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Straight from the horse's mouth? A literature review and a randomized controlled trial of intuitive animal communication

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Abstract

Intuitive animal communication (IAC) is defined as a process of transmitting and receiving information between humans and other animals while transcending conventional channels, sometimes invoking mystical roots. The apparent recent increase in the number of IAC practitioners, the “wild” aspects of their practice, the substantial expenses it often entails, and the intrusion into veterinary questions it amounts to, all point to the need for an evaluation of IAC scientificity.

To this aim, we conducted a systematic literature review and developed a randomized, double-blind, protocol testing the ability to distinguish living animals from deceased ones, in conditions close to IAC practice. Participants, practitioners and non-practitioners, were shown random photos of dogs, cats, and horses, each animal being currently alive or deceased, and tasked with “feeling” their status.

As a result, practitioners ($N = 340$) and non-practitioners ($N = 1986$) perform similarly and not better than chance when predicting living vs. dead status. Statistically, some scores are unusually high or low, indicating unnoticed clues, true or misleading, in the images.

To sum up, until today, no IAC capability has been demonstrated, and our protocol confirms this absence. The success of IAC seems based on a combination of guesswork and subjective validations and we find no scientific reason to recommend this practice. Regarding clinical relevance, proving that IAC has no basis should save animals from ineffective treatments and their owners from undue expenses.

Keywords:

Intuitive animal communication (IAC), Randomized controlled trial (RCT), Literature review, Animal telepathy

Introduction

Intuitive Animal Communication (IAC) is self-defined as the process of transmitting and receiving information between humans and other animals while transcending conventional communication channels such as explicit verbal, sound, or body language, and involving “intuitive”, “extrasensory”, or even “telepathic” transmission. According to the claims of its practitioners, IAC gives access to the well-being of the animal, to its affects and ailments, well beyond what ethologists and other specialists in “classical” communication realize. It is regularly implemented without meeting the animal, a photograph, with a few precise criteria (depending on the practitioner, for instance they often want to see the eyes), being sufficient.

The first experimental studies on telepathic-type links between humans and other animals date back to the 1880s, during the rise of meta- and para-psychology. Some of the most famous studies of the 20th century are due to the American theologian and naturalist William J. Long, who coined the term “animal telepathy” (Long, 1919), to Joseph B. Rhine and Louisa E. Rhine on the mare Lady (Rhine and Rhine, 1929), to Vladimir Bechtereov on circus dogs (Bechtereov, 1949), to Karlis Osis on cats (Osis, 1952, Osis and Foster, 1953), to Robert Morris on rats and goldfish (Morris, 1967), and to Pierre Duval and Evelyn Montredon (the pseudonyms of Rémy Chauvin and Jean Mayer) on mice (Duval and Montredon, 1968). At the turn of the 21st century, two series of experiments due to Rupert Sheldrake became famous despite their flaws, one involving Pamela Smart and her dog Jaytee (Sheldrake and Smart, 1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000b), the other involving Aimée Morgana and her parrot N’kisi (Sheldrake and Morgana, 2003). The experiments with the dog Jaytee were subsequently criticized by Richard Wiseman and coauthors (Wiseman *et al.*, 1998, 2000)

Epistemologically, IAC lies at the confluence of two heavily contested theories. The first one, due to Rupert Sheldrake, is the theory of “morphic fields”. It may be viewed as an heir to the notions of “group mind” (Hardy, 1965) and “group soul” (Selous, 1931). Morphic fields, whatever their precise nature, would determine and explain the behavior of living beings, in particular they would inherit habits of species by “morphic resonance” (Sheldrake, 2009). The second theory, due to Rosemary Crossley, is called “facilitated communication” or psychophany. Its aim is to enter into communication with people with disabilities or severe autism: the practitioner is supposed to “mix” their “unconscious” with that of the patient, and, doing so, to draw information about them. A systematic review of this method was carried out by Ralf Schlosser and coauthors (Schlosser *et al.*, 2014), who concluded that the technique was completely invalid. But most of IAC has developed in a “wild” manner, through the publication of countless non-scientific books (Evans, 2004, Williams, 2003, Del Monte, 2008, Smith, 2008, Dietmann, 2012, amongst others) and thanks to some significant media coverage (involving, in the French context, TV channels as diverse as Arte, Animal Planet, TF1, M6, France 5, and others). The potential abuses of this method in terms of consent are flagrant. Rosemary Crossley, already mentioned above, was called into question several times for this reason, such as in the Stubblefield affair, which concerned a case of forced sexual consent from a person suffering from severe cerebral palsy.

