

THE WORK OF DOGS IN AAI – THE EVALUATION OF WELFARE AND HUMAN–DOG COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the analysis of preserving dog's welfare and of human–dog communication during Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) in Poland. The analysis has been conducted through a Google Forms questionnaire. The following aspects have been analyzed: dog characteristics, owner/guide characteristics, dog's work and human–dog communication. The questions posed concerned, among others, the worktime of a dog, the frequency of dog's work per day and per week, the experience of the guide and guide's knowledge of calming signals sent by the dog. A statistical analysis was carried out using Microsoft Office Excel 2007 and IBM SPSS Statistics 24. The study involved 64 participants. The results suggest that the subject of dog welfare in AAI is a difficult topic discussed reluctantly by many dog guides. It is necessary to create legal regulations concerning the profession of a kynotherapist, including such aspects as the amount of dog's worktime considering the division into passive and active activity of the animal; frequency of the dog's work per day and per week; knowledge of dogs' behavior (including calming signals, dog's body language); the age at which the dog commences and terminates its work activity.

Key words: AAI in Poland, dogs' welfare, kynotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Animals play a significant role in human lives. They support humans with their daily activities, such as obtaining food through hunting or defending homesteads, and are used by the police and military forces for guarding prisoners and detecting landmines. Over the course of the last decades they have been used increasingly often in Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI). AAI has been around for over 100 years, but in Poland its popularity has grown in the last 30 years. Kynotherapist was officially acknowledged as a profession on July 1st, 2010 [Notice of the Polish Social Policy and Labor Minister of 24th February 2014]. However, no necessary qualifications for the profession nor guidelines regarding the conducted sessions were laid out. Lack of regulations in that area means that currently any person can become a kynotherapist with nothing, but good intentions. Lack of such regulations in Poland also leads to significant discrepancies among standards developed by AAI training organizations [Złotorowicz 2017].

This can eventually lead to negligence and abuse of dog's well-being during conducted sessions.

The goal of the thesis is to evaluate the welfare of dogs involved in AAI in Poland and the quality of human–dog relations during such work.

METHODS

The research focused on people conducting therapies with dogs in Poland. Survey research was employed as a technique for exploratory, descriptive and explanatory purposes [Babbie 2004]. Questionnaire created via Google Forms served as the tool for the research. The survey was shared among people associated with AAI via Facebook and email. The responders were gathered via AAI organization/association/company fan pages, theme groups created on Facebook, websites of existing AAI organizations/associations/companies and with the help of published List of Certified Dogs of Polish Kynotherapeutic Society [Polish Kynotherapeutic Society 2018]. Data analysis was conducted by means of

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Microsoft Office Excel 2007 and IBM SPSS Statistics 24 software.

Research was conducted in March–April 2018. The questionnaire consisted of 49 questions: open, short ones; open, long ones; multiple choice with multiple responses and with single correct response questions. The questionnaire was divided into 4 sections: dog characteristics, owner/guide characteristics, dog's labor and human–dog communication. Dog characteristics section concerned dog's breed, age, weight, health, sex, parentage and the age at which the dog started working in therapy. Owner/guide characteristics section concerned their gender, age, place of residence, education, number of completed AAI courses, AAI experience and the number of owned dogs working in AAI. Dog's labor section was devoted to areas such as the type of sessions the dog is involved in (individual/group/both), the location of these sessions, the age group of participants, duration of a single session, dog's maximum daily worktime, the number of days and hours the dog works within a week, dog's preparation for its work, including predisposition and behavioral tests. The last section was devoted to human–dog communication and focused on verifying respondent's knowledge of the basics of maintaining dog's welfare during sessions. The questions concerned calming signals, knowledge of the five aspects of animal freedom and their welfare, adjusting session's agenda to dog's welfare and using silencing techniques. 64 submissions were gathered from respondents working in AAI in Poland.

RESULTS

Demographics

64 people participated in the study: 95% were women at an average age 36.8 years and 5% were men aged 27 years on average. The participants reside mostly in cities with more than 200 thousand inhabitants (44%), followed by cities with 50 to 200 thousand inhabitants (30%), whereas 16% of respondents live in the country and 11% inhabit towns with fewer than 50 thousands people. 78% of participants obtained higher education on a Master level, 11% of them obtained a Bachelor's degree, 9% finished their education at high school level and 2% at primary school level. 97% of participants took part in AAI-related courses, from which 24% took part in 1 course. 16% of respondents took part in 2, 3 or 4 courses. Some respondents participated in 20 courses (3%), which implies there is a wide variety of available AAI courses in Poland. It is worth mentioning that some respondents (39%) only started their work in AAI and described their work experience as up to several dozen months. 32% have 3–5 years of AAI experience, while 29% 6 years and more. Most of respondents own 1 dog working in AAI (55%), 31% of

respondents own 2 dogs, 11% own 3 dogs and 3% own 4 or more dogs.

