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# "My Dog Is My Partner": A Qualitative Study of Motivations and Relational Impacts for Animal-Assisted Service Handlers

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## Abstract

Animal-assisted services (AAS) involve providers working in partnership with specially trained animals to deliver therapeutic, educational, and supportive benefits that promote human well-being. Although research shows dog-assisted AAS benefits recipients, little is known about handlers' motivations and how this work impacts handlers and their dogs. This study explores why individuals engage in AAS with their dogs and the relational benefits and challenges involved. A convenience sample of adult AAS handlers was recruited through various organizations via newsletters and social media. Participants ($N$ = 247), predominantly older, white, and highly educated women, responded to three open-ended survey questions. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which revealed several interconnected themes. Handlers described profound joy, pride, and purpose derived from sharing their dogs with others, and an enhanced capacity to support recipients. Participants reported using AAS to augment professional roles, to pay forward acts of kindness, and to enrich their dogs through social interaction. While overwhelmingly meaningful, this work also involves challenges, underscoring the need for organizational support for AAS teams. Training programs should equip handlers to recognize signs of animal stress, navigate demanding contexts, and engage in proactive conversations about rest, retirement, and loss. Normalizing these experiences may promote handler well-being and sustain ethical, relationship-centered AAS practice.

**Keywords:** animal-assisted services; dogs; animal-assisted therapy; human–animal bond; volunteer; motivation

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## 1. Introduction

Animal-assisted services (AAS) is an umbrella term defined as "services that are facilitated, guided or mediated by a health or human service provider or educator, who works with and maintains the welfare of a specially qualifying animal to provide therapeutic, educational, supportive and/or ameliorative processes aimed at enhancing the well-being of humans" [1]. The three types of AAS include animal-assisted treatment or therapy (AAT), animal-assisted education (AAE), and animal-assisted support programs (AASPs) [2]. Despite differences between the three forms of AAS, they all, at their core essence, involve a partnership between a handler and one or more animals. Although people partner with many types of animals (e.g., horses, cats, guinea pigs, goats), dogs are the most popular due to their temperament, strong bond with humans, and trainability [2–5].

Decades of research have demonstrated the effectiveness of AAS for recipients across diverse settings and age groups, including improvements in mental and physical health, behavioral problems, and emotional well-being [3,6–12]. Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain the effectiveness of AAS, but the most common is the human–animal bond (HAB) [13–16]. Beyond intervention contexts, a substantial body of literature demonstrates that animal companionship itself confers a wide array of benefits, including increased life satisfaction, calmness, and social interaction [16,17]. Owners frequently describe emotional support, caregiving routines, and positive mental health impacts as central motivations for dog ownership [18–21]. Taken together, these findings underscore that dogs enter therapeutic roles already embedded within meaningful, emotionally salient relationships.

Dog owners are motivated to participate in AAS for a myriad of personal, relational, and altruistic reasons [22,23]. More broadly, research on volunteerism identifies multiple drivers of engagement, including community building, learning and skill development, social affiliation, personal or religious values, career advancement, recognition, and a desire to help others [24–26]. Generally, women are more likely to volunteer than men, with 27% of women volunteering compared to 20% of men, which may be related to findings indicating that females are more likely to participate in prosocial and helping activities [27–29]. This trend appears to extend to AAS, as studies conducted in the field indicate that the majority of AAS volunteers are women and suggest more value- and relationship-oriented motivations in AAS [30–34]. Studies consistently indicate that handlers are primarily motivated by altruism, a desire to help others, and the wish to share the joy and comfort their dogs bring, rather than career-related or instrumental benefits [23,30,31,35]. These findings highlight the central role of the dog–handler relationship in shaping participation in AAS, yet they offer only a partial picture of the experiences associated with this work.

Despite strong evidence of benefits for recipients, handlers' relational and motivational experiences remain underexplored. The present study seeks to extend prior research by examining not only handlers' motivations for participating in AAS but also the perceived benefits and challenges they encounter when engaging in this work alongside their dogs. This study is grounded in theories of intrinsic motivation, volunteer role identity, and relational attunement within the human–animal bond framework and seeks to explore the following research questions: (1) What motivates individuals to engage in AAS with their canine companions? (2) What do handlers find most meaningful about their time engaging in AAS? (3) How does AAS impact the handler–canine relationship?