The growing media (and lucrative) success of IAC methods over the last 25 years, carried by a few “flagship” medium persons, has been facilitated by regular television shows, without any supporting evidence being presented. However, their risks are real: in addition to significant financial losses (IAC is expensive, with an average cost of around 70 EUR per hour in France for traditional owners (75 USD per hour), much more for Olympic-level competition horses), relying on them leads to delays in the care of truly sick animals. To sum up, some medical diagnoses by IAC practitioners amount to an illegal practice of veterinary medicine and they miss very real, possibly serious, pathologies.

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Literature review

We conducted a systematic literature review, supplemented by individual searches, from December 2023 to October 2024. We relied on 10 search engines (*Google scholar, Science direct, Pubmed, Cochrane, Cairn, PsyArticles, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, BioArxiv, LISSA, HAL*), using English keywords (“animal psychic”, “pet psychic”, “animal telepathy”, “pet telepathy”, “intuitive animal communication”, “intuitive communication”, “intuitive interspecies communication”, “interspecies telepathic communication”, “animal communicator”, “human-animal communication”) and French keywords (“communication intuitive”, “communication animale intuitive”, “interpréteur animalier”, “télépathie animale”). We identified 3,121 references from databases and 61 from other sources. We included experimental protocols using IAC and we set no limits regarding the publication date or the country of publication. In the end, this led us to include 6 studies in our literature review, as summarized in Figure 1 and Table 1 below.