The sex of animals was determined as follows: 48% dogs, 52% bitches. 89% of the dogs are claimed to be healthy, 6% suffer from allergies, 3% suffer from apparent hereditary diseases and 2% suffer from serious diseases. 77% of dogs came from breeding kennels registered at the Polish Kennel Club, 13% came from breeding kennels registered elsewhere, 6% came from animal shelters and 2% from domestic breeding, foundations or unknown origins.

Golden Retriever (27%) was the most popular breed indicated by the respondents, followed by Labrador Retriever (14%) and Australian Shepherd (9%). The following races were also indicated: Cavalier King Charles Spaniel (6%), Bernese Mountain Dog (6%), Siberian Husky (6%), mongrel (6%), Poodle (3%), Border Collie (3%), White Swiss Shepherd (2%), Boxer (2%), Cane Corso Italiano (2%), Labradoodle (2%), Leonberger (2%), Spanish Mastiff (2%), Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever (2%), Newfoundland Dog (2%), German Shepherd (2%), Samoyed (2%), Schipperke (2%), Shitzu (2%) and English Springer Spaniel (2%).

The dogs were 5.3 years old on average. Most dogs were 3 years old (19%), 5 years old (14%), 4 years old (13%) and 6 years old (11%). The dogs commenced their AAI work at 2.5 years of age on average. 31% of respondents mentioned that their dog commenced AAI work at 1 year of age, which might be too early commence such labor.

Two factors were analyzed: the age at which the dog started working in AAI and the dog's guide work experience in AAI (years). The dogs were divided into two groups: the first one consisted of individuals who commenced AAI work before turning 2 years old (too early) and the second one of the ones commenced their AAI work while being at least 2 years old (as recommended). The guide's experience was divided in the following groups: 2 years, 2–5 years and > 5 years, which corresponds to small, medium and vast work experience (Table 1).

Results presented on Table 1 suggest that regardless of guide's experience, dogs are involved in AAI too early (while being < 2 years old).

The weight of the dogs described in the survey amounted mostly to 20–40 kg (53%) and 40–60 kg (20%) and less frequently: 10–20 kg (14%), up to 10 kg (9%) and > 60 kg (3%).

Two factors were analyzed: dog's body weight and dog's age when commencing AAI work (Table 2). It is worth mentioning that dogs from weight spans 20–40 kg, 40–60 kg and > 60 kg in 50% of cases were involved in AAI before turning 2 years old.

Table 1. Comparison of two factors: the age at which the dog started working within AAI and the dog’s guide work experience

Tabela 1. Zestawienie dwóch czynników: wiek psa w chwili rozpoczęcia pracy w AAI oraz doświadczenie przewodnika

The age at which the dog started working within AAI Wiek psa w chwili rozpoczęcia pracy w AAI		Guide’s work experience (years) Staż pracy przewodnika (lata)			Overall Ogółem
		< 2	2–5	> 5	
≥ 2 years of age ≥ 2 roku życia	N %	12 50.0	12 55.0	9 50.0	33 52.0
< 2 years of age < 2 roku życia	N %	12 50.0	10 45.0	9 50.0	31 48.0
Overall Ogółem	N %	24 100.0	22 100.0	18 100.0	64 100.0

Table 2. Comparison of two factors: dog’s body weight (kg) and the age at which the dog started working within AAI

Tabela 2. Zestawienie dwóch czynników: masa ciała psa (kg) oraz wiek psa w chwili rozpoczęcia pracy w AAI

The age at which the dog started working within AAI Wiek psa w chwili rozpoczęcia pracy w AAI		Dog’s body weight, kg Masa ciała psa, kg					Overall Ogółem
		< 10	10–20	20–40	40–60	> 60	
≥ 2 years of age ≥ 2 roku życia	n %	3 50.0	6 66.7	16 47.1	7 53.8	1 50.0	33 51.6
< 2 years of age < 2 roku życia	n %	3 50.0	3 33.3	18 52.9	6 46.2	1 50.0	31 48.4
Overall Ogółem	n %	6 100.0	9 100.0	34 100.0	13 100.0	2 100.0	64 100.0

Dog’s labor

Vast majority of respondents (98.2%) conducts AAI activities with dog’s involvement for children. Patients attending the sessions comprised of the youth (50%), seniors (30%) and adults (20%).

