



What difference will this study make?

My study will capture the voice of autistic young people engaged in animal assisted therapy (AAT) addressing a current knowledge gap and investigate a new approach to AAT that can be relatively easily accessed and has the potential to improve the lives of autistic young people.

Research aims

- To explore Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) through the personal narratives of autistic people engaged in therapy using birds of prey
- To provide a greater understanding of the underlying processes taking place within animal assisted therapy interventions in the words of those experiencing them
- To give an understanding of the use of birds of prey in animal assisted interventions which currently does not exist.
- To refine the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within the field of ASC and to contribute to IPA as an evolving methodology

Background

Autism

Autism was first identified by Kanner in 1943 and the biomedical view of autism remains the dominant paradigm today. However, this view is being challenged by autistic communities who conceptualise the condition(s) as a “type of neurodiversity” (MacCarthaigh, 2020, p.56). Leading autism researchers are currently debating changes to the concept of autism (Levy, 2021). An important development supported by both researchers and the autism community is the need for participatory research enabling significant input by autistic individuals (Fletcher-Watson et al, 2019). The Neurodiversity Movement emphasises the need for interventions to focus on subjective wellbeing of autistic individuals rather than normalisation of behaviours to comply with societal expectations (Levy, 2020).

Animal Assisted Therapy

Humans and animals have coexisted for thousands of years and animals have been used therapeutically for many years. One of the first documented examples of animal assisted therapy was that of the York Retreat which opened in 1796 (Hooker et al, 2002). Later nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale took her small dog to see patients in hospital believing this to be beneficial to them (Hooker et al, 2002). During the 1930s psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud was known to have his dog Jofi sit in on therapy sessions and the US military used pets therapeutically during the 1940s. Later psychologist Boris Levinson wrote a paper on Animal Assisted Therapy for the American Psychological Association which was met at the time with cynicism.

Today animal assisted therapy (AAT) is growing in popularity as an intervention for a wide range of conditions including Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC), ADHD and mental health issues (Avila-Alvarez et al, 2020; Nimer and Lundhal, 2007; O’Haire, 2012; Robino et al, 2021; Shotwell and Wagner, 2019). Although a growing body of research appears to support the therapeutic benefits of AAT, a systematic review of AAT found no studies which attempted to investigate the process within the therapeutic undertaking (Hoagwood, Acri, Morrissey and Peth-Pierce, 2017).

Falconry

Many books on falconry state that it is believed to have a history going back over 4,000 years. Writer and naturalist Helen Macdonald suggests that humans have been working in partnership with birds of prey for over 6,000 years (McDonald, 2016). Many authors on the subject of falconry, over many years, have recognised the impact of the partnership of human and raptor on the physical and mental health of those engaged in the activity.

There are a number of programmes in which interaction with raptors is stated as being used therapeutically for veterans with PTSD including the Avian Veterans Alliance in USA which partners veterans with raptors requiring rehabilitation. In the UK there are several prisons including HMP Altcourse in Merseyside which use falconry therapeutically. However, there are no published research studies that investigate the use of falconry as a therapeutic intervention.



My work as an AAT practitioner using falconry within interventions has been captured in a number of magazine and newspaper articles, and independently produced videos. An autistic young client with comorbid ADHD stated in an interview by an independent interviewer for Red Bull TV (2018) that working with the birds had helped him to become more “patient, trusting and confident” and that through the intervention he was “getting to grips with being myself”.

As with other animal assisted interventions there is a need to investigate not only the impact of such therapies but also to evidence the “underlying mechanism of the human-animal interaction” through capturing the experience of therapist and participant within the intervention (Palley, O’Rourke and Meimi, 2010, p. 206).

Ethics

The main challenges to my ethics application were participant vulnerability and capacity to consent.

Vulnerability - It is often immediately assumed that autistic individuals have a higher risk of vulnerability than non-autistic individuals. Autistic individuals, as with non-autistic individuals have the right to have their perspectives included in research under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) children have the right to have their views including on matters that affect them (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2020; Rasmussen and Pagsberg, 2019).

Capacity to consent - Having a diagnosis of autism does not imply lack of capacity. British Psychological Society (BPS) mental capacity guidelines, which summarise the Mental Capacity Act 2005 will be followed. Capacity should be assumed unless it becomes clear that the participant lacks capacity. Information should be presented in such a way that the participant is able to understand. However, capacity to consent is a fluid concept and should be assessed regularly throughout the research process.

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been chosen as a research methodology as it is viewed as “an appropriate and useful tool for consulting with autistic individuals” (Macleod, 2019, p.60). It is suggested that non-autistic people, including many in the research community, may have difficulty in fully understanding how autistic individuals experience the world and IPA is increasingly being considered as an effective method to capture the experiences of autistic individuals, including children, in their own words (Howard, Katsos and Gibson, 2019). In their recommendations for improving autism research Howard, Katsos and Gibson (2019) state the need for greater reflexivity on behalf of the researcher. As practitioner who is researching my field of practice, I am deeply embedded as an insider and therefore there is greater need for the reflexive element of my research to be robustly managed.



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Contact

Anita Morris, PhD student – A.J.Morris@2020.ljmu.ac.uk
 Grahame Smith, Director of studies - G.M.Smith@ljmu.ac.uk
 Daz Greenop – Supervisor - D.T.Greenop@ljmu.ac.uk
 Denise Parker – Supervisor - A.D.Parker1@ljmu.ac.uk
 Social media for my work as a practitioner in animal assisted therapy :-
 Twitter - @burrowingbolt
 Instagram - @murraytheowl

