

# A CASE STUDY ABOUT THE ROLE OF DOGS IN REGULATING GROUP DYNAMICS DURING CANINE-ASSISTED GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS



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## SUMMARY

*Background and aims:* This case study is about the demonstration of the role of a canine co-therapist in the stress management and in the development of better social skills of children in psychotherapeutic settings, at the same time considering the ongoing group dynamic processes, and implementing attachment theory as a good theoretical basis for interpretation of the working mechanism of canine-assisted therapy.

*Methods:* The therapeutic sessions were held in a group of seven children attending 3rd grade in primary school. The aim of therapy was the enhancement of social skills, self-control, and management of anxiety and stress of the participants with the help of a canine co-therapist.

*Results:* Based on the analysis of video recordings, the spontaneous use of dog-stroking and the exercises involving dogs helped children in coping with stress and anxiety emerging during more stressful group phases.

*Keywords:* Canine-assisted psychotherapy, animal-assisted therapy, attachment theory, stress management, child group psychotherapy

## INTRODUCTION

During the past 30 years, scientific research on human–animal bond has become a serious interdisciplinary field, incorporating many different areas of research (Beck, 2007, cited in: Anderson, 2007; Shapiro and DeMello, 2010). Ever growing evidence supports that the bond between humans and animals

contributes to the overall health of humans (Friedman et al., 2010; Chandler, 2012).

Parallel to this, more and more therapeutic approaches appear in the field of psychology that use the facilitative help of animals in the process of reaching a therapeutic goal. Although the recognition of animal-assisted therapy is becoming frequent to an increasing extent, the unclear terminology

greatly hinders the revelation of supportive data in scientific research.

The aim of this pilot study was to prepare for the development of a protocol for canine-assisted psychotherapy, which in turn could be used for research of effectiveness in child group psychotherapeutic settings. When planning the occasions of the therapy sessions, it is an important question how the overall group process formulates throughout the complete course of therapy. Therefore, this pilot study was aimed at determining the optimal distribution of exercises involving and not involving the dog throughout the whole process and within each session.

In this paper I also argue for the consistent use of separate terminology for *canine-assisted psychotherapy*, the relevance of attachment theory in interpreting the working mechanisms of canine-assisted psychotherapy, and I show how this can be used in psychotherapeutic practice.

#### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

By definition, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is an umbrella-term for diverse therapeutic approaches, which share a few features: the intervention should be goal-oriented, there is a specially trained animal that is included in the therapeutic process, and during the intervention the therapist uses the therapeutic effects of human-animal bond (Kruger and Serpell, 2010).

An ever growing mass of studies deal with animal-assisted therapy administered on different population, but most of the reported studies deal with adolescents (Wilson et al., 2015) having prob-

lems with aggression regulation and loneliness; with elderly people (Krause-Parello, 2012; Bernabei et al., 2013); with children having communicational problems, ADHD (Schuck et al., 2015), pervasive developmental disorders (O'Haire, 2013), with trauma therapies (O'Haire et al., 2015), sexual abuse, (Dietz et al., 2012). Seemingly it is not only a mere coincidence that AAT is best for improving concentrated attention, self-regulation, improving social skills involved in how to connect to others, for harmonizing non-verbal communication, and in general terms to reduce stress in frightening situations, thus making it possible to deal with more frightening past experiences, memories etc.

Some authors have already tried to imply the usefulness of attachment theory in interpreting the results and working mechanisms of AAT (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). They claim that pets do share key characteristics and functions with human attachment figures although they are unique attachment figures.

I argue that the implication of attachment theory is very useful in interpreting the stress-reducing effect of animal-assisted therapy, but it is applicable mostly in the case of canine-assisted therapy. Recent ethologic research (Miklósi and Topál, 2013) shows that dogs are special among other animals in several of their characteristics as they share some key features and capabilities with humans, which make them appropriate for some otherwise human-specific characteristics and roles. Therefore, they can be considered as attachment figures by humans. Human-pet bonds often meet the four prerequisites for an attachment bond: proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base and separation distress (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).

