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# **GOAL ORIENTED ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES (AAA)**

**Survey study on aim setting among adults with mental health disorders**

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## ABSTRACT

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The thesis was done in cooperation with Lilinkoti Foundation who provides services for adults with mental health disorders. The aim of the thesis was to provide information for the working life partner whether they could utilize aim setting for their future animal-assisted activities. Additionally, the thesis aimed to inspect whether questionnaire could be a suitable tool for aim setting with their residents.

In this research-oriented thesis, a survey method was utilized with two paper questionnaires. The first questionnaire included questions related to the participants' aim setting. The second questionnaire assessed whether the aims were reached together with satisfactory questions regarding the study process. Data obtained from the questionnaires was analysed with thematic analysis. The study was conducted as qualitative research and it reached three participants.

One of the main findings was that the participants set practical and approachable aims for AAA. Another main finding was the participants perceived aim setting as a useful tool for AAA. The results of the study are tentative in nature. This thesis could be considered as a pilot study providing an example when formulating questionnaires for aim setting or feedback purposes related to AAA with adults with mental health disorders.

Keywords: Animal-assisted activities, mental health, aim setting

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## INTRODUCTION

According to registered association Green Care Finland (n.d.) animal-assisted activity (AAA) is based on interaction between an animal and human. Green Care Finland describes AAA as activities where animals are in central role to increase positive effects on a participant's quality of life. Another main theory applied in this thesis is goal setting. According to Locke and Latham's (1991) goal setting theory setting an aim increases a person's motivation to act and achieve their goals. Locke et al. (1981) has explained aim as an action taken when individual is attempting to accomplish a specific goal.

The need for the study originated from the working life partner's suggestion. The working life partner's operational model is goal oriented. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was for participants to set aims for one visit to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch. The thesis was executed in collaboration with Lilinkoti Foundation which is a non-profit organization offering support services, assisted housing and rehabilitation for adults with mental health disorders.

The study was conducted as a survey study utilizing two paper questionnaires. The first questionnaire consisted of questions related to the participants' aim setting. The second questionnaire concentrated on evaluating whether the aims were reached as well as feedback on the study process.

We aimed to provide information whether questionnaire could be an applicable tool for setting aims for the working life partner's future animal-assisted activities. The study could act as an example when formulating questionnaires for aim setting or feedback purposes for a similar target group.

## 2 KEY CONCEPTS

This chapter is for defining the key concepts of our thesis, animal-assisted activity (AAA), mental health and goal setting with references. The key concepts reflect the content of the study, adults with mental health diagnoses setting aims for AAA. These key concepts were chosen to provide insights of our thesis contents since any specific theoretical framework could not have been combined with the study.

### 2.1 Animal-assisted activity (AAA)

Animal-assisted activities (AAA) fall under umbrella term animal-assisted intervention (AAI). According to International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (2018) AAI is structured and goal-oriented activities provided by licensed professionals on the field of education, health care and social work. Ikäheimo (2013) describes animal-assisted activity (AAA) as an unstructured interaction between human and animal often conducted by volunteers without specialised education in the field of healthcare and social work. Ikäheimo notes the volunteers are commonly offered a basic training by the organization applying AAA methods. Most known examples of AAA are informal animal visitations to different assisted living facilities offering service users positive experiences of interaction with animals and increase their quality of life. These unstructured interactions can take place individually or as a group depending on the need and occasion. In our study the visitation to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch took place as a group activity since our working life partner apply Green Care methods to support the rehabilitation process of their residents. In Finland animal-assisted activities are considered as a Green Care method and are coordinated via Green Care Finland (Hautamäki, Ramadan & Vilhunen, 2021).

Animal-assisted activities are applied when increase of well-being either physical or mental, cognitive abilities and social capacity are sought after. Personal growth, interaction, increase of motivation or team activity as examples are common reasons to apply AAA as a method. The attendance of an animal can release tension and restlessness, increase the sense of security and trust, promote concentration and motivation. Interaction with animals increases self-knowledge and experiences of success. (Hautamäki et al., 2021)

There are ground rules and ethical principles that guide the interaction and determine whether an animal can participate in AAA. Green Care Finland among other organizations provides training for professionals and confirms the animal is suitable for AAA. According to Hautamäki et al. (2021) the volunteer or instructor is obligated to secure the health and wellbeing of the animal and recognize behavioral changes. They should have knowledge of the basic needs, risks, strengths, stress management and recovery of the animal. Additionally recognizing the possible risks, needs and behavioral aspects of the service user group is important to maintain the safety of animals and humans (Hautamäki et al., 2021).

## 2.2 Mental health

World health organization (WHO, 2013) defines mental health as a stage where individual can recognize their own abilities, work or take part in the activities of community and adapt to the challenges of life. According to Solin (2021) mental health includes psychological, emotional, and social well-being and affects how individual is thinking, feeling, acting towards themselves, relating to others and world around. According to Mental Health Finland (MIELI, 2021) emotional awareness, coping skills with stress and problem solving, making choices in life are all mental health skills, which change over time and can be developed on daily basis depending on the assets and abilities individual has.