## 2. Materials and Methods

An online, anonymous, cross-sectional survey was developed using Qualtrics (qualtrics.com; accessed 1 January 2025; Qualtrics, Inc., Provo, UT, USA). The study was approved by the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB #6446). Participants were recruited through Pet Partners' social media (Facebook, Instagram) and newsletter, as well as the Human Animal Interaction (HAI) Section of the American Psychological Association (APA). As an incentive for participating in the survey, participants were provided access to discounted AAS training videos through Pet Partners. The survey was made available from January to June 2025. Quantitative results from the survey are reported in Kogan et al.'s paper [23].

As part of the survey, participants were asked to respond to the following three open-ended questions about their motivations for performing AAS and the potential impacts of this work on their relationship with their dog:

- Please share what you find most meaningful about your time working with your dog partner.
- How would you explain what drives you to perform animal-assisted services?

- How do you feel providing animal-assisted services impacts your relationship with your dog (if at all)?

The focus of this qualitative study, drawing from three embedded, open-ended questions, was to further delve into handlers' motivations for performing AAS and how this dyadic work impacts their relationship with their dog.

*Data Analysis*

This interpretivist qualitative study employed Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis approach [36]. These guidelines informed the framing of our group coding and reflexivity practices and steps taken to enhance trustworthiness. This included how the coding team (first three authors) reflected on the study aims and collaborative coding processes; and how our positionalities shaped our integration of theory and coding decisions and interpretation of findings. As coders, we each bring graduate training in qualitative analysis and have performed research and published articles about the human–animal bond.

Before we started data analysis and throughout our data interpretation, we discussed our connections to human–animal bond work, including paid and unpaid roles in veterinary and animal-welfare, and our guiding theoretical frameworks as veterinary and social work researchers. The lead author shared the impetus for this study and findings from the quantitative study to provide insights into the sample's characteristics and motivations for performing AAS.

Integrating Braun and Clarke's six steps for thematic analysis [36], the first three authors inductively and deductively interpreted open-ended responses. Overall, we centered inductive interpretation and integrated deductive interpretation when we considered how theoretical principles from human–animal bonds, role identity, and motivational theories might influence our inductive interpretations of participants' responses. We began our collaborative coding process with each coder individually reading the complete data set to understand the general scope of the data. Next, we individually coded 25% of participants' responses to the first open-ended survey question to determine initial codes and review our individual coding processes. Then, we individually coded the remaining responses to the first open-ended response item and met to discuss new codes, code definitions, and initial themes. When we experienced coding differences, we shared our rationale for decision-making processes, which allowed for individual perspectives, as well as team-based discussion of how to proceed across differences. We completed these same steps for the remaining two open-ended survey items, generating new codes and themes based on the nuanced content of survey items. Lastly, we determined themes and subthemes across survey questions and identified salient quotes to represent these themes.

*Sample*

The total sample for the mixed-method survey included 247 AAS handlers (Table 1). Survey respondents primarily identified as women (89.8%), partnered or married (67.7%); white (88.8%), not Hispanic/Latinx (88.6%), and age 50 years or older (69.4%). The sample was highly educated, with 70% having earned a graduate or professional degree. There was variability in reported household income, with the largest number of participants earning \$70,000–\$99,000 (23.8%) or over \$150,000 (23.8%).

Handler's experience with AAS varied, with 81.8% actively providing AAS with their dog and 18.2% reporting former activity. Approximately one in five handlers (21.1%) had performed AAS for five or more years, with 14.8% being newer to the field with less than a year of experience. Their active canine partners were most commonly between the ages of three and eight years (56%). Handlers reported investing the following time performing AAS each month: 2–5 days per month (44.9%), 10 or more days per month (15.3%), or once a

month or less per month (8.1%). For more information about settings, handler motivations, and outcomes, please see Kogan et al.'s paper [23].