Most respondents (62%) conduct sessions lasting up to 40 minutes. Some respondents (19%) mentioned varying session lengths. The justification for varying session lengths was related to patient’s current mood and predispositions (58%), less frequently (17%) to dog’s current mood and its capabilities on a given day. 25% of respondents who conduct sessions of varying lengths believe that the length depends on both patient and dog capabilities. Some respondents conduct sessions lasting up to 50 minutes (13%) and to 60 minutes (4%). Sessions lasting over 60 minutes were reported in 2% of cases.

The responders claim that dog’s maximum daily worktime in AAI is: 1.5 hours (34%), 2 hours (28%), less than 1 hour (16%), 2.5 hours (11%), 3 hours (9%) and over 3 hours (2%). In most cases (64%) a dog works 1–2 times a week. 31% of respondents work with their dog 3–5 times a week, 5% 5–6 times a week. The dogs work usually 1–2 hours a week (36%), 33% of them work 3–4 hours a week. Minority of the dogs work usually 5–6 hours a week (16%), 5% of them work 7–8 hours a week.

If the respondents claimed that their dogs work 1–2 times a week (64%) and that usually single session lasts up to 40 minutes (62%), one could conclude that such dog work 1 hour 20 minutes a week (1–2 hours a week). However, only 36% of respondents marked this answer. Others suggested their dog works 3–4 hours a week (33%), 5–6 hours (16%) a week and 7–8 hours a week (5%). The respondents therefore may conduct longer sessions than the declared 40 minutes or the sessions take place more often than 1–2 times a week, which was not truthfully indicated in the replies.

Most of the dogs (70%) participated in an AAI training course conducted by an organization or an association. 40% of the respondents who took part in a training course, took part in 1 training course. It is worth mentioning that 55% of respondents who took part in courses, do not intend to expand their qualifications by participating in another training courses in the near future. Vast majority of the dogs (94%) were subject to AAI predisposition tests and 86% of the dogs were subject to behavioral tests.

Human–dog communication

Knowledge gaps related to dog treatment and its basic physiological needs leads to many work-related abuses of dogs in Poland. According to survey results 50% of

respondents do not know the basics of maintaining the well-being of dogs involved in AAI.

The questionnaire helped to establish the respondent's knowledge of calming signals. The first signal discussed was dog's yawning. The respondents mostly associate dog's yawning with being calm or remaining in calm environment (90.6%), while 43.8% believe that yawning indicates dog fatigue. Some respondents mentioned yawning indicates irritation (25%) or boredom (23.4%; multiple choices possible). Yawning and boredom are analogies made based on human behavior, when a person is tired or bored.

Another dog's body language test was conducted by means of several pictures of a dog being presented in different situations common to AAI sessions (Figures 1–2).



Fig. 1. Picture attached to one of the questions (<http://piesologia.pl/sygnaly-uspokajajace/>)

Rys. 1. Zdjęcie załączone do pytania w kwestionariuszu (<http://piesologia.pl/sygnaly-uspokajajace/>)



Fig. 2. Picture attached to one of the questions (<http://www.sosw.wschowa.com.pl/index.php/ter/163-dogoterapia>)

Rys. 2. Zdjęcie załączone do pytania w kwestionariuszu (<http://www.sosw.wschowa.com.pl/index.php/ter/163-dogoterapia>)

One of the pictures (Figure 1) shows a child hugging a dog. There are 4 signals sent by the dog in the picture: turned head, eye squinting, panting and withdrawn ears.

All 4 signals were identified by 20% of respondents. 3 signals were identified by 38% people and 19% of them spotted just 2 signals. 11% of respondents did not identify any signal, while 13% mentioned only one. The results suggest that the knowledge of basic calming signals from the dog is not widespread. Another picture (Figure 2) shows a very common situation in Poland related to AAI and dogs. A child is lying on a dog which is held by the guide, which prevents it from moving. Vast majority of respondents (92%) believe that dog's welfare is not preserved in this scenario. Explanations provided in the replies included “a dog is not a pillow”, “people should not lie on dogs” or “dog is not an object”. 25% of replies provided such explanations.

Another question focused on the techniques used by the guide to silence the dog before the session. 41% of respondents make use of such techniques before sessions. These people usually train self-control with their dog (e.g. by focusing on a treat placed on the floor while lying on the ground, massaging, playing with a Kong-type toy or doing olfactory exercises). The replies also described ways of silencing the dog, like playing with a knotted rope or taking a long walk.