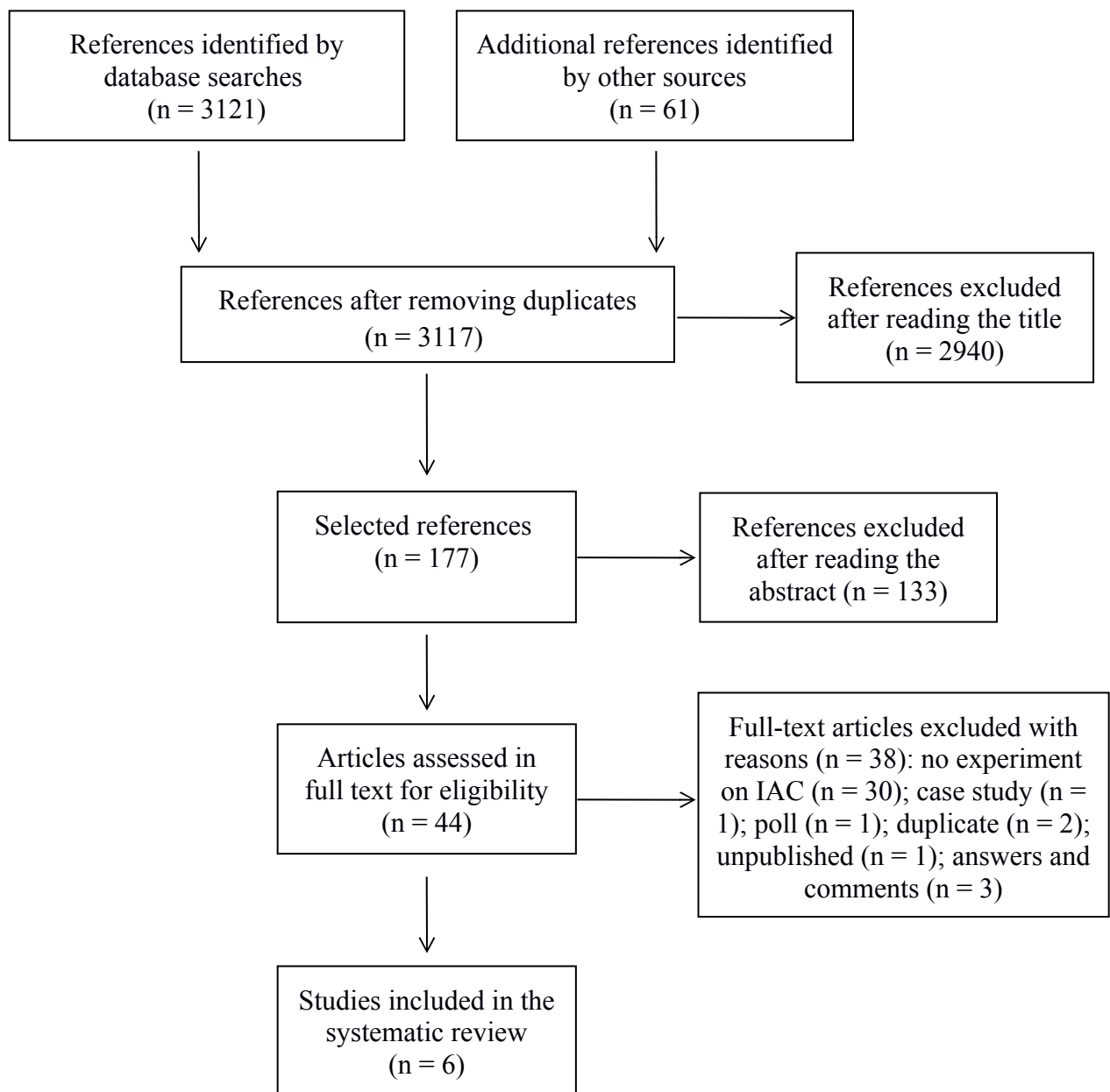


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram detailing the search and selection processes applied to the literature

Table 1. Details of the literature review

	Total number of hits	Selected titles	Selected abstracts	Studies included
Google Scholar	1674	48	9	3
Science Direct	656	24	5	0
PubMed	300	11	4	1
PsycArticles, PsycInfo, PBSC	158	18	1	0
Cairn	263	15	1	0
BioArxiv	0	0	0	0
Lissa	0	0	0	0
HAL	7	0	0	0
Other Sources	61	61	24	2
Total	3121	177	44	6

Table 2. Bias risks

Study's name	Bias risks	Comments
Erickson (2014)	High	Low level of methodological rigor No description of qualitative analyses No genuine statistical analysis Descriptive results Weak evaluation criteria Blind bias in animal-owner-IAC triangulation
Erickson <i>et al.</i> (2016)	High	Low level of methodological rigor No objective research Weak evaluation criteria
Sheldrake & Smart (1998)	High	Case study Experimental bias due to the presence of other persons near the animal Questionable (and discussed) evaluation criteria Lack of inclusion criteria
Wiseman & Milton (1998)	Medium	Case study Precise but ad hoc inclusion criteria Possibly confounded variables
Sheldrake & Smart (2000)	Medium	Case study Results over-interpretation
Sheldrake & Morgana (2003)	High	Major biases due to the implication of the experimenters Case Study Unjustified data exclusion

117 Our literature review indicates that the very few experimental protocols developed on
118 IAC are mainly case studies and that these are tainted by some major methodological biases, as

119 summarized in Table 2 above. The only protocols of a slightly improved quality point to the
120 absence of validity of the practice.

121

122

123 **Methods**

124

125 In the absence of rigorous experimental studies on IAC, and given the growth in supply
126 and the risks of delays in the therapeutic care of animals, we developed a randomized, double-
127 blind, experimental protocol to test the ability of IAC communicators to discriminate a non-
128 ambiguous information, in conditions as close as possible to their usual practice.

129

130 **Context and participants**

131

132 Participants were IAC practitioners as well as non-practicing volunteers. Recruitment was
133 carried out online from 9 March to 30 April 2024 by an announcement proposing to any
134 interested adult the opportunity to participate in a study on animal communication. We then
135 disseminated the announcement of the study online on social networks, relying on snowball
136 effects and email. More specifically, the announcement was published on several groups of
137 the IAC Facebook network, and we contacted directly and individually 404 identified
138 practitioners. Potentially interested people were then provided a more precise description of
139 the objectives and nature of the study and of its progress on the first LimeSurvey page of the
140 study, after clicking on a link. This gave them access to the inclusion criteria (being an adult)
141 and they could then choose whether or not to give their consent to participate in the study.
142 Participation was not mandatory, in fact each participant could decide at any time to leave the
143 questionnaire or cancel their participation, in a completely confidential manner. No reward
144 (either financial, or involving study vouchers, or other) was offered to the participants. No
145 element of this research involved any physical, psychological or professional risk.

146

147 The project received a favourable advice from the ethics committee of the Research
148 Ethics Committee of University Grenoble Alpes (CERGA, “comité d'éthique pour la
149 recherche Grenoble Alpes”, Advice 2024-10, dated 14 February 2024). To ensure quality
150 writing, the authors followed the recommendations of the CONSORT grid (Schulz et al.,
151 2010). All the materials used in the study and the data collected are freely available (OSF
152 Project “Straight from the horse’s mouth?”, 2024).

