

Sławomir Murawiec¹, Piotr Tryjanowski², Anna Nita³

¹Polish Forum of Precise Psychiatry, Warsaw, Poland

²Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Sciences, Poznań University of Life Sciences

³Dialogue Therapy Centre, Warsaw Poland

An ornithological walk to improve the well-being of mental health professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic: a pilot study

Abstract

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many routines worldwide and has also affected the mental health of psychiatric patients and mental health professionals. One of the suggested methods for mental health improvement is more intensive contact with nature, including birdwatching as a hobby.

Material and methods: After an ornithological walk in February 2021 for 5 psychiatrists and psychotherapists, in spite of unfavourable weather, all participants very positively evaluated the impact of birding on their well-being, mood and subjective evaluation of stress level.

Results: Particularly important is an observation that the pandemic reality forced the whole society, including mental health professionals, to limit their behaviours and attitudes to very “adult” and responsible ones. Everyday life was reduced to functioning based on a very concrete approach to reality while abandoning activities that stimulate imagination (travels, theatre, arts). The ornithological walk allowed participants to abandon the pandemic reality and enter the space of playfulness, fantasies and childhood experiences. It enabled immersion in a friendly “mother-world” in which sensory perceptions proved to be important: smell, touch (“rush of air”), feeling of space. Birds were perceived not only as direct objects of observations but also as symbols of freedom, energy and lightness.

Conclusions: Despite the small group size, ornithological walks are recommended as a nature-based intervention exerting a positive influence on the mental health of psychiatrists and psychotherapists. It is also believed to positively affect the management of their patients, although this and many other aspects require further research.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically transformed many sectors of the health system, economy and social life. It strongly affected the well-being of many people in the general population around the world, including

about half of the patients with pre-existing psychiatric conditions who experienced worsening of symptoms in the time of the pandemic [1–3]. The pandemic also exerted a profound impact on the work of health professionals [4], such as psychiatrists and psychotherapists, and posed new challenges to them [5]. First, it exposed many new professional demands, lots of stress, and even trauma. Thus, it is not surprising that various solutions are suggested to help both physicians and patients during epidemics, but also more broadly during crises associated with e.g., strong changes in

Adres do korespondencji:

Sławomir Murawiec
Polish Forum of Precise Psychiatry, Warsaw, Poland
e-mail: smurawiec@gmail.com

their environment [6–8]. An example of widely promoted therapeutic methods to improve mental well-being and social connectedness is contact with nature [9]. One of the more broadly known, intensive, and positively evaluated nature-based interventions is birdwatching as a hobby [10].

In the earlier study [11], the authors found that during the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, the observation of birds (mostly through a window or in backyard gardens) allowed psychiatrists to relax, restore their emotional stability, and supported the subjective sense of security and stability of existence of the world despite the pandemic crisis. Normally, however, birds are observed during field trips or, especially for beginners, local nature walks with ornithologists. It was attempted to verify if this simple method can affect the psychological comfort and well-being of mental health professionals in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering that the number of participants in this study was very limited the authors still suppose that it can be an incentive for further research in this field and a broader discussion of the need to experience contact with nature (including birdwatching) among mental health professionals. It is believed that this would be beneficial for themselves, their patients, and the natural environment, in general [10–12].

Material and methods

Participants were recruited by an advertisement on social media. The advertisement invited persons who met two criteria: (1) professionally linked with mental health services (psychiatrist, psychologist, psychotherapist); and (2) not particularly interested in birdwatching so far. The walk was organized on 28 February 2021, along the Narew River, downstream from the dam in the village of Dębe (Masovian Province). Weather conditions were unfavourable for active outdoor recreation as the air temperature was about 4°C.

The walk was attended by 5 participants (3 women and 2 men), including the organizer (S.M.). During the walk were observed numerous mallards *Anas platyrhynchos*, a large flock of common goldeneyes *Bucephala clangula*, Eurasian coots *Fulica atra*, great cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, single goosanders *Mergus merganser*, tufted ducks *Aythya fuligula*, gulls *Larus* sp., corvids (jackdaws *Corvus monedula*, rooks *Corvus frugilegus*, and magpies *Pica pica*), and 2 white-tailed eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*. Those species, except for the white-tailed eagle, are not rare in Poland and are standard components of the winter avifauna of the Narew River [13]. Before the walk, the participants were asked to write down their expectations concerning the walk. On the day of the walk, they were

asked about their experience of this activity when they got home. Participants were also asked about their experience of the walk and general reflections after 7 days.