**Table 1.** Participant Gender Identity, Race, Ethnicity, Education Level, Household Income, Relationship Status, and Age.

| Variable | Category | N | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender Identity (*n* = 225) | Woman | 202 | 89.8 |
| | Man | 18 | 8.0 |
| | Nonbinary | 1 | 0.4 |
| | Two Spirit | 1 | 0.4 |
| | Prefer not to say | 3 | 1.3 |
| Race (*n* = 224) | White/Caucasian | 199 | 88.8 |
| | Asian | 7 | 3.1 |
| | Biracial/Multiracial | 5 | 2.2 |
| | Middle Eastern | 1 | 0.4 |
| | Native American/Indigenous | 1 | 0.4 |
| | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 1 | 0.4 |
| | Prefer not to say | 10 | 4.5 |
| Ethnicity (*n* = 219) | Hispanic/Latinx | 8 | 3.7 |
| | Not Hispanic/Latinx | 194 | 88.6 |
| | Prefer not to say | 17 | 7.8 |
| Education Level (*n* = 226) | ≤High school/GED | 3 | 1.3 |
| | Vocational/trade/2-year degree | 16 | 7.1 |
| | College (4-year degree) | 47 | 20.8 |
| | Graduate/professional degree | 154 | 68.1 |
| | Prefer not to say | 6 | 2.7 |
| Annual Household Income (*n* = 224) | <$10,000 | 5 | 2.2 |
| | $10,000–$29,999 | 7 | 3.1 |
| | $30,000–$49,999 | 12 | 5.4 |
| | $50,000–$69,999 | 35 | 15.6 |
| | $70,000–$99,999 | 40 | 17.9 |
| | $100,000–$149,999 | 32 | 14.3 |
| | ≥$150,000 | 37 | 16.5 |
| | Prefer not to say | 56 | 25.0 |
| Marital/Relationship Status (*n* = 226) | Single/Divorced/Widowed | 66 | 29.2 |
| | Partnered/Married | 153 | 67.7 |
| | Prefer not to say | 7 | 3.1 |
| Age (*n* = 225) | Under 30 years | 10 | 4.4 |
| | 30–39 years | 19 | 8.4 |
| | 40–49 years | 39 | 17.3 |
| | 50–59 years | 45 | 20.0 |
| | 60–69 years | 64 | 28.4 |
| | ≥70 years | 45 | 20.0 |
| | Prefer not to say | 3 | 1.3 |

## 3. Results

Handlers' descriptions of their motivations for providing animal-assisted services (AAS) with their dogs revealed an array of factors that generated meaning not only for the handlers themselves, but also for their dogs, the handler–dog dyad, and the recipients of AAS interactions. At the same time, participants identified several stressors that at times undermined their motivation. Despite these challenges, handlers overwhelmingly portrayed their AAS experiences as positive, meaningful, and purpose-driven. The ability to share their dog with others served as an added benefit to this existentially fulfilling work.

Our findings can be grouped into three thematic domains: Existential and Identity-Based Motivations; Relational and Dyadic Transformation; and Welfare/Strain (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Thematic Domains.

| Theme | Sub-Themes |
| --- | --- |
| Theme 1: Existential and identity-based motivations | Purpose and meaning |
| | Paying it forward |
| | Professional augmentation |
| Theme 2: Relational and dyadic transformation | Strengthened human–animal bond |
| | Partnership framing |
| | Increased attunement |
| Theme 3: Welfare and strain | Financial cost |
| | Environmental stress |
| | Exacerbated grief |

### *3.1. Partnering for a Positive Change in the World*

The most common theme across handlers' responses to the open-ended prompts centered on the existential and social benefits of sharing their dogs with others. Their stories highlighted the meaning they derived from sharing their dog with children, students, hospitalized individuals, older adults, and those processing distressing life events. Handlers' sentiments about their own existential benefits from this work included expressions of joy, laughter, meaning, and hope. A handler explained the considerable benefits from partnering with their dog in AAS: "I love having a well-trained goofy dog, and I love sharing him with others. I do this because it is one way I can give back to others. My dog loves people, and he makes it easy to show kindness" (P86, Q2). Feelings of joy and pride resonated among handlers' descriptions of what drives them to provide AAS:

> *It fills my heart with joy to share this precious, all-forgiving, all-loving being. To see how he can bring so much joy to everyone he meets. To be able to help someone who has just experienced a traumatic event while at work, and to be able to release so much of that pain by just hugging [my dog]. How could I possibly quit? I have been doing AAI for 21 years. All my dogs have enjoyed doing this work. They would wake up in the morning and ask, 'Where is breakfast?' Then they would ask, 'Who are we going to visit?'* (P113, Q2).