153

154 **Material**

155

156 After reviewing the literature and consulting with IAC practitioners to get closer to their
157 practice, we developed what appears to be the first randomized, double-blind experimental
158 test on the issue. Considering that IACs would hardly risk producing therapeutic statements
159 during the study, we first considered a test based on an unambiguous criterion, namely, the
160 ability to discriminate, from photos presented online, real living animals from fictitious
161 animals created by AI. However, AIs in 2024 can only offer images whose falsehood is easy
162 to detect. So, we modified the protocol and, because we found that every other criterion we
163 could think of remained interpretative and ambiguous, we opted for the mere capacity to
164 discriminate between living and deceased animals.

165

166 Knowing that a majority of IAC practitioners are familiar with dogs, cats and horses,
167 although some prefer to operate with certain species of animals, we built three tests:

168

- 169 • 10 photos of horses, mixing in a random proportion living and deceased horses,
- 10 photos of cats, mixing in a random proportion living and deceased cats,
- 10 photos of dogs, mixing in a random proportion living and deceased dogs.

170 Participants had the possibility to take one, two or three of these tests, depending on their
171 personal preferences.

172
173 Our pool of photos comprised 20 images of horses, 32 images of cats and 20 images of
174 dogs. The sets of photos proposed to each participant were drawn uniformly randomly from
175 these pools. The owners of the animals gave their agreement to the use of an image of their
176 animal, and we made sure that the status of every animal (deceased or alive) remained the
177 same during the whole experiment.

178 179 **Adherence to conventional and alternative therapies**

180
181 To measure the adherence to complementary and alternative therapies of the participants,
182 we relied on the scale of attitudes towards conventional medicine and complementary and
183 alternative therapies (David *et al.*, 2020). This scale, which is the French adaptation of
184 CACMS, for *Complementary, alternative and conventional medicine attitudes scale*
185 (McFadden *et al.*, 2010), is composed of 19 items and it allows to study specifically the role
186 of beliefs in the decision to use complementary and alternative therapies. Participants respond
187 using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). In our study,
188 the scale has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$).

189 190 **Data analysis**

191
192 We assessed the relationships between the participants’ profiles (that is, practicing IAC or
193 not), their beliefs about IAC and complementary and alternative therapies, and their scores on
194 the test, by computing Pearson’s correlation coefficients. We also performed ANOVAs to
195 compare the scores on beliefs about IAC and about alternative and complementary therapies
196 and the scores on our experimental tests, depending on the practice or not of IAC.

197 198 **Results**

199
200 We collected a total of 2,326 complete responses, 263 participants claiming a personal
201 practice of IAC, 73 a professional practice, and 4 both practices. The sample comprised
202 83.5 % of women ($N = 1942$), 14.2 % of men ($N = 331$) and 2.3 % of persons who indicated
203 no gender ($N = 53$). The mean age was 35.2 years (median 33, standard deviation 11.6).

204
205 Table 3 below presents Pearson’s correlation coefficients between these variables and the
206 scores to the tests, showing the following results. First, there is a positive correlation between
207 the degree of beliefs in the existence of IAC and the degree of beliefs associated with
208 alternative and complementary therapies ($r = .77, p < .001$). Second, there is no significant
209 correlation between the scores (i.e., the number of images guessed correctly) to the tests about
210 dogs, cats and horses. Thus, participants with a good score on a given series do not tend to
211 have particularly good scores on another series. Finally, there is a negative correlation
212 between the degree of beliefs in the existence of IAC and the scores; however, this effect is
213 weak, and it is only statistically meaningful for the series of dogs ($r = -.097, p < .001$).

214
215 Respondents who do not practice IAC have lower degrees of beliefs towards IAC and
216 complementary and alternative therapies (means 36.9 and 38.5 respectively) than people who
217 developed a personal practice of IAC (means 80.2 and 50.5 respectively) and than people who
218 developed professional IAC practices (means 97.2 and 55 respectively). The ANOVAs in
219 Table 4 below reveal some significant differences in beliefs in IAC and alternative and
220 complementary therapies depending on the practice or absence of practice of IAC.