Therefore, it would be very useful to narrow terminology and differentiate between the different types of animal-assisted therapies using different animal species. We would claim that in case researchers used the narrower field and meta-analyses differentiated between the species-specific animal-assisted therapies, the results of research would be much more unified and interpretable than today. Therefore, it would bring the broader acceptance of canine-assisted psychotherapy closer as an evidence-based useful therapeutic possibility.

Relying on the application of attachment theory for psychotherapy, it is understandable how the stress-reducing and emotional state regulating effect of canine-assisted therapy can be used so well. Attachment theory implies cognitive, physiological and neurochemical consequences of an attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1988).

Within the secure attachment bond of emotional communication with the mother, this early socioemotional learning is internalized in the form of an enduring capacity to generate and maintain states of emotional security. These attachment interactions allow the emergence of the biological control system of the organism's state of arousal.

These internal working models influence regulation of emotions, the strategies on how to cope with stress and the behavior in close relationships throughout life. Although the core of these mental representations is formed during the attachment-interactions with the primary caregiver in childhood, Bowlby (1988) claimed that memorable interactions with others throughout life can alter a person's internal working models. Therefore, if we consider dogs as potential attachment figures, it

is easily understandable how these relationships can help in self-regulation, stress management, anxiety reduction etc.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF GROUP DYNAMICS

Applying the theory of Tuckman (1965) considering group dynamics, every group – including psychotherapeutic child groups as well – has to go through four developmental stages. The first phase is the group formation, when the group members get to know each other, the tasks and the aim of the group. The second, most critical and dynamic phase of group-forming is called storming, which is a very stressful, emotionally upset interval. In this phase, the individual differences and conflicts gain attention, and there is a rivalry for the different group roles. During the norm forming period of group dynamics, the common group norms are formulated, the different roles get cleared up. Finally, in the working period, the group uses the developed structure to perform its work. Yalom (2001) analysed these group phases in group psychotherapeutic context. He identified a starting orientation phase, which is described by the search for structure and aims of the group, and is characterised by dependence on the therapist and search for borders. The following phase is characterised by dominance conflicts between group and its members. After this, harmony and love between the members arise, the individual differences might even disappear, thus serving the group cohesion. The mature working group develops much later, which is characterised by strong cohesion, interpersonal and intrapersonal analy-

sis, and complete commitment towards the primary aim of the group and its members. Yalom further stresses the importance of the hardness and pains concentrated around the finishing of the group.

Based on the above mentioned assumptions, we have designed a canine-assisted psychotherapy for pre-adolescent children in group therapy sessions. In the therapeutic process we included the dog on every occasion, in a pre-designed manner. We have planned the themes of the sessions flexibly by assimilating the plans to the needs and psychological problems of the involved children. The aim of therapy was primarily to improve the social skills of the participating children and to help them develop better ways of aggression management.

In the process of preparation of therapeutic occasions, we primarily considered the beginning and the end of the occasions as fixed, and left the other parts of the sessions open for change, having more choices at hand for the same session, and flexibly attuned the exercises to the actual state and need of the children. Every occasion was started with a starting cycle, when every member could share their actual feelings, state of mind connected to either their actual day or any memory or event they felt important at the time. The time frame was not pre-set for the starting talks, it was regulated by the actual needs of children. We have prepared different games, exercises for every occasion, which we offered to the children in the view of the topics and emotional state emerging during the starting conversations. The dog was present from the starting point of the meetings, so he was there during the conversations as well. The children could "use" him as they wished, they could stroke him, pet him, or

just sit near, or ignore him just as they felt right. In the range of the prepared exercises there were some involving the dog and also such that did not involve him.

### THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE GROUP-THERAPY

We performed child group psychotherapy with seven 10-year-old children (3<sup>rd</sup> grade in primary school, 5 boys, and 2 girls). The children had difficulties in managing peer relationships in school, had some oppositional behavioural problems, and all of them had some complications in their family background. The aim of the psychotherapy was to strengthen the self-confidence of the children, to help them in coping with their own anxieties and to help them develop better peer relationships by having more appropriate communicational skills and better self-regulatory capacities. The participants volunteered for group membership and an informed written consent was obtained from the parents.

The group process took the time interval from November to May, once a week, each group session being 45 minutes long. The sessions were video recorded. Written consent was obtained from the parents of the children also for recording the sessions.

The group therapies took place in a Pedagogical Service Centre in Pest County. The groups were led by two psychologists. The therapeutic process was facilitated by a German shepherd male dog, which had extensive training experience and a therapy dog certificate. The leader and owner of the dog was one of the psychologists in the group, she was the one responsible for the performance and execution of the

exercises involving the dog. The animal-assisted therapy program was offered for the members as a state-financed program within the basic service possibilities.

The presence of the therapy dog on the sessions was permanent, the dog stayed in the therapy room during the whole session, but the amount of the structured exercises involving the dog, and the spontaneous reactions of the children towards the dog have appeared with different intensity in the different group phases.

The health of the therapy dog was continuously supervised by a veterinarian, and the dog was provided with free time to walk, satisfy his needs etc. before and after the sessions as well.

#### THE RESULTS OF OBSERVATION REGARDING THE ROLE OF THE DOG IN SESSIONS

Since due to the size of the sample, quantitative analysis was not possible. We could only rely on our subjective feelings as group leaders during the sessions; however, this internal experience coincided with our findings based on qualitative analyses of video recordings. These are as follows.

During the beginning phase of group forming, which is more infiltrated by anxieties, the ratio of dog-involving exercises was considerably high. This was partly the aim of the group leaders as well (to introduce the dog, practice dog-handling skills etc.), but at the same time children enjoyed it very much, and liked to spend lots of time with the dog: their attention was more turned towards the dog than towards the still unknown, anxiety-arising groupmates. This meant that the self-introducing games

and exercises were mostly combined with dog-leading tasks, which helped them to get acquainted with each other, and at the same time it helped to establish a base of trust towards the group and the projective situations as well. Children were very motivated to handle the dog, they were very eager to participate, so this ensured their involvement in the tasks and exercises and the continuous presence of the group members on every occasion even from the beginning, which in turn helped to consolidate the group. In sum, both the group leaders (not consciously aiming at this goal) and the children felt the need for the relative dominance of dog-involving exercises during the first group sessions, which served to decrease the anxiety related to group forming, and helped to end this phase.

This was followed by a phase when an increased need arose in the children to introduce themselves, which could also be well observed in the ratio of the dog-involving exercises. They needed less exercises involving the dog, and were more involved in the projective situations and conversations about themselves, their feelings etc. The pattern was very interesting; it seemed as if the change in the frequency of dog-involving exercises would be connected to the rising ratio of conversational periods. This can be interpreted as the work with the dog has developed a secure base for emotional exploration into more stressful fields, and the children were able to open up and talk about more intensive inner contents. One peak of inner work was on the 8<sup>th</sup> occasion, when the children felt themselves so safe and immersed in their intrapsychic work that they spent the whole session with conversations, and there was no need for dog-involving activities. This could be identified

as the beginning of a group phase when the members were able to get detached from the safety of the dog, and could use the holding, safe atmosphere of the group as secure base for emotional exploration.