Individual's subjective experience of mental wellbeing has high importance when evaluating the treatment or need of support. According to Pasanen et al. (2021)

mental health is recognized as a key aspect when discussing the individual's overall health and counted as a broader concept than absence or presence of a diagnosed mental illness. According to Solin (2021) mental health can be contributed to biological factors (such as brain chemistry, genes), different life experiences (trauma or abuse) or family history (socio-economical background).

MIELI (2021) explains how protective aspects of mental health can be divided to internal and external factors, which all support individual's coping with challenges across the life span. The internal factors can be positive early life relationships, social support, interpersonal skills and possibility to self-fulfillment. External factors are for instance safe living environment, ability and feeling of being heard and being included, possibility to influence, possibility for education and income. We consider mental health should be recognized as a structural issue including for example poverty and equality which can affect an individual's wellbeing.

### 2.3 Aim setting

Locke et al. (1981) has explained an aim as an action taken when individual is attempting to accomplish a specific goal. In this study the participants set aims individually and as a group for a field visit. The main goal was participation and commitment to the study. According to Locke et al. (2012) the members of the group must engage in communication and coordination together with interpersonal interaction to achieve the set aims and therefore accomplish the main goal. Locke et al. state trust, cohesion, and group members' cognition such as interactive memory and shared mental models are all important to attain the main goal during the process. According to Locke et al. the relationship between the participants has an effect how the motivation is attained and whether the process is fulfilling enough to participate from the beginning to the end.

According to Locke and Latham's (1991) goal setting theory setting an aim increases a person's motivation to act and achieve their goals. The goal content needs to be specific, and the difficulty must be in suitable level depending on the person's ability and experiences. Setting an aim for example "petting alpacas" can be described as a vague goal while "petting at least two alpacas" is a specific goal which might influence the outcome of individual goal setting. One aspect of goal setting is the participant's intensity or commitment and depends on whether the individual considers the goal significant enough to act or maintains the feeling of the goal being attainable. Receiving feedback and peer support are essential aspects when creating group goals and when aiming them to be reached. The tasks should not be too complex to attain the performance of the goal and confidence to reach the goal. (Locke & Latham, 1991)

Francis et al. (2021) has researched aim setting can be associated with positive outcomes related to mental health including decrease in stress, anxiety and depression among with adolescents with mental health disorders. Malkamäki (2022) underlines the importance of participants setting their own aims which can lead to participants deeper understanding and knowledge of their abilities, needs and probabilities to increase the possibility to meet their goals.

### 3 PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE THESIS

The purpose of the thesis was to study aim setting for AAA among adults with mental health disorders living in assisted living facility.

The research questions this thesis aims to provide an answer to are: What type of aims residents perceive as essential for animal-assisted activities? What type of opinions residents have on utilizing aim setting as a tool for animal-assisted activities?

The aim of the thesis was to provide information for the working life partner whether they could utilize aim setting for their future animal-assisted activities. Additionally, we aimed to inspect whether questionnaire could be a suitable tool for aim setting with their residents.

## 4 BACKGROUND AND PARTNER OF THE THESIS

This thesis was created in collaboration with working life partner Lilinkoti Foundation (est. 2004). They are a non-profit organization offering support services, assisted housing and rehabilitation for adults with mental health disorders in multiple locations. We cooperated with one of the living facilities operating under Lilinkoti Foundation whose name or location are not specified to protect the anonymity of the residents who participated in our study.

Green Care methods are applied in Lilinkoti Foundation's assisted living facilities as part of the residents' rehabilitation plan. Some of the examples of these are gardening, visits to nature and animal-assisted activities. According to Green Care Finland (n.d.) Green Care methods rely on nature and animals in different settings varying from agricultural environments to gardens, urban- and indoor areas. Green Care Finland explain Green Care methods are used by professionals in varying fields including health care and social work to improve and maintain quality of life by providing contact with nature, meaningful experiences and social interactions.

Animal-assisted activities, as explained in earlier chapters are one of the categories which fall under Green Care methods. Lilinkoti Foundation collaborates with Ali Olli's alpaca ranch where the residents are provided with instructed visitations to take care of the ranch's alpacas and other animals. According to Learning 4 Life farm (2019) who have created an alpaca therapy program for children and young adults on the autism spectrum have noticed alpacas can have a calming and anxiety-reducing effect which makes them effective therapy animals. Hannula's (2017) interview with Sirpa Ryyppö revealed that alpacas do not have other defence-mechanisms besides escaping making them extremely sensitive to a person's emotional state and body language and well suitable for animal-assisted activities. Ryyppö explains in Hannula's interview that alpacas are excellent animals to use with groups of people whose actions can at times be unpredictable since alpacas do not display signs of aggression. According to Ryyppö alpacas

naturally keep a small distance from people and other animals which makes them suitable to use for AAA even with people who experience nervousness around animals. Due to their calm, curious and soft nature alpacas were found to be excellent species working and interacting with vulnerable groups (Suomen alpukka-ja laamayhdistys, 2018).