Working alongside their canine partner opened doors for handlers to experience meaning-making and role identity consolidation through "being part of positive change in the world" (P8, Q1). The ability to support their community was experienced as a humbling opportunity to learn more about themselves and others:

> *Working alongside my dog partner has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. What stands out most is the quiet, yet profound way a dog can connect with children who are often unreachable through words alone. Watching a child soften, smile, or open up in the presence of my dog has taught me more about trust, safety, and co-regulation than any textbook ever could. It's in those small, quiet moments—a child resting their hand on her back, whispering secrets they can't tell an adult, or finding the courage to try again because she's sitting beside them—that I see the deepest kind of healing. Being part of that journey, with a dog partner by my side, is both humbling and powerful* (P233, Q1).

Providing a moment of joy, distraction, or support to an individual during a time of need or a particularly challenging moment commonly appeared as a driving force

for handlers. They often described feeling honored, humbled, and encouraged in their helping roles:

> *The most meaningful part has been helping people in their time of need. After my dog and I visited one boy in a hospital, his nurse followed me out into the hall to tell me that the only time she had seen him smile all week was when he was petting my dog. Another time, a mother saw my dog and I in the hospital hallway. The mother quietly walked up to my dog, hugged him, and started sobbing. My dog was able to bring her comfort on one of the worst days of her life when her child was horribly sick in the hospital* (P188, Q1).

Acknowledgements by recipients of their dyadic interventions brought numerous existential rewards to handlers, as explained by a handler:

> *We are able to help people who are stressed, hurting, or in need of comfort. It is so rewarding to hear people tell me that they really needed us and how much they appreciate that we are there* (P217, Q1).

Animal-assisted services aligned well with most handlers' values and offered a way for them to fulfill what they frequently portrayed as their life's mission. One handler summarized the expansive benefits of providing AAS: "For me, [AAS] fulfills my mission of being a loving force on the planet; for my dog and I: because he loves it; for the people we interact with: measurably improving their lives" (P35, Q1). Sentiments commonly focused on how this work aligns with their purpose-driven values and a desire to be in service to their community, and their dog's desire to help others.

For example, one handler explained, "(1) My dog is the love and light of my life, (2) he loves serving others, (3) my mission is to be a loving force on the planet" (P2, Q2). Handlers also portrayed how providing AAS enables them to further their life's mission: "It just brings me joy to do something nice for unassuming people who are in need of some love. Giving to others brings me great joy. It's who I am" (P23, Q2). Additionally, some handlers' comments also reflected their religious mission and being able to perform God's work: "It's an opportunity to brighten someone's day. It's a ministry" (P130, Q2). Another explained how providing AAS is "watching God's goodness work through the human–animal bond to make a life more fulfilled" (P210, Q1).

### *3.2. AAS as a Tool to Augment Professional Gains*

The ability of school counselors, educators, and therapists to integrate AAS into their professional roles affords handlers unique ways to augment their interventions and connections with clients. Participants expressed gratitude to their dog for serving as an extension of their professional skills and a buffer for stressful work moments. Handlers portrayed their AAS dogs as an additional tool to support goal attainment and further recipients' progress in building confidence, overcoming traumatic experiences, and attending to previously unaddressed emotional barriers. A therapist explained the power of the human–animal bond in aiding their clients' progress: "The human–animal bond reaches the most vulnerable places inside the human soul without force and allows for deeper connections to be made in the therapeutic process" (P170, Q1). Dogs were also described as resourceful in breaking down social stigmas attached to seeking mental health services. A handler explained, "My patients are often terrified of being admitted to a 'psych ward, 'and my partner helps create initial trust and support in fighting the stigma" (P18, Q1). Witnessing their dog's role in helping their clients achieve their goals afforded a handler intrinsic reward:

> *To sum it up, my therapy dog provides the drive for people to do hard things. When they do not think they can do it, they do it for the dog. Whether it's an academic task or a social*

> *or emotional challenge. The presence of the dog supporting them drives them to try. It's truly amazing and so rewarding* (P180, Q2).

Handlers reported a secondary benefit of their therapeutic interactions—having the opportunity to engage in society and feel a sense of connection and belonging in the world. These opportunities appeared as "a conduit to interaction" (P28, Q1), "a time to engage with another human being" (P31, Q1), and "a way to meet new people" (P37, Q1). Sharing their dogs with others was described as a social catalyst and way to foster connection: "Having an instant connection with strangers and a way to quickly build rapport" (P40, Q1).

Therapeutic interactions with their dogs also helped some handlers feel a sense of connection to their former roles in education, health, and mental health. Whether retired or in a new career, handlers highlighted the ways in which their working partnership allowed them to regain the vocational meaning they drew from patient interactions: "As a retired nurse, AAI is the best part of nursing without all the paperwork!!!" (P15, Q2). A doctor shared a similar sentiment, "I am a retired MD; I witnessed what AAT does and was always a tad envious of the child life and dog teams that just had fun with the children" (P49, Q2).