We were also looking at how frequently the children wanted to stroke the dog, as it would demonstrate the emotional need of the children, since it does not depend on the ratio of dog-involving exercises. The dog was available during the whole session, and children could voluntarily stroke him any time they wished. It can be noted that the need for stroking the dog was quite high all through the group process. Therefore, we would state that children really do use the dog for decreasing their own anxiety and feelings of stress in emotionally overwhelming situations. But at the same time, we should also note that it is not limited only to the stressful group-dynamical phases, during group forming, storming or ending, but it is also in use during the safer period of the well-formed working group phase, when children are ready to talk about their problems and are more immersed in their intrapsychic world. This statement was supported by our observations, when the children frequently and spontaneously were stroking the dog during conversations; showing that children really use the dog as a stress relieving agent during discussing emotionally upsetting events.

An example of this was when one of the boys shared really deep feelings about his family background. He entered our group because he had some behavioural difficulties in the school, had no real friends and had some unexpected mood changes as well. Otherwise, he was a very nice boy, who very rarely talked about himself, and hid his feelings very much. He usually tried to impress

others by some humorous actions, which in the school were considered behavioural problems. Because he was so out of contact with his feelings, it was very difficult to get near to him, and this hindered both his personal relationships and the resolution of his emotional problems. The main reason behind his emotional state was that he was living with his grandparents, because his mother and father got divorced, and neither of them wanted to take care of him. On this occasion, he told us a story about a family day in school, and how sad he was that he was the only one who did not have his father or mother around. He could also share that he felt he was not important to anybody. During his recollection of this memory, he unconsciously dropped himself down beside the dog, and he was continuously stroking him while he was speaking. After he finished his story, he went back to his chair. This demonstrated to us that the calming and stress-relieving presence of the dog helped this boy in recollecting and sharing his feelings to such an extent that was far beyond anything he was able to talk about before.

At the ending phase of the group sessions, the exercises involving the dog became frequent again, as the group leaders wanted to guide the children back to emotionally safer areas. And in the exercises that did not involve the dog the aim was also to bring in activities which would help the group members in closing down their common group work and relationship (collective drawings etc.).

It is very important to note that the temperament and training of the dog is a very important factor in having a successful therapy. The therapy dog had a licence, which meant he had to pass a temperament exam showing that his behaviour is complete-

ly controllable and never aggressive. This is very important, since the children with behavioural difficulties can act rather unexpectedly, even they can become very loud or aggressive, and it is essential that the group leaders can trust the dog that he will never act aggressively. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the group leaders to protect the dog too, so that no one can hurt him. This safety enabled the group leaders to guide the group in a non-directive manner, since the children could freely choose to play with the dog, to stroke him or hug him. The thorough training of the dog enabled the group leaders to prepare lots of different exercises to be executed by the children. The dog leading exercises could be performed by the children without help, since the dog would comply with their commands as well if they were executed properly. On the other hand, the dog leader was able to control the dog from a distance as well, this way the success of the children could be ensured. Besides these, we were very fortunate with the special characteristics of our dog, Lerry, who had a kind, but calm temperament. He was never aggressive towards anybody, but he did not pursue children to pet him, he rather left them the choice to initiate any kind of contact, and he was always ready to react. This way the needs of the children were the key factors in regulating the amount of dog-use during the therapy sessions. This kind of non-directivity of the dog was essential in demonstrating the real needs of the members.

## DISCUSSION

On the whole, it was very helpful for us to experience the effect of group dynamics on the total sequence of group work and on the

need for the different quality and quantity of dog-use at the different occasions. All the experience helped the group leaders to plan the methodology of future canine-assisted psychotherapy sessions. The experience arising from this study showed the importance of taking the actual group dynamics into consideration when pre-planning the possible exercises of a given session.

At the beginning, it is worth to applying more exercises focusing on the dog. In our case, these exercises were as follows: leading the dog and handing him over to each other, while practicing the name of the group-mate and dog leading as well, or giving 3–4 consecutive commands to the dog (e.g.: sit, bark, lie down) while the others were listening and then repeating the sequence, or showing the dog hand-signalled commands without words or just the opposite, giving verbal commands while standing perfectly still etc. These exercises were originally aimed to help children attune to each other and the dog, and improve their dog-handling skills. Learning dog handling skills is important not only for enabling children to participate in those exercises which focus more on the task at hand while leading the dog, and not just on how to lead the dog, but also this shared experience contributes to the strengthening of the relationship between children and the therapy dog – which in turn will result in the developing attachment relationship between them. This therefore will serve as the emotional basis of the following therapy work.