## 5 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study was conducted as qualitative research. Our research questions intended to inspect residents' opinions and views regarding aim setting for AAA and therefore making the questions qualitative in nature. According to Safi (2013) qualitative research aims to understand phenomenon as well as beliefs and ideas of humans.

The data collection process of this study began in March 2022. The process is described in Table 1 below. First, we executed a data management and protection plan. Next, we signed a thesis agreement as well as a plan and cooperation agreement for working life collaboration. Lastly, we applied for research permit. We designed a consent form (Appendix 1) which was signed by the participants of the study in our second session (Table 1). Before data collection we made an ethical review (more information on chapter 6) and deliberated on the justifications for the process. The rights of collected data and study are reserved with authors, Lilinkoti foundation and Diaconia University of Applied Sciences.

One of the most important aspects concerning the data collection were the participants' time and effort they were able to commit and whether they would find the study motivating enough to participate in. According to Tait and Lester (2005) encouraging service users to actively involve themselves is one of the key aspects when conducting research in mental health services to produce positive practice and development from the service users' perspective. The participants were provided one month's time after the information session to process possible questions related to their consent and participation in the study. Our intention was to hear the voice and opinions of the participants, yet we had to recognize the possible obstacles with a tight schedule and short notice of motivating an adequate number of participants to achieve reliable results with a survey. According to Pope and Mays (2020) suitable sample size for qualitative research is dependent on the chosen method and research questions, being even as low as one or

two participants in some cases. Pope and Mays state qualitative research does not intent to statistically represent a population but rather examine phenomenon.

### 5.1 The research environment and target group

We had decided to conduct our thesis based on animal-assisted activities (AAA) as a theme due to our common interest of the subject in the beginning of the study. We shared a post in Green Care Finland's Facebook page with our advertisement and original idea of an AAA related thesis. We requested possible partners to contact us via email. We were open on the specifics of the study including the target group to adjust to the working partner's needs. We were contacted by an assisted living facility under Lilinkoti Foundation and began negotiations of cooperation. We visited the living facility in December of 2021 and decided on cooperation and as result our target group got selected. We continued discussions on alternative study subjects and decided to engage with the idea of aim setting related to AAA.

The target group was adults with mental health disorders living in an assisted living facility. According to MIELI (2021) up to 20 to 25 % of adults in Finland receive a mental health diagnosis annually. Statistics Finland's (2021) statistics display 8 209 individuals received psychiatric housing services by the end of 2020.

According to Lilinkoti Foundation, an assisted living facility is suitable for individuals who can lead relatable independent lives and do not require round-the-clock assistance. Psychiatric enhanced assisted living care is received by individuals requiring constant support from professionals during all hours of the day. Individual will often first reside in psychiatric enhanced assisted living care and after attaining a higher level of independence transfer to an assisted living facility. (Lilinkoti Foundation, n.d.)

Some of the participants had been previously taken part in different Green Care activities and some were exploring the activity of AAA. There were no restrictions regarding participation to the study. Any resident showing interest in the study and AAA were welcomed to take part without any limitations.

## 5.2 Data collection methods

In this study we applied survey as a data collection method. According to Check & Schutt (2012, 160) survey can be defined as “the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions” and is frequently utilized to explore and describe human behavior in social research. According to McCombes (2019) survey includes the whole process including questionnaire along with a collection and analysis of data. Roopa & Rani (2012) define a questionnaire as a “series of questions asked to individuals to obtain statistically useful information about a given topic and it forms the backbone of any survey.” According to Hall (2020, 81) a questionnaire survey is a data collection method commonly used in quantitative research but can also be applied in qualitative research utilizing open-ended questions or mixed methods.

The study intended to gather specific and topic focused answers from participants anonymously, therefore survey as data collection method was elected. According to DeCarlo (2018) states surveys tend to provide precise information since the questions are presented and phrased the same way for all participants. Additionally, time effectiveness was one of our priorities regarding the data collection process. DeCarlo states survey is an effective method to gather anonymous information on people cost- and time efficiently.

### 5.3 Implementation of the research

In this chapter we introduce the study's implementation process. Data collection for this study was divided into three sessions. We planned the content of each meeting and prepared cover letters to provide comprehensive information of our study process to the residents of the assisted living facility. In Table 1 below we have described the schedule of the implementation. The table contains information on the dates and numbers of the sessions as well as their contents.