Results

Expectations concerning the walk

The walk took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (high numbers of cases and deaths in Poland at that time). It was nearly a year after the beginning of the pandemic in Poland after many changes in daily routines, work and leisure activities: working online (exclusively or to a large extent), limited personal contacts, limited contact with family members, travel restrictions, limited access to cultural activities, bars/restaurants etc. Thus, it was not surprising that the pandemic context was repeatedly mentioned by participants of this study, e.g. “we live in a Covidreality”; “I expect that its enrichment with a more conscious observation of the bird world will please me and strengthen the effect of ‘logging out’ from the hasty, nervous everyday reality”. They expected that contact with nature in a conscious way (effect of biophilia, in the sense described by Sia et al. [14]) would improve their mood, while no specific expectations concerning birds were formulated, such as a will to see a certain, preferably rare species, which is characteristic of the people who are more advanced bird lovers [15]. Before the walk, the participants also expressed other expectations. These expectations concerned their needs, both unconscious (“during sleep, my imagination showed me slides and whole films concerning memories about the sun, water, and nature: in this space, I feel the best”) and conscious (“I’m aware that I find rest in contact with nature, in the contemplative ‘soaking’ into it, preferably in solitude and silence, or possibly in the company of other people of my kind”).

Another context of the walk was the context of childhood desires, behaviours, and imaginations, which could be realized during the walk: “I remember albums with Włodzimierz Puchalski’s photographs [of wildlife], which I owned and watched passionately”.

However, concerning the previous lack of interest in birdwatching, one of the participants wrote: “As for ornithological aspects, I don’t have any special expectations, I imagine that it can be pleasant as contact with nature, spending time in nature, etc., but it doesn’t matter if I’ll observe birds or horses, dogs or other animals... I’m not convinced that birdwatching in any special way other than contact with nature in general, spending time outdoors, and will affect my mood”.

One of the participants was interested in birds in childhood, and she wished to realize this form of activity (that person did not practice birdwatching before. She

wrote: “my interest in birds then was only theoretical, unfortunately. I wonder how it looks like in reality, as for amateurs but with a scientific mentor”.

In the public space, there are many excellent wildlife photographs, including birds. In an amateur photographer, they can arouse a desire to take an equally good photograph:

“Pictures of birds and other animals in their natural environment delight me (I adore e.g. [Adam] Wajrak), I also admire ornithological knowledge of their authors. I am a little jealous about beautiful photos”.

Emotions expressed by one of the participants before the walk included “joy, hope for absorbing the space. Its major heroes are the visitors of skies – I have immediately felt their lightness, departure, energy. I felt the rush of air and again extensive images, the smell of meadow, forest”.

That statement concerned the subject of restrictions and the pandemic again but also feelings aroused by birds, namely energy, freedom, easy mobility, lack of restrictions. Not surprisingly, the participants expected the walk to be an “antidote”, “some variety, doing something new and interesting”, “logging out”.

Survey after the walk

Answers of all the participants indicated that their expectations were satisfied during the walk. They reported that they “turned away” from the thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to the pandemic and its limitations. Examples of statements:

- “When I engaged in watching the birds, I realized that in a nice way I was distracted from everyday routine... I relaxed”.
- “Such a walk was a very good occasion to be diverted from reality, a complete and unexpectedly pleasant distraction from everyday activities, despite unfavourable weather”.

That feeling of separation from current life demands was enhanced by the impression of the novelty of the undertaken activity.

- “The trip was a wonderful experience. Watching birds, which are close to us, but overlooked in everyday life, has proved to be completely new to me”.
- The impression of novelty has corresponded with inspiring cognitive needs, a willingness to learn about a new realm of reality:

- “It has inspired a new need in me –to learn about this new world. A need that can be satisfied. By myself”.
- Before the walk, the participants recalled their childhood fantasies concerning birdwatching and contact with nature. Those needs were fulfilled, too. Examples of statements:

- “an echo of my childhood fantasies about being a wildlife tracker. As if I were several years old and saw an elephant or tiger for the first time in my life: some unbelief, some surprise, some admiration. I truly saw a white-tailed eagle, in reality!”.