It is also highly important to supply children with such safe and holding environment, where they can use effects of the dog on relieving stress and anxiety spontaneously in a way that they can stay active participants in the psychodynamic actions

going on inside the group just as well. This means that the mentioned setting where the children are sitting in a circle and the dog lies in the middle, where they can reach and touch him or stroke him any time they feel like it, is a very important base of psychodynamic exploration.

It should also be noted that a secure attachment relationship can in many ways facilitate the therapeutic work of the group. The group members can establish an attachment relationship with the therapy dog via having successful, safe and joyful interactions and by petting, stroking him. Among other aspects, the presence of an attachment figure can facilitate mentalization processes (Allen et al., 2008). In our group, as the presence of the dog could help in relieving stress and decreasing anxiety, the members became more open to mentalization processes. This enhanced mentalization capacity can help them to talk about intrapsychic events, feelings, emotions. This can greatly contribute to the success of psychotherapy both by helping the intrapsychic work of the group members and by helping them to consider each other's view-

points, this way strengthening interpsychic relationships and skills as well.

To further strengthen our results and formulate clearer theories about the background mechanisms that play a role in the effectiveness of canine-assisted psychotherapy, we plan to organise larger-scale research in the future. A greater sample size incorporating the data of more groups would make it possible to draw well established, statistically significant and valid conclusions, which in turn would contribute to the better foundation and acceptance of canine-assisted psychotherapy as an evidence-based complementary psychological method.

It would also be interesting to determine the specific needs of different age groups in the types of dog-involving exercises and to define which groups benefit the most from canine-assisted therapy. It is also important to describe which types of problems can be treated best with the help of canine-assisted therapy.

To achieve the above mentioned aims, we are aiming to perform more research with a larger sample and to propose a protocol for specific groups.

## ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

### ESETTANULMÁNY A KUTYA SZEREPÉRŐL A CSOPORTDINAMIKA SZABÁLYOZÁSÁBAN FIATAL SERDÜLŐK KUTYAASSZISZTÁLT PSZICHOTERÁPIÁS CSOPORTJÁBAN

*Háttér és célkitűzések:* Ebben az esettanulmányban azt szeretném bemutatni, hogy milyen szerepe lehet a kutya ko-terapeutának stresszkezelésben és jobb társas készségek fejlesztésében pszichoterápiás közegben gyermekcsoportban alkalmazva, valamint szeretnék rámutatni a kutya csoportdinamikai folyamatokban játszott fontos szerepére. Elméleti keretként kiemelem a kötődélméletet, amely jól alkalmazható a kutyaasszisztált terápia működési mechanizmusainak értelmezéséhez.

*Módszer:* A terápiás üléseket egy hét főből álló általános iskola harmadik osztályába járó korosztályhoz tartozó gyermekcsoporttal végeztem. A terápia célja a társas készségek,



önkontroll, szorongás és stresszkezelés megtámogatása volt egy kutya ko-terapeuta segítségével.

*Eredmények:* Az ülésekről készült videófelvevételek elemzésére alapozva a gyermekek spontán megnyilvánuló kutyasimogatásai, valamint a kutyát aktívan bevonó feladatok segítettek a gyermekeknek megküzdenni a stresszel és szorongással, amelyek a csoportdinamikai szempontból megterhelőbb szakaszokban előtérbe kerültek.

*Kulcsszavak:* Kutyaasszisztált pszichoterápia, állatasszisztált terápia, kötődésemélet, stresszkezelés, gyermek-csoportterápia

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