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# Identifying risks factors for therapy dog welfare - When it's "too much"

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## Introduction

Animal-Assisted interventions (AAI) are defined as *"a goal oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human services (e.g., social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans"*.

Animals are central in these interspecific practices, whereas yet studies on their impact on them are still rare. Focusing on the canine species, therapy dog welfare in AAI is an actual concern because interactions with a variety of unfamiliar and sometimes fickle humans, which are common in AAI, have a stressful potential for dogs. However, there is currently little consensus on the consequences of such interventions on the dogs involved.

**Instead of answering the question "are therapy dogs stressed ?"**, which is questionable because of the individuality of each animals but also the diversity of setting, **we choose to identify risks factors for dog's welfare in AAI** in respect to the representativeness of the field and its heterogeneity

The objective of our research was to identify risks factors for dog's wellbeing in AAI.

### Study 1

April 2018 to  
September 2019

We interrogated handlers to characterize AAI in France and study their representations on mediation dog welfare. Two articles have been published (Mignot, 2021).

### Study 2

October 2019 to  
November 2021

We observed sessions of AAI in various settings to underline risks factors for dog's stress. Therefore, the study presented in this poster is the last part of a PhD, which is still on analysis.

## Methods and Materials

Observations were carried out from October 2019 to March 2020, based on the voluntary participation of handlers.

In total, we observed 54 sessions from 11 human-dog teams, with 16 dogs. Settings were various : individual or group sessions, in prisons, retirement homes, medical-educational institutions

We used different tools to study mediation dog welfare:

- A 12-items questionnaire about handler's training in dog behavior, their representations on therapy dog welfare
- A session sheet with the characteristics of each session
- A list of dog and human (handler and beneficiaries) behaviors to be completed by the handler in one-zero (occurred or not)
- Behavioral analysis : ethological and ethnographic analysis of sessions; focal animal sampling with humans as variables that could impact dog's stress
  - Paper pencil or video (BORIS®)

### Dog behaviors

- Stress
- Avoidance
- Agitation : physical, vocal
- « positive » behaviors Contact seeking

### Human behaviors

- Verbal
- Appropriate or inappropriate tactile behaviors
- Other : play, give a treat, looking at the dog ...

### Other variables

- Duration of session
- duration of transport,
- number of sessions per week
- number of beneficiaries,
- age of the dog
- use of coercive tools...

## Primary results (data analysis in progress...)

- Dogs show first stress signals, then avoid interactions with beneficiaries
- Dogs are more likely to seek visual or physical contact with the handlers than with the beneficiaries
- We observe restrictive behaviors in some handlers and referents
- Some handlers do not recognize the signs of stress in their dogs and do not respect their choice not to interact
- There is some behaviors that could stress dogs in AAI : petting on the top of the head, sudden gestures, agitation, screaming, restrictive behaviors
- There are risk factors in the settings of the sessions: too many beneficiaries, no referent present, rooms too hot and/or too noisy, interruption of the medical team



**Figure 1.** dog petted by beneficiary, held by caregiver to stay, ears back, lip licking.



**Figure 2.** Two dogs lying down during discussions, on a table with a non-slip mat and an access ramp.



**Figure 3.** Dog doing a lip licking during brushing



**Figure 4.** relaxed dog in session playing alone.

## Related literature

Mignot, A. The State of Animal-Assisted Interventions in France: Is the IAHAIO Model Relevant? *Press* **2021**.

Mignot, A.; de Luca, K.; Leboucher, G.; Servais, V. French Handlers' Perspectives on Animal-Assisted Interventions. *Complement. Ther. Clin. Pract.* **2021**, 101356.

Glenk, L.M. A Dog's Perspective on Animal-Assisted Interventions. In *Pets as Sentinels, Forecasters and Promoters of Human Health*; Pastorinho, M.R., Sousa, A.C.A., Eds.; Springer International Publishing: Cham, 2020; pp. 349–365 ISBN 978-3-030-30733-2.