Some participants indicated that many aspects of their needs were satisfied: a need to break away from “Covid-reality”, the enriched spectrum of experiences with new aspects of contact with nature, and fulfilled ambitions to take good photographs:

- “I’m aware that such meditative contemplation is good for me: communing with nature, absorbing it with all my senses, catching the sounds, smells, noticing the smallest details and movements. And attempts to capture this feeling in a picture. With a guide who opens my eyes to the bird world, the contemplation is even more fulfilling, and very effectively distracts me from everything I routinely do every day”.

An important component of the walk was the fact that it took place in a group and with a guide. In some participants, this has aroused feelings of belonging to a group:

- “but my presence in this group, which had a common aim and similar sensitivity to it, was enjoyable, interesting, satisfying, and gave me a sense of belonging”;
- “I liked the trip, both the objects, place, and atmosphere”;
- “I was captivated by the guide’s personality, unobtrusive style, and kindness”.

However, the presence of other people can be also experienced in a more complex and ambivalent way:

- “I found it slightly difficult to enter such a distinct, relaxing state of mind because of the presence of (otherwise nice) people who enjoyed our trip in a more joyful, humorous way. I could laugh, fool around, and talk to them, but it’s a completely different mode, different type of relax, for me apparently irreconcilable with the stunning immersion in nature ‘bath’, which works the best when it’s total”.

Effects of the walk were subjective and recounted by the participants, and included new energy and improved attention:

- “After the trip I could stay alone for some time, read, do no scheduled things, and this matched my feelings very well. Surprisingly, in the evening, a lot of energy, good attention, and a positive approach to the things I had to do. This was not typical of me, as I have a rather early chronotype, so it seems to be due to [the trip] today”.

An interesting effect was the feeling of inner enrichment, similar to that observed in situations of contact with culture:

- “impressions slightly similar to those after leaving a theatre after a good play – as if you were a somewhat better person”;
- “It was very poetic. This state of mind, for now, is visible”.

One participant reported also plans about repeating such an activity:

- “I hoped that this form of activity, so pleasant for me, can develop in more favourable conditions: warm spring and hot summer”.

A week after the walk

Three opinions received about a week after the walk indicated very similar ranges of experiences as those described above. The participants mentioned emotional distance from their work, a broadened perspective of viewing reality. One of them wrote:

- “On a daily basis I work with patients in the clinic and with data in my scientific research, so I must evaluate all the time (the patient’s profile, scales, quality questionnaires, data trends). Contact with nature brings some relief and a possibility of a more relaxed approach to reality”.

The participants noted also sharing this experience with others in their social environment:

- “This is recorded as a pleasant memory, which returns, as it is worth talking about to other people, treated as an interesting experience, which perhaps could be also used by others. One can say that it is ‘self-refreshed’ as something worth experiencing again and sharing with others”.
- “Sometimes I recall this walk with some longing and a feeling that this walk was a soothing and calming experience. I have an impression that it is a good way to be distracted from the everyday activities and the rush of life, which brings something nice and good, but also promotes development. During various meetings I often mention it and it becomes an interesting topic for discussions. I’ve also gained interesting knowledge about birds, which makes me very happy”.

Discussion

Although the study group size was small, the authors have decided to publish the results of this specific study to emphasize the importance of contact with nature (in this case: birdwatching) for improving the psychological comfort of psychiatrists and psychotherapists. Birdwatching is often reported to affect various parameters of health and well-being, and this hobby, very much like gardening, is believed to be one of the activities most involving various regions of the brain and improving cognitive functions [11, 12].

The unfavourable weather conditions during this walk allowed excluding the effect of the non-specific factor of a sunny day, which generally has a positive influence on human mood [16]. However, one cannot exclude the effect of the way how the ornithologist guided this group and other participants of the walk, which are important factors for the outcome of psychotherapy [17]. This aspect appeared in written information, where participants mentioned the friendly atmosphere during the walk.