Table 1. Schedule for the implementation of the data collection

4 <sup>th</sup> of March 2022	<i>First cover letter sent:</i> informing the residents of assisted living facility on the becoming study process
8 <sup>th</sup> of March 2022	<i>Second cover letter sent:</i> Invitation to the information session
24 <sup>th</sup> of March 2022	<b>Session 1. (60 minutes, participants: 6)</b> Meeting with the participants in the assisted living facility: Information event, Questions & Answers.
28 <sup>th</sup> of March 2022	<i>Third cover letter sent:</i> Final schedule and dates informed to the participants
25 <sup>th</sup> of April 2022	<b>Session 2. (30 minutes, participants: 4)</b> Meeting with the participants in the assisted living facility: Participants sign the consent form (Appendix 1). Participants answer the questions on Questionnaire 1 (Appendix 2).
26 <sup>th</sup> of April 2022	<b>(120 minutes, participants: 3)</b> Participants visit Ali Olli's alpaca ranch
10 <sup>th</sup> of May 2022	<b>Session 3. (30 minutes, participants: 3)</b> Meeting with the participants in the assisted living facility: Participants answer the questions on Questionnaire 2 (Appendix 3). Oral feedback and reflecting on the research process, explaining the next steps of the thesis process for the participants.

**Information session, 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 30 minutes.**

Number of participants: 6

The contents of the session included distributing information and answering the residents' questions regarding the study process, their rights and ethics related to the study. We presented this information with a slideshow. According to the residents the presentation and the idea of the study was clear to them, and they expressed interest in participating in the study. We agreed on the implementation schedule with the contact person from the assisted living facility after the information session.

**Second session, 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 30 minutes.**

Number of participants: 4

During the second session we discussed the consent form, the participants role and rights regarding the study. After the discussion participants signed the consent form and answered the first questionnaire (Appendix 2) where they set aims for one visit to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch.

**Visit to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch, 26<sup>th</sup> of April, 120 minutes**

Number of participants: 3

We together with the participants visited Ali Olli's alpaca ranch in order to achieve the aims set for the visit. We justify our presence during the visit due to our passive role. We did not mention the study, or the aims set previously to avoid affecting the participants' experience and the results. The visit had two instructors provided by Ali Olli's alpaca ranch as well as one employee and three students of Lilinkoti Foundation. One of the four participants was retreated from the study at this point.

**Third session, 10<sup>th</sup> of May, 30 minutes**

Number of participants: 3

During this final session the three participants answered the second questionnaire (Appendix 3). The questionnaire consisted of questions related to the participants' experiences and feedback regarding the study.

#### 5.4 Thematic analysis

As mentioned in previous chapters we utilized two questionnaires in this study. The first questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions and the second questionnaire of closed-ended questions. The first questionnaire was analyzed with thematic analysis. However, thematic analysis could not be utilized to its full extent when analyzing the data. The second questionnaire's data is displayed with tables due to insufficient amount of data. Three participants was not enough to gather sufficient amount of data and broad results with the survey method.

According to Jason & Glenwick (2016) thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching for recurring ideas referred to as themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis in steps which consist of familiarization of the data, generating initial coding, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and reporting.

We began the process of thematic analysis by initial coding as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). From the answers to the first question "What aims do I set for one visit to Ali-Olli's Alpaca Ranch?" we identified six initial codes. We then continued by grouping the six initial codes into one main theme. The main theme we recognized was interaction with animals on the ranch. From the answers to the second question "What aims do we set as a group for a one visit to Ali-Ollis' Alpaca Ranch?" we identified three initial codes and recognized the same main theme, interaction with animals.

## 6 RESULTS

This chapter describes the results from the two questionnaires utilized in this study. The results of the first questionnaire are described through one main theme interaction with animals. The second questionnaire's results are presented with tables due to the small amount of data and predetermined answer options. The contents of the tables are also described in written form for further clarification of the results. The number of responses to the questionnaires was three.

### 6.1 Interaction with animals

The main theme identified from the answers to the first questionnaire was interaction with animals. For the first questionnaire participants were asked to set individual and group aims for one visit to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch. All aims the participants set included interacting with an animal in some form. The participants set aims to clean together in the farm, to walk, feed and pet alpacas, see rabbits and feed them salad as well as feed fodder to guineapigs.

Organisation Pet Partners (2019) writes about the release of oxytocin hormone which reduces anxiety, is increased in the human brain and circulatory system when humans interact with animals. According to Pet Partners increase in human oxytocin release through animal interaction is found to be substantial compared to interaction with other humans explaining the effectivity of animal-assisted activities. Our study's participants expressed interaction with animals hold meaning to them and they seemed excited to participate in the field visit to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch. The participants described their previous ranch visits positively. They seemed to wait for the monthly ranch visits eagerly. The participants seemed to have formed a personal connection with some of the ranch's animals, remembered their names and talked about them fondly. The participants mentioned they

wanted to take photos with the animals and reminisce the ranch visits later at the living facility. This could further demonstrate the importance and long-term effects interacting with animals bring to the participants.