Table 3. Pearson’s correlation coefficients between beliefs in IAC, beliefs in alternative and complementary therapies, and the number of correct responses to the each series

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Beliefs in IAC	-				
2. Beliefs in alternative and complementary therapies	.77 (¹)	-			
3. Scores on dogs	-.097 (¹)	-.065 (²)	-		
4. Scores on cats	-.017	-.045	.055 (³)	-	
5. Scores on horses	-.024	-.035	.049	-.053	-

Notes: (¹) $p < .001$ (²) $p < .01$ (³) $p < .05$

222

Table 4. Rates of success: means and ANOVAs based on IAC practice, on beliefs in IAC (b-IAC), and on beliefs in alternative and complementary therapies (b-ACT)

Outcomes	IAC PRACTICE				ANOVA
	None Mean (SD)	Personal Mean (SD)	Professional Mean (SD)	Personal and professional Mean (SD)	
b-IAC	36.9 (35.1)	80.2 (28.1)	97.2 (13.3)	75 (50)	$F(3, 2322) = 189, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .19$
b-ACT	38.5 (13.2)	50.5 (10.4)	55 (8.24)	34.8 (21.7)	$F(3, 2322) = 102, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$

223

Table 5. Means and ANOVAs based on scores, depending on the type of practice

Outcomes	IAC PRACTICE				ANOVA
	None Mean (SD)	Personal Mean (SD)	Professional Mean (SD)	Personal and professional Mean (SD)	
Dogs	1.63 (3.14)	1.51(3.03)	1.17(3.51)	Na	$F(3, 1955) = .593, p = .619, \eta^2_p = .001$
Cats	.35 (3.20)	.45(3.19)	-.2(3.01)	1(4.24)	$F(3, 1690) = .672, p = .57, \eta^2_p = .001$
Horses	.15 (3.14)	-.18 (3.14)	.27 (2.83)	-2(Na)	$F(3, 1414) = .831, p = .477, \eta^2_p = .002$

224 The participants answered completely 1163, 859 and 698 series of images of dogs, cats,
225 and horses, respectively. Each series was made of 10 images. The proportions of correct

226 guesses of the animal's status (dead/alive) are 54.8 %, 49.2 % and 48.2 % for dogs, cats and
227 horses respectively. Random answers would have yielded proportions of 50 % for each
228 species, with respective standard deviations 0.46 %, 0.54 % and 0.60 %.

229
230 Figures A1, A2 and A3 in the Annex show histograms of the scores realized by the
231 participants on the sets of 10 images proposed to them, compared to pure chance histograms
232 based on binomial distributions of parameters $n = 10$ and $p = .5$.

233
234 Table 5 above presents ANOVA analyses on the type of IAC practice (i.e., none,
235 personal, professional, or both), which reveal no significant differences in the scores obtained
236 on the three tests.

237 **Discussion**

238
239 Although the effectiveness of IAC services is often claimed, it is not, according to our
240 literature review, supported by any conclusive study. Instead, the literature presents an
241 assortment of testimonials seen as evidence, a characteristic feature of pseudo-scientific
242 theories or therapies.

243
244 Before starting our experiment, we benefited from some experience sharing with several
245 IAC practitioners. This allowed us to place ourselves as close as possible to their actual
246 conditions of exercise, for example, working on clear images, using full-length photos when
247 possible, images of the animals alone, and with their eyes being visible.

248
249 The results show that neither practitioners nor non-practitioners achieve scores above
250 chance, despite a possible bias for some photos. If practitioners fail on a parameter as
251 powerful and well-defined as the living/dead status of the animal, their chances of being able,
252 by pure IAC, to detect “classic” elements of IAC sessions, such as a degree of contentment of
253 the animal, the presence or absence of a garden, their appreciation of their food, and various
254 pains, seem dim.

255
256 In their exchanges with us, some practitioners raised an ad hoc counterargument to this
257 point, which amounts to presuppose that dead animals are not aware that they are dead, hence
258 our alive-or-deceased criterion would not be relevant since the “soul” of the animal may
259 express itself as well. We find difficult to give credence to this hypothesis, which mobilizes
260 without any supporting element an ex nihilo theorization of the afterlife.