Specifically, for those in retirement, AAS brought a sense of purpose to their daily lives. As explained by a retiree, their partnership with their dog has "been a great retirement journey" (P133, Q2). Others explained how their work "gives [them] an opportunity to give to others, and it gives purpose to [their] retirement" (P114, Q2), and allows them to "make a positive difference in children's lives, gives me 'value' in a society that negates the elderly in our community" (P140, Q2).

Handlers also reported perceiving that AAS work provides purpose for their dogs and feeling that their dogs enjoyed their 'job': "It gives my dogs purpose. They're always happy to "go to work" (P88, Q3) and "my boy JUMPS for joy when he knows it's time to work" (P146, Q3). Handlers also described the shared joy they felt working with their dog, recognizing them as coworkers in this role ". . . we enjoy putting on the work collar & doing it together" (P119, Q3) and discussed the relationship in terms similar to work relationships with coworkers, "We worked together 8 h a day for almost 8 years . . ." (P221, Q3).

### *3.3. Paying Forward Acts of Kindness*

Handlers shared how AAS acts as a powerful means to 'pay forward' acts of kindness. Their AAS work provided opportunities to find healing, including what one handler proclaimed as creating a life-saving connection with their AAS partner:

> *Along with my two younger brothers, I received her as a Christmas gift. She has led me on the journey to animal-assisted intervention and has continued to lovingly assist me in actualizing my higher purpose in all things AAI. Not only has she taught me more about consent and unconditional love than any human, she has saved my life. Sharing her with others has allowed me to grow closer to her, myself, and my fellow humans* (P210, Q1).

Furthermore, working through one's own trauma with their AAS experiences allowed handlers to find hope for the future. A handler with traumatic life experiences recognized the role of AAS in providing them faith in the future: "[AAS] has truly assisted me in my own healing from moral injury from the military and military sexual trauma. I have found a new way to have a sense of purpose and connection and faith in the world again" (P77, Q1).

Handlers also shared stories of how their AAS experiences enabled them to give back to facilities where they or loved ones received supportive care. These experiences included someone's "desire to give back to the hospital that literally saved my life four years ago" (P144, Q2), and an acknowledgement for being alive, "I had a really horrible battle with Lyme Disease that left me somewhat impaired, and now I like to thank the world for keeping me alive" (P67, Q2). Others gave back to facilities in honor of professionals

who cared for their family members: "I am 'paying back' to the hospital that saved my grandson's life" (P141, Q2). One handler wanted to reward nursing home employees for her father's excellent care: "My dad was in a nursing home, and this provides me a way to give back for all of the people that supported him" (P143, Q2). Notably, one handler utilized the survey to share their hope that someone would pay it forward to them in the future: "I hope when I can no longer care for pets that someone will share with me" (P73, Q2).

### *3.4. Opportunities to Enhance Dogs' Needs for Socialization, Cuddles, and Treats*

Interspersed throughout descriptions of the benefits handlers saw for themselves and recipients were statements reflecting perceived benefits for their dogs. These comments commonly focused on their ability to offer their dogs opportunities for social interaction and mental stimulation. One handler explained, "I love doing something that puts a smile on other people's faces. Also, my dog loves people and seems to love working with others" (P85, Q2). As explained by a handler, performing AAS "[is] a way for me to give my dog what he loves (people interaction and attention) and make people happy" (P123, Q2). Doing this work also provided handlers with increased opportunities to support their dog's development and ability to form human connections:

> *Before my first Golden gave me the idea to try this, we were having difficulties bonding because of how she spent the first 2 years of her life. The one positive quality I saw in her is that she had never met a stranger. Therapy work was just starting to be a thing in my area. And showing up in the news feeds. Once [dog name] learned to respect me, we started this journey, and I will do this for & with a rescue dog 'til my dying days. I am so grateful to deliver smiles with my companions* (P14, Q3).

