

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of adults on the autism spectrum, regarding their experiences with their assistance dog or companion dog (i.e., a pet). Anxiety and depression are more prevalent in adults on the autism spectrum than in the broader population, yet there is limited access to comprehensive forms of support that can be embedded within daily routines to improve overall well-being. Whilst there is an emerging body of research on the benefits of human–animal interaction for children on the autism spectrum, very little research has addressed the ways in which dogs can support the everyday lives and independence of adults on the autism spectrum.

This study was guided by the research question: ‘How do adults on the autism spectrum describe the role(s) and benefits of their assistance or companion dog?’. To address the aim of gaining *depth* of understanding, an interpretivist paradigm was employed in a qualitative study that utilised Straussian grounded theory methodology. Semi-structured interviews and Photovoice were used to collect data from 12 participants, eight who had an assistance dog and four who had a companion dog. The participatory nature and combination of these methods placed participants at the centre of the research, giving them the agency to curate their own experiences authentically. The analysis of these data resulted in the emergence of six highly interconnected themes: ‘connection with dog’, ‘sense of purpose’, ‘supports emotional and sensory regulation’, ‘increases independence’, ‘supports healthy living and daily routines’, and ‘facilitates social interactions’. Some key findings included how dogs facilitated the emotional and sensory regulation of their bonded owners, reducing their anxiety and supporting their recovery. Additionally, dogs gave participants a sense of purpose in their lives, as they had someone to live for and take care of. This had significant implications for their mental health and acted as a suicide prevention factor for one third of participants.

‘A Grounded Theory of Support, Expansion, and Enrichment for Adults on the Autism Spectrum through their Connection with Dogs’ explains *how* and *why* the person’s connection with their dog can expand, enrich, and optimise their engagement and participation in their life. The underlying mechanisms of the person–dog bond that make up the inner workings or ‘process’ of their beneficial relationship is also explained. Critically, this ‘big picture’ perspective has highlighted the progressive, flow-on effect of benefits for the person, that *depend* on a strong reciprocal person–dog bond. Dogs had a unique ability of helping their bonded owners perceive and relate to their experiences in a more positive and constructive way. This enabled dogs to support their owner’s well-being holistically and address a wide range of everyday challenges in a natural, supportive, and empowering way. This may be beneficial for some adults on the autism spectrum with low support needs, particularly for assisting their daily living and promoting personal independence.

Keywords: autism, assistance dog, companion dog, adults, well-being, support, bond, grounded theory, Photovoice