261
262 Table 3 in the Results section shows a strong positive correlation between the degree of
263 belief in the existence of IAC and the tendency to adhere to several beliefs about alternative
264 and complementary therapies, as already noted by other authors (Jamain *et al.*, 2023, Bergh *et*
265 *al.*, 2021). Thus, beliefs in IAC and beliefs in those therapies are positively correlated, a fact
266 which may point at some intellectual roots common to both types of beliefs. On the other
267 hand, correlations between the beliefs in IAC and/or alternative and complementary therapies,
268 and the scores realized on each series, are all small (some of them being positive and others
269 being negative), indicating no significant effect.

270 **Strengths and limits**

271
272 Before the experiment, we had anticipated that some clues left in the background of the
273 photos, such as car models, photo granulosities, flash, old fashioned tapestries, and so on,
274 would distort our results, since they could make possible to estimate the date when the photo
275 was taken and therefore the age of the animal at the time of the test. Thus, we performed some
276 preliminary, seemingly conclusive, tests to remove photos suggesting specific epochs.

279 However, the better-than-average scores (and also the few lower-than-average scores) of
280 some dog photos suggest that some confounding variables escaped us in this specific series.
281

282 A possible explanation could be related to passing fads for specific dog breeds. To wit,
283 most of us frequently see dogs passing by, and doing so, one can get an idea of the breeds that
284 are fashionable at the moment. In contrast, cats are much less often visible, as well as horses,
285 which non-professionals actually rarely see. To overcome this presumed parameter, one
286 should use sets of photos of dogs from breeds that do not allow such presumptions about their
287 temporality.
288

289 A remark that was regularly addressed at us by practitioners, which we had failed to
290 foresee, was that bringing large numbers of people into telepathic contact with animals, as our
291 test presumably entailed, would amount to an act of cruelty, overloading these animals with
292 telepathic solicitations without their explicit consent. At this point, two remarks are in order.
293 First, such a burden, though hypothesized, was never actually observed, for example, no
294 owner mentioned any change in their animal health due to the experiment. Second, animal
295 consent is an ambiguous hypothesis, rarely used except in the controversial “theory of the
296 domestic contract” (Palmer, 1997). We also wish to stress that, although IAC practitioners all
297 testify to feeling the emotions of companion animals, no mention is ever made in such a
298 context of the roughly 70 billion land animals that are slaughtered every year, mainly for food
299 consumption by humans. Thus, such a (claimed) hypersensitivity towards animals with high
300 social desirability, joined with a total deafness towards animals of other species, suggests
301 some variable degrees of empathy and compassion, as was already studied by others (Miralles
302 *et al.*, 2019).
303

304 Another frequent remark by practitioners was that, since dead animals do not know
305 whether they are alive or dead, even dead animals would actually be able to communicate
306 with practitioners. Independently on the validity of this reasoning, our study shows that
307 practitioners are unable to discriminate between living and dead animals. When we relate this
308 inability to the precision of usual IAC claims (about dental pains, tastes for brands of kibble,
309 etc.), we are tempted to view this second remark as an attempt, possibly unintentional, to
310 make impossible any existence proof or disproof in these matters.
311

312 **Conclusion**

313
314 Despite an abundant secondary literature and the current blossoming of IAC services
315 offered out of any legal framework, our literature review was unable to unearth works proving
316 the effectiveness of these practices to provide specific informations about the animal. The
317 studies appearing to do so actually mix subjective validations with high-probability guessings,
318 leading to hypothesis confirmation biases appealing to both animal owners and to IAC
319 practitioners (the animals themselves, as far as one can tell, do not seem to care).
320