Others shared "... a way for me to enhance his life" (P69, Q3), a "[s]ocialization opportunity for my dog" (P178, Q2), and "provid[ing] extra stimulation and outings for my dogs" (P167, Q3). A few handlers saw this as mutually beneficial socialization for the pet, themselves, and recipients, sharing:

> *My therapy dog partner is highly social and has an aptitude for helping people ground when they feel anxious. Providing animal-assisted interventions helps provide him with a regular opportunity to do these things, provides him with cognitive and social stimulation and his presence helps me by bringing me joy and peace as well as the people who we work with.* (P137, Q3)

Several handlers shared stories about the excitement their dogs expressed when they saw their handlers gather AAS items as they prepared to leave the home. One handler described their dog's reaction to getting ready for AAS: "I use the same verbiage with her when we prepare to go visit. I can see she is excited about being social. She also turns on 'work mode' when I put her volunteer bandana on her. It's the cutest" (P61, Q1). Seeing their dogs in purpose-driven roles brought joy to handlers, as portrayed in this story of a rescue dog in his AAS role:

> *The high I feel after visits lasts for days! Joy, pride, love, satisfaction. And right now, the need is so great. When we leave visits, there are smiles all around us. It also makes me happy to see what it does for my dog. Each dog had some issue with how they had been living life since they were rescued. They love it. It would have been a shame for them to not have the opportunity to turn their lives around and give back. They are all conceived to do just that but people get in the way of their opportunities* (P169, Q1).

Offering AAS as part of their dog's routine also enabled handlers to supplement their dog's desires for affection, rewards, or attention. For example, a handler explained, "My dog would not survive without constant love and affection, so this provides him a great

outlet for that need so that we can chill at home without me getting frustrated with the constant need to be touching" (P13, Q3). A couple of handlers humorously shared about the added benefits their dogs garnered in their AAS roles: "We just have a great time. Plus, what's not to love [about] massive pets, kisses, and treats!" (P216, Q3).

### *3.5. More than Just a Walk in the Park: Psychosocial and Situational Strains*

Although most handlers' responses centered on factors that they portrayed as meaningful, joyful, and beneficial to their and their dog's well-being, a minority of comments described parts of AAS that created tension or worries. For example, a handler with almost 30 years' experience shared both benefits and strains of partnered work: "I have been doing this since 1996. I don't feel like myself when I'm not doing it. However, I will note that the cost of maintaining pets has begun to impact my involvement" (P70, Q2).

Another area of concern for some handlers was the stressful environments or situations that they sometimes encountered while working with their dogs. These included situations in which they felt unsafe, where the environment was tense, or where they felt their dog responded in ways that indicated discomfort or reduced enjoyment for the work. Handlers described a sense of responsibility for their dog's physical and emotional state and acknowledged that the nature or setting of AAS can sometimes be innately tense. Within the responses concerning stressful dynamics, comments often reflected the handler's recognition of the strains and specific steps they took to assure their dog's well-being. A handler explained:

> *I sometimes put my dogs in very stressful situations. They depend on me to have their backs. I have always used the thumbs-up sign to my dogs to let them know all is okay. I like the hand signal because many of my dogs become deaf with age, so they can always be reassured, even if they can't hear me. The relationship between my therapy teams has always been stronger* (P82, Q3).

Handlers explained that over time, they found ways to navigate situations to better support their dog's needs or ceased working in that setting. For one handler, this process looked like: "I believe it is sometimes stressful and less enjoyable than I'd like it to be. I'm learning to say no to certain events or lengths of engagements because it's too much for him" (P52, Q3).

Among stories of the handler's description of the impact of performing AAS on their relationship with their dog were a few comments that alluded to how their intense dyadic bond could lead to increased grief: "It definitely brings me closer with my dog. That is difficult when a dog dies, as the grief is greater. But the joy is worth it all" (P81, Q3). Concerns regarding death appeared to be mutual, with one handler sharing the assumed impact of their death on their dog, "[My dog] would most likely die if I died; his bond is so strong" (P43, Q3). Notably, handlers frequently reflected on the enhanced bond they felt with their dog partners and how they felt deeper emotional connections with these dogs because of their purpose-driven partnerships.

Even though some handlers expressed strains caused by their AAS work, only a few expressed frustrations with their dog. Notably, these frustrations were centered around the dog exhibiting different behavior at home compared to when they were 'working,' but it did not appear to negatively impact the human–animal bond or the perceived importance of the dog's role in AAS. As detailed by one handler:

> *I'm so much more bonded and can read her subtle cues in all life situations. That said, I do sometimes find I get more frustrated over little things because I think, 'she knows better, she's an amazing dog at work, so why is she doing XYZ at home?'" Overall, I feel more dependent on her in a primarily really positive way, but a little tinged with anxiety*

*that if anything were to happen, I'd lose out on some of the impact I'm able to have with my clients when she's there* (P70, Q3).