The individual and subjective character of the impressions from the walk is interesting. Participants emphasized e.g., improved attention and a surge of inner energy. All participants emphasized that they would like to take part in a similar trip in spring or summer when the expected positive results for their well-being could be even greater. The authors once again emphasize that taking advantage of the benefits of contact with nature cannot be overestimated during the COVID-19 pandemic [18], and this effect is visible also in people professionally involved in psychological and psychiatric services. It is also expected that it can influence the effectiveness of their clinical work. The earlier research, conducted in the initial period of lockdown, drew attention to the importance of birdwatching for psychiatrists [11], although due to the restrictions it was then conducted mostly through the windows. In this study, observations of birds were additionally linked with a dynamic effect, which is normally associated with birdwatching.

As mentioned many times in this paper, the people who took part in this study referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as the context of the walk. Thus, when taking a closer look at the expression “Covidreality”, one can notice that, in a broader perspective, the walk was an opportunity for emotional “transfer” from one reality to another (in a subjective dimension of experiences). The participants for many months had lived in a specific reality, limited by restrictions due to the pandemic, while during the walk they entered a completely different realm of experiences, emotions, and meanings, unrelated to the pandemic. Clemens [19] writes about some elements of experiences from earlier phases of development, which are recalled and become available during birdwatching. Based on psychodynamic theory, he analysed the comedy film *The Big Year* (directed by David Frankel, 2011; in Poland translated as *Wielki rok*). He believes that the observation of birds is deeply rooted in our nature, as indicated by cave paintings. Thus, it is an activity determined evolutionarily in a sense, concerning the need to identify signals from nature and potential threats. At the level of subjective experiences, it indicates e.g., childhood pleasures, derived from looking, touching, listening,

tasting, efficient bodily functions, and exploration of reality. They are pleasures linked with the perception of new stimuli, originating from one's own body and the environment, from childhood learning and exploration of the world and one's own mobility. Other sources of pleasures can include counting (of noticed bird species), qualifying, organizing own observations (compiling lists, summaries). Another level of pleasure can result from discovering something hidden (observation of a species that seemed to be inaccessible, impossible to see). In the context of the activity described here, also identification with parents and teachers can be important if they encouraged cognitive development. Besides, pleasures resulting from competition among peers can play a significant role.

All those elements were noticeable in the relations of participants. Some of them directly referred to childhood fantasies: dreaming about being a nature tracker or looking at albums with bird photographs in childhood. In this context, it is noticeable that the participants subjectively were "transferred" from the reality determined by pandemic restrictions to the reality of a "child's room" or a "child's garden", obviously in a metaphoric sense considering reality but in a literal sense considering the kind and range of experiences.

The pandemic reality forced the whole society, including mental health professionals, to limit their behaviours and attitudes to very "adult" and responsible ones. Our life was reduced to functioning based on a very concrete approach to reality while abandoning activities stimulating imagination (travels, theatre, arts). The walk in the world of nature and birdwatching can be regarded as Winnicott's transitional space and playing, which according to him is an activity that expresses human nature most fully [20]. The cited statements indicate that each of the participants used the space of the walk in a way that matched their needs: it allowed them to escape from the "real" pandemic world to a space of playfulness, fantasies and childhood experiences. From "I" in a claustrophobic, concrete pandemic world to "I" in nature and space, immersion in a friendly "mother-world". Sensory perceptions proved to be important: smell, touch ("rush of air") and a feeling of space. Birds were perceived not only as direct objects of observations but also as symbols of freedom, energy and lightness, somewhat corresponding to the "lost I" during the pandemic.

The hypothesis about the walk being Winnicott's space "in-between" is confirmed by statements about its poetic character, increased tolerance to being alone, immersion in the world of experiences, separation from the common everyday routine. The walk created a possibility for various

spheres to meet: imagination with reality, internal with external worlds. It could also recall childhood ("an echo of my childhood fantasies about being a wildlife tracker") when with a guide (parent, grandparent, teacher) they could explore the world, discover unbelievable things, where curiosity and admiration were born. Such playing is of fundamental importance for life and work, as thanks to it we become ourselves over and over again, and we can respond to the changing external conditions more fully. Importantly, the experience is also of therapeutic value. This preliminary report is intended to be an inspiration to continue such an approach. A broader perspective and similar studies with other groups of participants and in other field conditions may enable the creation of professional questionnaires for the mental state evaluation of participants. It can be based on the suggested analyses of expressed emotions (review: Okon-Singer et al. [21]), but also on other methods (e.g., hormonal analysis of saliva, advanced resonance techniques), to validate satisfaction from the ornithological trip, as suggested in the authors' earlier review [10].

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