According to Rossetti & King (as cited by Hautamäki 2018) research literature has proven the benefits of animal-assisted activities and animal interaction amongst people of different ages with mental health diagnosis. Rossetti & King's systematic review of numerous research articles on people with mental health diagnosis concluded interaction with animals through AAA improves individual's social-and overall wellbeing. Some of the participants visited Ali Olli's alpaca ranch on a monthly basis which could indicate they experienced at least some positive effects from the visits.

Another notion of the results to the first questionnaire was the participants set simple and practical aims for the field visit that would be easily achievable. According to Locke and Latham (2012, p.22) low-set goals which are easily achievable are often completed by the individual; however, when the goal is too easy to attain the motivation level of the individual will be lower compared to more difficult goals. The aims participants set might seem simple; however, we cannot determine the participant's own experience of the aims' level of difficulty. For example, in case a participant had a fear of alpacas, setting a goal to pet them during the visit would raise the aim's level of achievability. Another example raising the aim's difficulty level would be if a participant set an aim to walk alpacas and they had physical challenges.

## 6.2 Participants' experiences on utilizing aim setting for AAA

The second and final questionnaire was filled in by the participants after their visit to Ali-Olli's alpaca ranch. The questionnaire consisted of four questions most of them including predetermined answer options. The options related to the participants' experience of the study process and whether the aims were achieved in

their opinion. The participants' answers are displayed with tables below. The answers are also written open to clarify the results for the reader.

Table 2. Question 1. In your opinion were the aims reached?

Answer options	Number of answers
Yes	2
No	0
Some of the aims, which ones	1

The first question displayed in Table 2 inquired the participants' opinion on whether they had reached the aims set for the field visit. The participants were given three answer options to the question. Two participants answered all their aims were reached during the field visit. One participant answered some of their aims were achieved, however not all of them, the participant did not elaborate which aims were not achieved. All the participants achieved at least some of their aims during the visit to Ali Olli's alpaca ranch.

Table 3. Question 2. Did you find the aim setting useful based on your experiences?

Answer options	Number of answers
Yes, very useful	2
Somewhat useful	1
Not useful at all	0

The second question (Table 3) aimed to find out whether the participants experienced aim setting as a useful tool for the living facility's animal-assisted activities. Two participants answered they considered setting aims very useful. One participant answered they deemed aim setting as somewhat useful, yet the participant did not elaborate further.

Table 4. Question 3. In your opinion could aims be set for animal-assisted activities in the future?

Answer options	Number of answers
Yes	3
No	0
I do not know / I do not have an opinion	0

The third question (Table 4) inquired whether the participants would be open to continue setting aims for animal-assisted activities in the future. All three participants answered aims could be set for AAA in the future.

The last question related to the participants' general experience of the study process, what they considered successful and what could have been improved. We describe the participants' answers below using citation marks; however, these citations are raw translations from Finnish.

One participant answered in their experience "everything went well" in the study. Another participant answered they "do not give any negative feedback, only positive" yet they did not elaborate what was positive about the study. Another answer was the participant "enjoyed feeding and walking the animals, spending time with them in general and participating in the study was a positive experience overall". The answers consisted of merely positive feedback, they were rather short and did not include recommendations to alter the study.

## 7 ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RELIABILITY

While conducting research with people considering ethical aspects is a priority throughout the whole study. People with mental health disorders are not automatically a vulnerable group; however attention should be paid when planning and implementing a study with them. The participants of this study live in an assisted living facility and need support in their daily lives which is why they could be considered as a vulnerable group. Bos (2020) describes vulnerable participants as those who have a higher likeability to face injustice or violation of their rights. According to Bos this does not mean vulnerable participants should not take part in research; however special attention should be paid in order to conduct ethical research. A contact person and other employees of our working life partner assisted in ensuring the participants' rights were respected.

We began the study process by familiarizing ourselves with the topics of mental health to be able to consider aspects such as inclusive language. We conducted an ethical review in order to recognise possible challenges and risks which may occur during the study. We had a meeting where we discussed and listed the possible ethical aspects to consider, how to avoid them and created an action plan in case they occur.

*“Ethical review is part of comprehensive and proactive research integrity, the aim of which is to anticipate ethical problems and risks.”*  
(The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019)

The residents were informed of their role and rights as participants in the study during the information session. We informed the participants the expectations from them during the process and underlined the protection of their privacy. We highlighted the voluntary nature of the study meaning they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. According to Bos (2020) participants must be informed on the contents of the study, what is expected from them and how their data will be managed.

We ensured the participants knew what they were committing to by creating a clear structure and timetable describing the contents and number of sessions for the study process. According to Tate & Lester (2005) participants with mental health disorders could have challenges to commit to the process of research. This was taken into consideration by giving the residents a month's time to consider their participation in the study before the next meeting and signing a consent form. We came to the conclusion the number of the sessions should be kept to a minimum in order for the participants to stay committed to the study; therefore we planned three sessions close to each other.