### *3.6. AAS Is a "Win-Win" for Animals and Their Handlers*

Additional benefits for both dog and handler frequently mentioned by participants included strengthening the human–animal bond through teamwork, improved communication and mutual understanding, a "win-win" approach for both person and pet, novel relationship-building, and an increased ability to advocate for the dog's welfare.

A strengthened bond between the therapy animal and their handler, driven by increased one-on-one time together during preparation for AAS work (e.g., grooming, training) and during the work itself, was a frequently mentioned benefit. One participant reported that "[AAS] has been a positive influence on my relationship with my dog. We have other animals in the house, and this provides some much-needed one-on-one time, which we both value. She also gets lots of treats during AAI visits, so that's a bonus! (P90, Q3).

This deep bond was reflected in how handlers viewed their AAS work with their pet as a "partnership" and in their sense that they and their pet were a team or unit. One participant explained, "I have a closer and more meaningful relationship with my therapy dog than with any other animal in my life" (P179, Q3). Animals were referred to as a "canine partner," "battle buddy," "true friend," "equal partner," "co-worker," and "teammate." A handler elaborated on this by saying, "He is truly my partner . . . not just a pet" (P28, Q3), while another shared, "My canine partner has developed a trust in me that is invaluable. He goes anywhere he is needed and trusts me to keep him safe. I have developed a sense of partnership with him, not ownership" (P131, Q3).

This partnership was described as leading to increased communication, understanding, empathy, and attunement to each other's needs and wants. One participant explained:

*There is a tight bond based on trust between my dogs and I. I trust that they can fulfill the client's needs, and they trust that I will keep them safe and happy. We work closely as a team, communicating constantly, so we know what each other is thinking even before the thought comes into our heads. It's a very close relationship, and one that is very rare* (P178, Q3).

Handlers reported increased ability to read their dog's body language and understand their welfare needs, especially in stressful situations, resulting in improved trust and communication. One handler described this communication as "reading each other's minds," while another said, "I am also better at listening to [my pet] now" (P75, Q3). Another explained, "I've learned so much more about dog psychology and welfare and am so much more in tune with her needs and her need for autonomy/choice than I ever would have been as just a companion dog owner" (P34, Q3).

Another participant also mentioned viewing their dog as a "mirror" of their own emotions, which helped them to be better attuned with themselves and their own needs:

*Providing animal-assisted interventions has deepened the bond between me and my therapy dog beyond what I could ever have imagined. I do not know if I will ever have human children, so [dog name] is my first child. I have come to realize, through providing AAI with [dog name], that our bond holds me accountable as a person. I have come to view her as a mirror of myself, in the sense that my own dysregulation manifests as her "behaviors." In this way, [dog name] is somewhat of a mood indicator for myself and others, and this has helped me meet [dog's name] and my own needs, which deepens our bond immensely"* (P157, Q3).

The deeper understanding of their dog's needs allowed handlers to better advocate for their dog's welfare and prioritize their needs throughout the work. One handler described this as, "TRUST. I know my partners' idiosyncrasies; they know mine. No matter what, I will always advocate for my dog first over a client; they know they can count on me" (P181, Q3). Another proclaimed:

> *Despite having grown up with dogs, I've learned so much more about their body language, being responsive to their needs, and ensuring that they actually ENJOY what I involve them in. It's ALL about relationship, whether or not we do AAI—the values still hold* (P182, Q3).

Additionally, participants reported the added benefit of increased training and skills, meeting new people, making memories together, and building novel relationships as a team. One handler proclaimed, "All my fur-partners have enjoyed people. It's been easy to teach the pups special skills that reach individuals" (P9, Q3). While another reported, "We definitely have a special bond through the opportunity to visit new people and go to new places together" (P207, Q3).

Although a few individuals reported that AAS had no impact or worsened their relationship with their animal, overall, AAS was described as a "win-win" due to its mutual benefits for both the handler and the dog.