321 When, as in our experimental protocol, unambiguous criteria are used, practitioners fare
322 no better than chance. Furthermore, despite the care and the preliminary tests carried out on
323 our photos, clues seems to have corrupted some of these images. This shows the extent to
324 which, even in unconscious ways, IAC practitioners have a strong chance to attribute to their
325 capacities something in fact depending on the environment.
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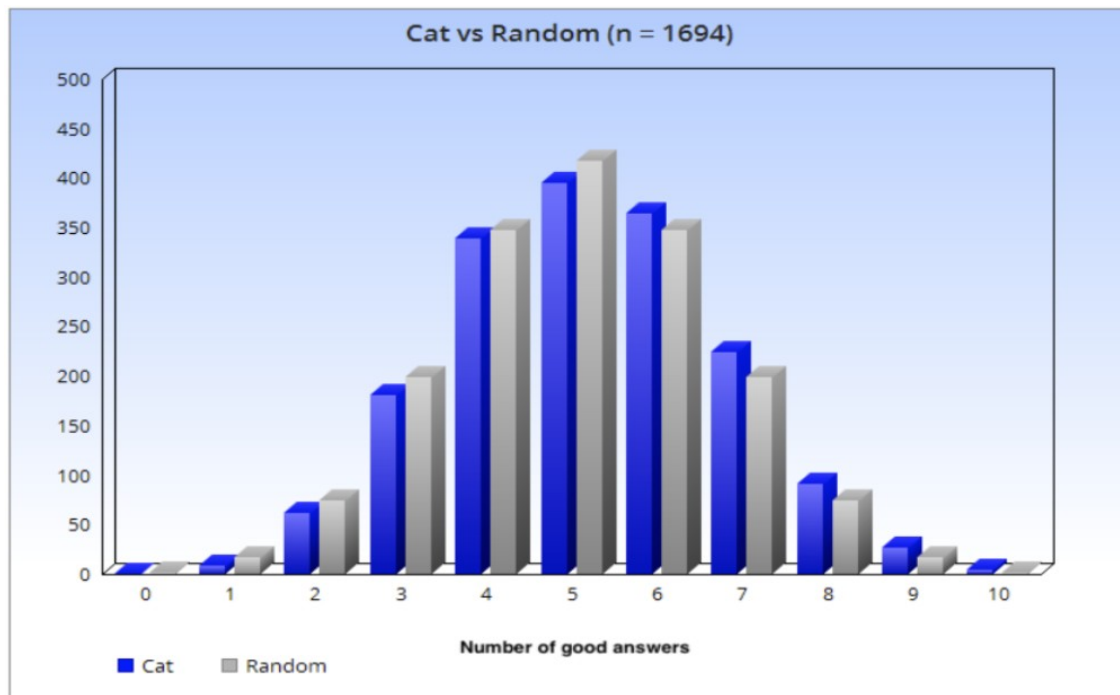
327 At present, we hesitate between two options: either we refine the experiment presented in
328 this paper, trying to get as close as possible to practice and to take into account the numerous
329 comments received; or, we consider as problematic, being agents of institutions financed by

330 public money, to spend more of our time on a subject for which neither the scientific
331 construction nor the results obtained so far present any avenue whatsoever.
332

333 In any case, our study shows unequivocally that there is currently no scientific reason to
334 validate IAC practice. As a consequence, we recommend that veterinary services warn the
335 general public about this technique, which is probably often used sincerely but whose
336 beneficial effects are illusory.
337