We followed TENK's (2019) guidelines when producing the consent form (Appendix 1). The consent form covered topics such as privacy and data protection of the participants, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Bos (2020) states four important principles regarding consent; the consent must be given voluntarily without coercion, the person giving their consent needs to be competent legally, they must have received all relevant information regarding the study, and they are capable to comprehend what is required from them. According to Bos consent is necessary for both the researcher and the participant. Consent ensures the participant's rights are reserved and the researchers has the right to engage participants in their research. We ensured the residents comprehended the contents of the consent form by reading it out loud and providing assistance in filling the form for those who required it.

We recognized building a safe environment for the participants of the research was essential and the basis for reliable research. According to TENK (2019) mistrust could lead to a decrease in participants' motivation to finalize the research process and have a harmful effect by creating prejudice towards future projects and research. According to TENK (2019) it is essential to respect the dignity and autonomy of the participants during research by respecting the basic human rights such as personal liberty and integrity, freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of expression, and the right to privacy as mentioned in the Finnish Constitution 1999/731, Sections 6–23. For example we ensured the freedom of expression by providing a choice of oral or written participation in the study. Additionally, TENK

states researchers must abide to the ethical principles of research and avoid causing any significant risks, damage or harm to the participants. We had a moral obligation towards Lilinkoti Foundation, Ali-Olli's alpaca ranch, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, the professional field of social sciences and society. Bos (2020) reminds researchers to avoid discriminating participants at all cost based on gender identity, background, ethnicity or any other factor not related to the study. Other aspects Bos emphasizes are honesty and objectivity in terms of research. According to Bos researchers must convey truthful information to participants and other stakeholders and reflect on researchers' own prejudices. We ensured all relevant information regarding the study was repeated in the beginning of every session.

According to TENK (2019) it is important to handle any collected data from the perspective of privacy at all stages; no data can be shown or revealed to anyone who is not part of the research (excluding the work life partner, participants and Diak). The study's data was stored in a folder reserved for this study in a closet with private access. The data was disposed by using a paper shredder after it was analyzed. According to TENK nothing which can lead to identifying participants can be published. We did not display any private information in the data such as names of the participants. The participants had the right to see any collected data during and after the study process. According Bos (2020) when conducting research data must not be fabricated or misrepresented. We aimed to present the results gathered from the data as truthfully as possible and describe them as tentative.

## 8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study's research questions were the following: "What type of aims the residents of the assisted living facility perceive as essential for animal-assisted activities?" "What type of opinions the residents have on utilizing aim setting as a tool for animal-assisted activities?" One of the main findings was the participants considered practical and approachable aims essential for AAA. The main theme discovered from the aims was interaction with animals. Another main finding was the participants perceived aim setting as a useful tool for AAA.

The aim of the thesis was to provide information for the working life partner whether they could utilize aim setting for their future animal-assisted activities. We concluded setting aims for AAA supports the working life partner's goal-oriented operational model and aim setting could be utilized for their future animal-assisted activities. Additionally, we aimed to inspect whether questionnaire could be a suitable tool for aim setting with their residents. We discovered questionnaire in the form used in this study is not the most optimal tool for aim setting for the residents. The feedback from the working life partner was the questionnaire and the concept of the study might have been too challenging for the participants to comprehend considering their cognitive abilities. According to Vuoksima (2019) cognitive abilities can be described as abilities related to assessing information such as observation, thinking and memory. Vuoksima states adults with mental health diagnosis can be considered a group with large variability in terms of cognitive abilities. We made an observation the participants required encouragement from the workers to commit to our study and join the study's sessions. One reason could be the participants' varying condition related to their mental health. Another reason could be our study did not appear motivating enough. As mentioned in earlier chapters, goal setting theory by Locke and Latham (1991) suggests key to successful research is making the research motivating enough to participate in and commit to till the end.

We attempted to formulate the questionnaires to be clear and accessible by creating simple and understandable questions. We should have consulted the working life partner further when formulating questionnaires in the study's planning stage. Additionally, we should have performed a test run on the questionnaires before applying them in our study. According to DeCarlo (2018) it is crucial for researchers to test their survey questions and request feedback during the designing process. Questionnaires in general could be considered a suitable tool for adults with mental health diagnosis, however we later concluded an interview could have been more suitable for this specific participant group. Interview could have required less effort and capacity from the participants compared to filling out questionnaires.

### 8.1 Challenges of the study

The initial plan was to combine participatory action research together with a survey study to involve residents as active participants in research. According to Borda (1987, as cited in Jason & Glenwick, 2016) participatory action research (PAR) is based on social action focusing on communities' needs. Rappaport (1995, as cited in Jason & Glenwick, 2016) describes PAR as individuals having control over research and resources resulting in social change and empowerment. When familiarizing ourselves with previous PAR research we noticed survey study is not usually included. According to the previous PAR studies participants are usually given complete autonomy regarding the research while the researcher simply provides the resources. We did not involve the participants in the study's planning stage. We considered the participants setting their own aims would give them enough autonomy over the study in order to call the study PAR. However, we realized only including elements of participatory action does not mean the study can be considered PAR. We partly explain disregarding these notions due to our inexperience in research. We should have reflected the study's

research questions and goal regularly throughout the process to realize the dysfunction regarding data collection method at early stage.

