

The context

Since 1980, in Belgium as in other countries, the Mental Health Policy tends to limit as much as possible the duration of a stay in a psychiatric hospital. Different measures have been set in order to promote the patient's psychosocial rehabilitation. But for some patients, this proves to be difficult.

First results confirm the findings of the founders of pet therapy

> **A matter of encounters:** the project AAT Mistral Gagnant grew as the spontaneous outcome of (partly chance) encounters between people and dogs. The caretakers who initiated it insist on the humane "bounds" and the "trust" that made it possible. (Cf. B. Levinson, 1962, « The Dog as 'co-therapist' »)

> **Systemic changes:** according to its initiators, the project remobilized the nursing staff and renewed their motivation: "the atmosphere of the whole ward has changed" (Cf. Cf. S & E Corson, 1975, « Pet-facilitated Psychotherapy in a hospital setting »)

> **Patients as actors of the project:** the patients themselves took part in the setting of the project, including the choice of the puppies (Cf. Cf. D. Lee, 1984, « Companion Animals in Institutions »)



Living with two dogs in a psychiatric ward Ethnography of patients/dogs interactions

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The project "AAT Mistral Gagnant"

Two dogs have been introduced in an open psychiatric ward (the "Trieux"), one as a resident dog and the other one as a visiting dog. Around twenty male patients, with psychotic disorders, live at the Trieux. Some of them have a long history of mental hospital, while others, younger and more motivated patients arrived more recently. All of them suffer from psychotic symptoms (hallucinations and delusion) in spite of medication. Some of them also have negative symptoms (flat affect, social withdrawal...). The dogs arrived during the summer of 2010. The nursing staff's aim was to introduce them both within the community daily life of the ward and within individual treatment plans. According to them, the puppies needed some obedience and socialization training and the patients, for their part, needed to learn how to behave appropriately towards the animals. It was also obvious that some patients could benefit from a participation in the training of the dog. Between five and eight patients volunteered to participate in the program.

What the ethnography study showed so far

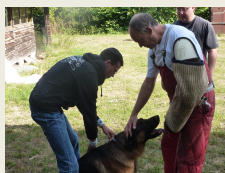
> **Active or sensitive way of getting in touch with the dogs** – Some patients get involved in the project in a very active way: they take part in walks, go to the vet with the dog, or go the dog's training center. Other patients prefer a more sensitive way that implies their emotional and sensorial life.

> **Attachment roots** – Reciprocal attachment ties develop between the dogs and the patients through touch, gaze and mutual gaze, affectionate words and gentle gestures. When they are in touch with the dogs, patients show real attentiveness to them.

> **Emotional life** – The presence of the dogs seems to increase the patient's emotional life. It reminds them good and bad memories. As a patient said: "I hope he (the caretaker) will never abandon her (the dog)". The dog also brings memories of childhood companions that proved to be affectionate and faithful, and of past life in the country.

> **The dog as stimulating the search of meaning** – The dog is also a mirror that helps the patient questioning himself about his life and his illness. When a dog underwent minor surgery, a patient asked: "Is it (the illness) innate?" And after a while: "And psychosis, is it innate?"

> **Social cognition, empathy and common ground** – The dog may be the support of social cognition and empathy. The dogs are recognized as subjects in the interactive network of the community. They become the support of joint attention between the patients and the nursing staff and some common grounds between them may be established from there. Patient, looking at a dog apparently making a bad dream: "I don't like when she has nightmares." "Neither do I" answers a nurse. They both agree that they should wake the dog up. Being treated as subjective agents by the nursing staff and by the patients, the dogs, for their part, fit into inter-subjective relationships. (Cf. Sanders C., 1999. *Understanding Dogs. Living and working with Canine Companions*)



How and why did the idea of the project come?

The idea to introduce dogs in the ward came upon Christophe Medart and Ludovic Mazzier (respectively (male) head nurse and specialized teacher) when they noticed that walks with their own dogs motivated the patients more than walks without them, and that walking with, talking about and petting the dogs seemed to help the patients to be more aware of their surroundings and to be more rooted in the reality.



Why an ethnographic study?

