get agitated *before* it showed any physical signs of doing so?).

We might explore the possibility of reports of telepathic experiences in the relevant regional groups because they theoretically would make correct assessments about the crucial factors (i.e., that the animal

knows the owner is going out *before* he shows any *physical signs* of doing so). Owners presumably know much better their animal's behaviour and hypothetically can also better discriminate *environmental stimuli bias*, and if they kept this in mind when answering *Question 6*, they might have avoided the contradiction indicated by the answers to *Question 5*.

The fact remains that people can be mistaken in their assessments because they effectively give physical *signs* that the animal can tune into. What people could observe are the final results (response) of the animal's behaviour after they sent information (stimulus) such as unconscious *cues*. It would be a case of underestimation of what can happen due simply to this subtle process, even though there may be other interpretations.

In conclusion, and in accordance with our predictions, the majority of participants: (1) don't agree that *their pet gets agitated before a family member arrived home* (Q3); (2) recognise that *their animal knows they're going out before they show any physical signs of doing so* (Q5); and (3) disagree that *their pet responds to their thoughts or silent commands* (Q6).

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APPENDIX

SHELDRAKE'S (BROWN & SHELDRAKE, 1998, P. 397) PERCEPTIVE PETS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you or does anyone in your household own a pet? Yes No
2. What type of pet? Species
3. Have you or anyone in your household ever noticed the pet getting agitated before a family member has arrived home? Yes No
4. How long before you/they arrive is your pet agitated? 0-5 mins. 5-10 mins. 10-20 mins. 20 mins or more
5. Would you agree or disagree that your pets knows you are going out before you show any physical sings of doing so? Agree - Disagree - Don't know
6. Would you agree or disagree that your pet responds to your own thoughts or silent commands? Agree - Disagree - Don't know
7. Would you agree or disagree that your pet is sometimes telepathic with you? Agree - Disagree - Don't know
8. Would you agree or disagree that any of the pets you have know in the past were telepathic? Agree - Disagree - Don't know
9. How frequently have you yourself had what you would consider to be a psychic experience? Never - Sometimes – Frequently