We managed to involve three participants in the study which was not enough to gather sufficient amount of data with the survey method. However, three participants could be enough depending on the type of qualitative research. According to Pope and Mays (2020) suitable sample size for qualitative research is dependent on the chosen method and research questions, for example in detailed qualitative studies with several hour-long interviews one or two participants can be enough. We did not execute any sample calculation when planning to utilize the survey method in the study. The realistic expectation of the sample size should have also been discussed with the working life partner to alter the study. We later concluded interviews and observation as methods could have been more applicable to this study to gather more data. We did not alter the research method because we were uncertain whether the schedule of the study could be maintained.

After the first session we remained optimistic due to the residents' encouraging feedback and presumed our study would reach more participants when the word of our thesis would spread in the assisted living facility. At this stage we should have conducted a risk analysis considering changes along the process as well as creating a plan B and C in case we do not gather enough participants for our study.

The working life partner had planned tasks such as cleaning with their residents for Ali Olli's alpaca ranch previously. We noticed the participants set similar aims to the physical tasks they had set for previous ranch visits before the study. While the participants were setting their personal aims, we noticed they discussed the aims together. When analyzing the results, we noticed the participants' aims were similar with each other. This could have resulted from discussing their aims during the session.

During the last session we failed to introduce and orientate the participants to the session. The participants started to fill out the questionnaire almost immediately after the session started. We had discussed possible preparations such as a visual presentation or introduction for the session but decided not to implement them since we aimed to create a casual and relaxed atmosphere for the session. In our experience the atmosphere turned out to be rather tense and the participants seemed to wait for more instruction from us. We noticed our preparations were deficient and a casual atmosphere can only be achieved when the instructors of the session are fully prepared and confident in their actions. We felt the participants were looking for our approval by reading their answers out loud and discussing them with us. We suspected our presence might have caused the participants to avoid giving critical feedback on the study process.

We reflected whether the second questionnaire should have been formulated with a larger scale of answer options related to the participants' experience on reaching their aims. According to Thomas & Sturgis (1998) satisfactory questions tend to be answered positively since usually they contain expectations that are easily reached, and they do not offer guidance on how the service can be improved. At least three quarters of answers are "very" or "fairly satisfied" (as cited in Bourke, Kirby & Doran, 2016, pp. 22). Our participants gave positive yet neutral feedback on the study. The reason for this could stem from the possibility the study did not hold deeper meaning for the participants.

## 8.2 Professional development

The thesis process has developed our professional identity and confidence to trust our skills as professionals in the social services sector. This process has prepared us for future research and projects in this field's working life. We have gained resilience and ability to adapt to errors and situations that do not occur as planned. We have attained knowledge and understanding of the data collection,

analysis process and the different analysis methods. Our co-writing, team working- and communication skills have improved during this process.

### **Karoliina's professional development**

Working on the thesis has improved my skills in properly conveying ideas and maintaining open communication with my thesis partner as well as other stakeholders. Portraying my own ideas turned out to be challenging at times; therefore, I had to keep practicing those skills constantly and developing my professional communication.

I learned reflecting on our shared and individual work throughout the thesis process has been essential in maintaining schedules and providing actual results. I have developed my skills in receiving and providing feedback in professional context after starting to work on the thesis. In my opinion to be able to reflect situations, own and other's behaviour, is one of the most important skills in the field of social services to be able to develop one's professional identity. According to Fook et al. (2007) reflection is an important skill to use especially in service user fields for professionals to be able to consider different perspectives, to identify own prejudices and assumptions of situations and interactions.

One of the main points I had gathered from this process was that conducting a study means immersing myself in an environment of constant change and evolution. In my experience the field of social services is in constant change and sudden situations happen in every day working life. In my impression, quick and adaptive professionals are valued in this profession. I am looking forward to utilizing the skills gained through this process in collaboration with other professionals in this field in organizational work such as projects or events in the future.

## **Annika's professional development**

The thesis process has been instructive in multiple levels and has improved my skills regarding professional development and conducting a research-based study. Aptitude for perceiving broader views and learning new ways of managing time and scheduling has increased together with systematic progress. Tackling obstacles has taught me courage and resilience to make decisions and carry the responsibility for the outcomes. Skills with communication have deepened, I have learned to justify my thoughts and communicate more clearly to commerce the cooperation with the co-author and with other stakeholders of the study. Receiving feedback from the study at different stages, together with my professional abilities and strengths has been essential for the learning process and reflecting my own professional identity. Laughter and humor were important during the process by carrying me through the challenges of the journey and stages when I didn't know how to proceed. The support which I received from the co-author and shared motivation to move onward together during the process has been irreplaceable. Acquiring knowledge of the many distinct aspects of research has developed my abilities to produce research in the future.