Additionally, 53% of the respondents confirmed to have recorded themselves during their AAI sessions. The questionnaire did not ask to specify whether the recordings were made to promote their services or to analyze their own work.

The questionnaire ended with an invitation to participate in further research conducted in the area of dog's welfare during AAI therapy; the invitees could apply via email and by providing such data as: name, surname, dog's age and breed, guide's education, AAI experience (years), short description of dog's personality, place of residence and willingness to participate in tests (via correspondence or in Warsaw). Unfortunately none of the respondents were interested in participating in further research. Lack of interest may suggest the respondents are not aware of the need to expand their qualifications or are concerned about placing their work under assessment.

DISCUSSION

There is little to no data concerning the professional assessment of dog's welfare in AAI in the available literature. Lack of regulated norms and requirements concerning guide's and dog's preparation for work created disorder in Poland in the area of accepted dog's predispositions for work, the length and frequency of dog's work and the knowledge of animal's behavior, which was evidenced by the results of the conducted survey.

Most of the mentioned breeds are naturally predisposed for their labor and are generally gentle, friendly, trusting and loyal to human [FCI Standard no.

342/05.06.2009, FCI Standard no. 111/28.10.2009, FCI Standard no. 122/12.01.2011]. However, respondents also mentioned breeds that are considered defensive or hunting animals, suitable for guarding people and places, e.g. Cane Corso Italiano, or breeds that act fast when defending the herd, e.g. Spanish Mastiff [FCI Standard no. 91/30.08.2002, FCI Standard no. 144/09.07.2008]. It is worth noting that 98.2% of respondents conduct AAI sessions for children. All the dogs described in the survey as weighting 40–60 kg and > 60 kg participate in therapeutic sessions with children. Sessions for children involving an animal that weighs 60 kg might constitute a threat to patient's well-being. An overview of the above mentioned breeds suggests that most of them are suitable for their work and are properly trained. There are single cases, such as Spanish Mastiff or Cane Corso Italiano, that might suggest that not all guides are well acquainted with the characteristics of a given breed.

Lack of regulations that would state at what age a dog may commence work in AAI poses a risk of involving a large dog in AAI before it matures emotionally. The dog would then be subject to greater stress through undeveloped behavioral traits. A dog matures in 6 to 14 months. During that time a dog undergoes significant hormonal changes. Full maturity comes after 1 to 4 years of life, depending on the breed, size and sex of the dog [Horoszewicz et al. 2017]. Larger breeds should commence their AAI work when older than 1 year, so that their behavioral basis are well established. Most of the dogs evaluated in this research are dogs of large or very large breeds, which needs to be taken into consideration during AAI trainings.

According to the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations therapeutic sessions with dog's involvement should not last more than 30–45 minutes. 62% of surveyed guides meet this requirement. It is also important to note that animal's involvement in therapeutic sessions should be preceded by an accurate assessment of dog's behavior by professionals (vets, behaviorists), which was also observed by most of the respondents [Jegatheesan et al. 2014].

Respondents' knowledge of dog's behavior was assessed by focusing on calming signals sent by the dog. The first analyzed signal was yawning which happens when a dog attempts to calm itself or its surroundings, which consequently leads to conflict alleviation and acknowledging the dominance of another individual [Rugaas 2016]. Yawning may also happen in stress-free situations, such as when the dog needs more oxygen or is tired. However, the respondent should focus on situations where this signal suggests the dog's well-being is in danger, rather than assume it comes from stress unrelated reasons. Analysis of this question shows that most people working in AAI cannot identify one of the basic signals

sent by the dog. Knowledge of calming signals would enable the guide to understand the animal and remove it from a difficult situation [Rugaas 2016].

Dog's welfare should not be assessed based on a single picture due to lack of context. However, a picture is a very effective respondent's knowledge checking material. Figure 1 shows 4 signals. Turned head suggests that the dog does not feel comfortable in the situation. Squinting of eyes usually accompanies the that signal in stressful situations. It is also perceived as an attempt to calm down the opponent. Panting is another signal that may signify exhaustion, but also stress and it is often accompanied by withdrawn ears that also signify animal's fear and unrest [Rugaas 2016]. Everything is most likely caused by the presence of a child, which violates animal's personal space and might hold it too tightly. This may make the dog bite the child, because the animal is subjected to significant discomfort and without human's intervention it will attempt to free itself from such a situation. Many respondents miss the basic calming signals sent by the dog not only during AAI sessions, but also during daily situations that occur at home.