We decided to set an ethnographic study in an attempt to understand how interacting with dogs might change something for the patients. In accordance with the "participant observation" method, one of us (Benedicte de Villers) spent time in the hospital with the patients and documented their daily life with the dogs. Thanks to the time she spent in the ward, B. de Villers was able to develop a trusting relationship with both the patients and the caregivers. Neither of them felt evaluated or judged by her. B. de Villers also participated in the dog's training sessions. As a former dog trainer and breeder, she is an experienced dog woman.

Taking the dogs to the obedience training: social rehabilitation, self-confidence and emotional learning

> **Social rehabilitation:** these activities are the most relevant for the social dimension of the project. Once a week, three or four patients go out of the hospital and mix with "normal" dog owners for obedience training of the dogs.

> **Self-confidence:** the dog trainer doesn't know anything about mental illness. During the obedience training sessions, he treats the patients in (nearly) the same way as he treats normal people; he is about as demanding with them as he is with other people. So when the patients do reach the trainer's objectives, the nursing staff might be as pleasantly surprised as the patients themselves are. In 2012, 3 patients and dogs passed the official Belgian obedience test along with 30 "normal" dog owners. Of course this has a positive impact on their self-confidence.

> **Emotional learning:** According to the nursing staff, during the dog's training sessions the patients learn to regulate their emotions and/or to show more appropriate emotions. How is it so?

Conclusions

The training sessions further the patient's self-esteem and self-confidence. They foster their emotional adjustment to the requirements of the situation and their understanding of their own emotions.

Understanding emotional learning

Looking closely at the course of a training session, we identified two concepts that might help to understand how these changes happen: **ritual and techniques of the body**

1. **Ritual** (Houseman M., 2003, Towards an anthropological model of psychotherapeutic practice) A ritual is a frame around action. Inside the ritual frame the usual relationship between internal dispositions (emotions, expectancies, intentions...) and action is reversed: action creates dispositions.

2. **Techniques of the Body** (Mauss M., 1936-1971, Techniques of the Body)

✓ Techniques of the body and **dog training** – The patients get in touch with the dogs in an original way during the leading activities. Any order given to Jillian or Jethro must be accompanied by the right attitude, tone of voice, affect, intention and attention if it is to be effective. The whole sequence needs to be repeated frequently in order for the dog to be trained. Through the practice of these techniques of the body, the patients acquire dispositions that could possibly be mobilized in other circumstances.

✓ Techniques of the body and **language** – It must be emphasized that the techniques of the body cannot be understood nor learned through words. Language cannot account for the way of learning and forms of transmission of the techniques that needs to be mastered in order to lead a dog in defense or objects retrieval exercises. They must be experienced and felt: they are an embodied knowledge.

✓ **An embodied knowledge** – By now, the patients who have been attending the obedience training sessions are able to execute many exercises "without thinking about it" because they incorporated the knowledge in their body. It is now an embodied knowledge. As Marcel Mauss made it, techniques of the body are neither psychological nor physical. They are more like "cog-wheels", "physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions". p.85)

✓ Techniques of the body and **learning emotional stability** – Learning the dog's obedience training techniques means to progressively acquire "simplified" communication codes. Short and simple words are delivered to give an order or to praise and encourage the dog. They are coordinated with very simple and precise gestures. In so doing, the patient/trainer puts aside any gesture, attitude or word that doesn't fit with the pursued goal. According to Mauss, "the basic education in [...] these techniques consists of an adaptation of the body to their use" (p.86). "It consists especially of education in composure. And the latter is above all a retarding mechanism, a mechanism inhibiting disorderly movements; this retardation subsequently allows a co-ordinated response of co-ordinated movements setting off in the direction of a chosen goal. This resistance to emotional seizure is something fundamental in social and mental life." (p.86)

✓ Techniques of the body and **human-dog cooperation** – During obedience training sessions, acquiring these techniques is not a matter of doing it "alone": it must be done in a collaborative work with the dog. The dog also needs to coordinate her own movements to her leader, and to respond adequately to his orders. In this way, the patient gets immediately the results of his communication back. A successful communication depends on such a two-way communication and coordination.

✓ Techniques of the body and **attention to the dog** – Obedience training is a unique moment during the course of which patients listen and give their whole attention to another sentient being: the dog. The dog is a social being for those patients who still suffer from psychotic symptoms. When they engage in interactions with the dogs, the patients are most of the time grounded here and now.

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