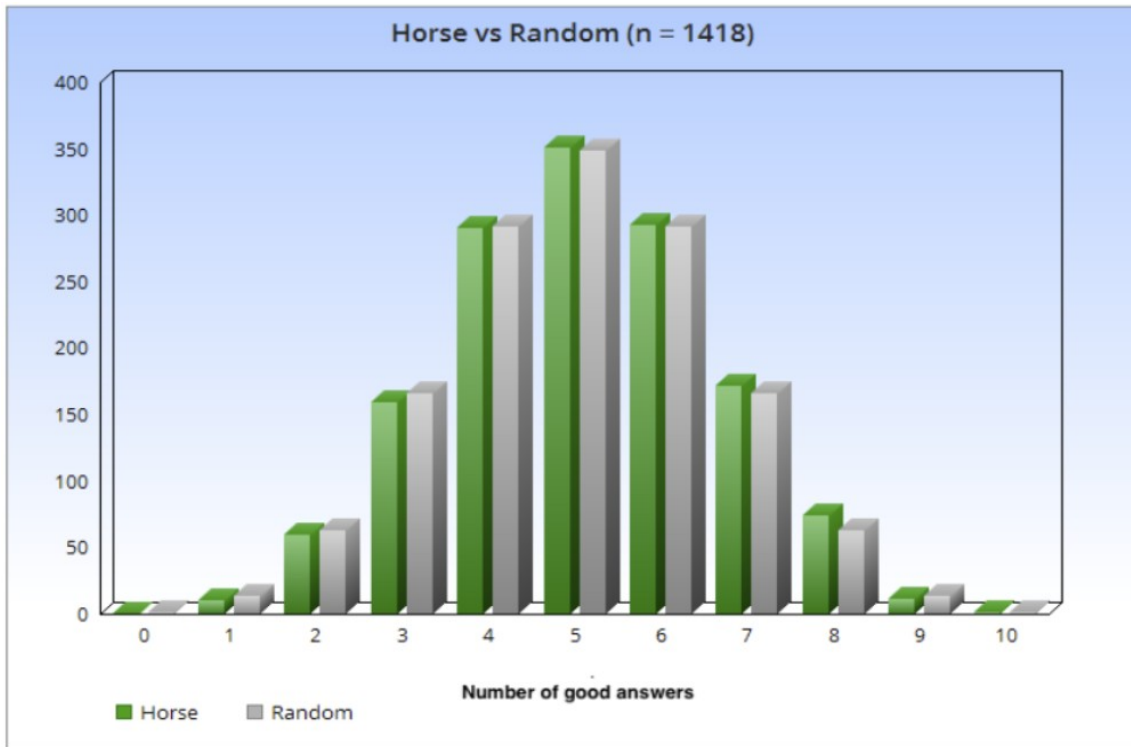
338 Appendix

339
340 Figures A1, A2 and A3 below provide some data mentioned in the body of the paper, namely
341 histograms of the scores realized by the participants on the sets of 10 images proposed to
342 them, compared to pure chance (binomial distribution).
343



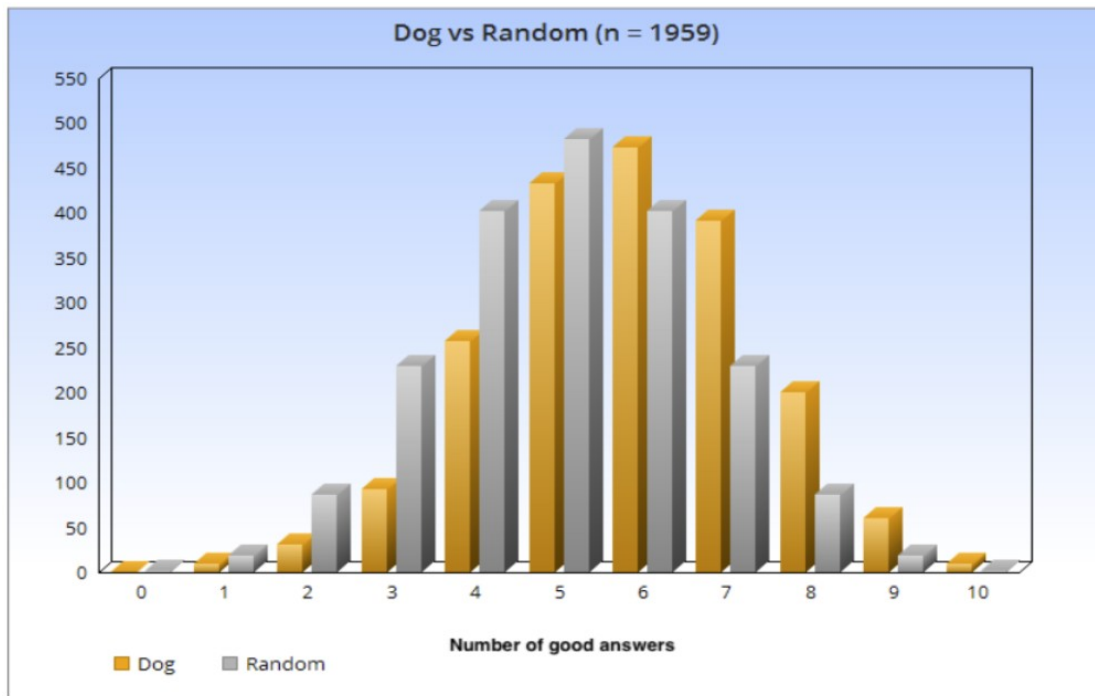
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364 **Figure A1** – Histogram of scores for the cats series, compared to pure chance

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394 **Figure A2** – Histogram of scores for the horses series, compared to pure chance

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416 **Figure A3** – Histogram of scores for the dogs series, compared to pure chance

417 **Acknowledgements**

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429

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432
433

434 **Data availability**

435 The materials used in the study and the data collected are available on OSF (OSF Project
436 Straight from the horse’s mouth?, 2024).
437
438

439 **Conflict of interest disclosure**

440 The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest relating to the content of the article.
441 Blandine Legavre is a member of the Council of the Order of Veterinarians (Conseil de
442 l’Ordre des v t rinaires) of Region Pays de la Loire, France.
443
444

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452 der Entfernung erfolgende “unmittelbare Einwirkung” einer Person auf das Verhalten der
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