### **8.3 Recommendations for the future**

When conducting research with narrow samples we recommend utilizing qualitative methods such as an interview or observation. In our impression questionnaires could require a lot of effort from participants with mental health disorders. According to Mental Health Finland (MIELI) for example people with depression can experience symptoms such as challenges taking initiative, indecisiveness, difficulty concentrating and fatigue. In case a survey is applied for adults with mental health disorders living in assisted living facility or similar target group, we recommend visual aids such as photos could be used to ensure accessibility.

We recommend extensive groundwork especially regarding planning a study, research methods, data gathering and analysis. We did background research on conducting research including these topics; however, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of risk assessment and creating an alternative plan in case sudden changes occur. When changes occur, open communication and requesting support from the working life partner can be highly recommended. We encourage altering the study even drastically in case it could be beneficial to reach desired results.

In conclusion the results gathered from the data are tentative due to unrefined nature, insufficient results, and narrow sample size. This thesis could be considered as a pilot study providing an example when formulating questionnaires for aim setting or feedback purposes related to AAA with adults with mental health disorders.

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## APPENDIX 1. Consent form



## Suostumuslomake

Hei! Olemme kaksi opiskelijaa Diakonia-ammattikorkeakoulusta ja teemme opin-  
näytetyötä, jonka tarkoitus on tutkia Lilinkotisäätiön asukkaiden tavoitteiden aset-  
tamista ja niiden toteutumista eläinavusteiselle toiminnalle.

Tavoitteet asetetaan etukäteen yhdessä asukkaiden kanssa yhdelle käyntiker-  
rälle Ali-Ollin alpakkatilalle keväällä 2022. Käytämme työkaluna kahta erillistä ky-  
selylomaketta (mahdollisuus myös suulliseen osallistumiseen), joista ensimmäi-  
nen täytetään ennen vierailua alpakkatilalle ja toinen vierailun jälkeen.

Toivomme sinulta halukkuutta osallistua tutkimukseemme ja pohtia omia sekä  
ryhmäsi yhteisiä tavoitteita.

Kyselylomakkeita hyödynnetään ainoastaan apuna tutkimuksessamme eikä niitä  
käytetä muuhun tarkoitukseen. Kyselylomakkeet hävitetään asianmukaisesti  
käytön jälkeen. Kyselylomakkeeseen vastanneen yksityisyys suojataan eikä hen-  
kilöllisyys käy kyselylomakkeessa ilmi. Tutkimukseen osallistuminen on vapaa-  
ehtoista ja tarvittaessa voit keskeyttää osallistumisesi missä tahansa vaiheessa.  
Kyselylomakkeeseen vastaaminen on luottamuksellista eikä mihinkään kysymyk-  
seen ole pakko vastata.

Kiitos ajastasi!

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Karoliina Lundell ja Annika Varkki

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Helsingissä \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ 2022

Tutkimukseen osallistuvan allekirjoitus ja nimenselvennys

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## APPENDIX 2. Questionnaire 1

1/2

Olemme kaksi opiskelijaa Diakonia-ammattikorkeakoulusta ja teemme opinnäytetyötä, jonka tarkoitus on tutkia Lilinkotisäätiön asukkaiden tavoitteiden asettamista ja niiden toteutumista eläinavusteiselle toiminnalle.

Tavoitteet asetetaan etukäteen yhdessä asukkaiden kanssa yhdelle käyntikerälle Ali-Ollin alpakkatilalle keväällä 2022. Käytämme työkaluna kahta erillistä kyselylomaketta (mahdollisuus myös suulliseen osallistumiseen), joista ensimmäinen täytetään ennen vierailua alpakkatilalle ja toinen vierailun jälkeen.

Tämä osio täytetään ennen vierailukäyntiä.

**Mitä tavoitteita asetan itselleni alpakkatilan vierailukäynnille?**

**Mitä tavoitteita asetamme ryhmänä alpakkatilan vierailukäynnille?**

## APPENDIX 3. Questionnaire 2

2/2

Tämä osio täytetään vierailukäynnin jälkeen.

**Toteutuivatko tavoitteet mielestäsi?**

Kyllä

Ei

Osa tavoitteista, mitkä niistä?

**Koitko tavoitteiden asettamisen hyödylliseksi?**

Kyllä, erittäin hyödylliseksi

Jokseenkin hyödylliseksi

En ollenkaan hyödylliseksi

**Voisiko tavoitteita asettaa mielestäsi myös tulevaisuudessa eläinavusteiselle toiminnalle Lilinkodissa?**

Kyllä

Ei

En tiedä/minulla ei ole mielipidettä asiaan

**Kerro omin sanoin, miten koit tämän tutkimusprosessin? (Risuja ja ruusuja, missä onnistuimme, mitä olisimme voineet tehdä paremmin? Missä koit itse onnistuneesi?)**

