

**Cooperation between blind people and guide dogs.
Cultural and social determinants of the interspecies relationship.**

The project aims to explore how blind people build cooperation and communication with guide dogs. Equally important will be to identify the cultural and social conditions and consequences of this relationship. The research will include the different actors of this process and will focus on their interactions and interdependencies. In addition to regular in-depth interviews and meetings with blind people, the project will invite guide dog trainers, trainers of blind people applying for a dog, volunteers taking care of dogs during the first period of training, representatives of non-governmental organisations training and providing guide dogs and family members and friends of blind people with guide dogs.

The research will be conducted mainly in Poland and additionally in Slovakia. The project will be carried out using research methods and techniques characteristic of cultural anthropology, ethnography and qualitative sociology, such as various types of individual interviews, participatory and non-participatory observation and ethnographic walks.

There are two main reasons for choosing such defined research problems and this way of exploring them. Firstly, there is the social importance of widely available research on marginalised or excluded groups, including people with disabilities. A reliable, scientific description of their lives - problems, challenges, ways of functioning - can contribute to breaking stereotypes and prejudices about specific groups. Secondly, according to many studies, the most serious limitations and handicaps that inevitably determine the life and social situation of blind people relate to the field of independent mobility and spatial orientation. Hence, there is a need for detailed research on blind people's abilities in this area related to using guide dogs.

The intention, and at the same time potential value of the planned research is to broaden and deepen knowledge on selected issues related to the relationship, co-operation and communication between blind people and guide dogs, and to show them in the wider context of cultural and social factors conditioning the lives of disabled people. The selection of the appropriate research group, research methods and research questions will also enable the researcher to complement the general knowledge on the functioning of blind people, their cognitive abilities, ways of enhancing agency and independence, as well as reflect upon the close, cooperative interactions between humans and animals. This will be possible thanks to an interdisciplinary research approach, taking into account perspectives and achievements of cultural anthropology, special education studies (specifically typhology), sociology, disability studies, and animal studies.

At the same time, despite the fact that the described project has the character of basic research, its results can be applied by non-governmental organisations to improve the process of training dogs and their transmission to blind people. In addition, the results of the study may provide a basis for further debates on legal solutions concerning guide dogs for the blind, including rights and limitations related to their functioning in public spaces. Finally, the planned publications may be of interest not only to researchers in the humanities and social sciences, but also to blind people themselves, including potential candidates for guide dog owners. Thus, the potential value of the project will be to go beyond the academic audience and thus show the social significance of this kind of anthropological research.