Figure 2 shows a dog that is deprived of its freedom to express its natural behavior, which violates the Animal Welfare Rulebook prepared by Farm Animals Welfare Council [Bombik et al. 2013]. It has been proven that when an animal is immobilized, its body secretes more adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones are catecholamine neurotransmitters that are secreted during stressful situations. They cause increased heart rate, pupil and bronchi dilation and increased blood pressure [<http://www.flyfishingdevon.co.uk/salmon/year1/stressho.htm#Overview>]. 25% of respondents submitted an incomplete answer to the question. It is difficult to assess whether this was due to lack of knowledge or to employing mental shortcuts.

Respondents were asked whether they use silencing techniques before AAI sessions. They are employed to gain control of dog's emotions during therapeutic sessions, which in turn makes them more focused on their work. Silencing dog's emotions makes them work more effectively during sessions, which is beneficial to both patients and the dog. A dog that is able to control its emotions will be subjected to less stress during sessions. Additionally, guides should remember to allow the dog to get to know the room in which the session takes place to let it accept it. It is important to note that silencing techniques are meant to silence dog's emotions and not fix physical or intellectual exhaustion. A dog after silencing must not be too tired to carry out its work.

Only 53% of respondents recorded their AAI sessions. Analysis of such recordings would allow to assess the human–dog teamwork, pinpoint weaknesses and correct errors that the guide might not notice. Research con-

ducted by Rogoza and Boruta [2017] indicates that dog guides might miss up to 60% of signals sent to the guide during AAI sessions. Recording the sessions allows error correction and agenda adjustment to dog's abilities. This can in turn lead to better psychological and physical comfort felt by the dog during AAI sessions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research material gathered, personal experience and available literature the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The well-being of dogs in AAI sessions is a difficult subject that is discussed reluctantly by many dog guides.
2. Every human–dog team that works in AAI should participate in mandatory training courses, predisposition tests and qualification exams that test participant's knowledge.
3. It is necessary to unify training programs for future kynotherapists and their dogs, while considering animal welfare as an integral element of that program, including the identification of dog's signals and body language.
4. Potential clients would greatly benefit from a unified certificate that confirms guide's and dog's qualifications (according to Polish law).
5. Regulations related to kynotherapist profession need to be introduced and embrace the following items: amount of dog's worktime with a distinction of active and passive activity of the animal; frequency of dog's work; knowledge of dog's behavior (calming signals, body language); the age at which the dog can commence work considering the dog's breed; the age at which the dog should retire.
6. Knowledge of dog's well-being, their needs stemming from breed predispositions and of their body language should be popularized.

The presented results may not adhere to the whole population of kynotherapists in Poland, because their exact numbers are not known. The only organization that trains the guides and the dogs for AAI-related labor and provides an official list of certified dogs is the Polish Kynotherapeutic Society.

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PRACA PSA W AAI – ANALIZA DOBROSTANU I KOMUNIKACJI CZŁOWIEK–PIES

STRESZCZENIE

W pracy dokonano analizy zachowania dobrostanu psów oraz komunikacji człowiek–pies podczas pracy w terapii z udziałem zwierząt (AAI – Animal Assisted Intervention) na terenie Polski. Analizę przeprowadzono poprzez kwestionariusz utworzony w Google Forms. Analizowano: charakterystykę psa, charakterystykę właściciela/przewodnika, pracę psa oraz komunikację człowiek–pies. Pytano o: czas pracy psa, częstotliwość pracy psa w ciągu dnia i tygodnia, doświadczenia przewodnika oraz znajomości sygnałów uspokajających wysyłanych przez psa. Do analizy statystycznej wykorzystano Microsoft Office Excel 2007 oraz IBM SPSS Statistics 24. W badaniu uczestniczyło 64 respondentów. Wyniki wskazują, iż temat dobrostanu psów w AAI jest tematem niechętnie podejmowanym przez wielu przewodników psów. Konieczne jest stworzenie regulacji prawnych dotyczących wykonywania zawodu kynoterapeuty, uregulowanie takich kwestii jak: czas pracy psa z podziałem na aktywność bierną i czynną zwierzęcia; częstotliwość pracy psa w ciągu dnia i tygodnia; znajomość behawioru psów (m.in. sygnały uspokajające, mowa ciała psa); wiek rozpoczęcia pracy psa; wiek zakończenia pracy psa.

Słowa kluczowe: terapia z udziałem zwierząt, dobrostan psa, AAI w Polsce