## 4. Discussion

Across the three open-ended prompts, handlers reflected on the multitude of ways that their AAS experiences facilitated relationship building, capacity for helping others, and healing. They wrote about providing AAS to a diverse group of recipients, including children and adults, hospitalized individuals, therapy patients, and those experiencing difficult life events. Across the range of settings, situations, and recipients, they described their dog not only as being able to bring joy, distraction, or support but also serving as a therapeutic tool for emotional and mental healing. Bearing witness to the impact their dog had on recipients cultivated a sense of purpose, social connection, and belonging among handlers, with the dog serving as a social catalyst between the handler and recipients. Handlers saw the connection and socialization as beneficial for their dog, themselves, and AAS recipients. The beneficial experience of pets acting as a social catalyst is seen with both companion animals [37,38] and AAS animals [39,40].

Our findings suggest that handlers' benefits should not be understood as merely secondary to recipient outcomes, but as part of the relational process through which AAS is enacted. Handlers described meaning, joy, pride, identity affirmation, and strengthened partnership with their dogs as deeply intertwined with their ability to engage in this work. In this sense, AAS appears to function not simply as a service delivered to recipients, but as a co-constituted, multispecies relational practice in which recipients, handlers, and dogs are all shaped by the interaction. This extends volunteer motivation theory by suggesting that AAS participation is sustained not only by altruistic values or role commitment, but also by ongoing relational reinforcement through teamwork, attunement, and shared purpose. It also supports viewing AAS as an identity-affirming practice, particularly for retired professionals and others who described this work as an extension of their values, prior roles, or life mission. Rather than positioning handler benefits as incidental, these findings indicate that handlers' sense of purpose, emotional engagement, and bond with their dogs may help create the relational conditions that make AAS possible and meaningful.

Partnering with their dog to conduct AAS opened doors for handlers to find meaning in their roles as volunteers and professionals. Handlers often described their initial interest in AAS as a way to enhance their connection with their dogs or to pay forward benefits that they or a loved one had received during a time of physical or emotional crisis. Through

their partnership with their dog, they discovered additional mechanisms to enhance their daily joy through existential gains such as meaning-making, purpose, and a sense of interpersonal connection [30,31,35]. Notably, for retired handlers, providing AAS brought a nuanced perspective of volunteer role identity and highlighted the sense of purpose and meaning AAS provides, as well as opportunities for socialization and a sense of belonging that they formerly found through employment [41]. Common throughout responses were reflections on how performing AAS enabled handlers to fulfill their life's mission or embody their values in having a role in building a better world [42,43]. Handlers elaborated on the intrinsic meaning they found through witnessing their dogs supporting others during times of physical or emotional need. Their narratives elevate the science around handlers' intrinsic motivations [23] by detailing specific ways in which AAS enhance handlers' personal growth, enjoyment, and fulfillment of their need to help others.

Handlers' descriptions also revealed gratitude for the extrinsic rewards they gain from the work, including praise from AAS organizational contacts and acknowledgement from AAS recipients. They described pride in their dog's training acumen and skills nurtured to help others achieve previously unattainable goals. Notably, a few handlers chose to share stories of recipients who reflected on the lasting impacts of their visits and how, years later, families would stop them on the street to share the significant role their dyadic visits had in bringing joy during a distressing life event.

The drive for providing AAS also included perceived benefits for their dogs. These narratives frequently reflected the exuberance and joy their dogs express when preparing for a visit and the enjoyment they experience when interacting with others [23,30]. Some handlers lightheartedly explained how providing AAS relieved some of their pet parenting duties in meeting their dog's needs for affection, attention, and social or mental stimulation. In several instances, handlers displayed what could be interpreted as anthropomorphic projection in their descriptions of how they perceived their animals' joy and reward from providing AAS.

One of the most common findings in this study was the relationship between handlers and their dogs that strengthened over the course of providing AAS. This result aligns with previous studies, which suggest that enhancing the bond with their dog is a primary motivation for handlers [23,30,35]. Many handlers in this study viewed their dog not only as family [44] but also as their partner or co-worker. During this special form of one-on-one time together, handlers form a deep bond, distinct from relationships they may have with other companion animals. This strengthened HAB can lead to greater attunement, communication, and understanding between handlers and their dogs. This finding supports previous research, which has found that dogs that perform AAS work often direct their attention towards their handlers rather than recipients, suggesting increased bond, trust, and attunement [35,45,46]. This pattern is also consistent with theoretical models that emphasize reciprocal, embodied attunement as central to the development of human–animal relationships [47]. Within this tight-knit partnership, handlers often expressed confidence in advocating for and prioritizing the safety and welfare of their dog, a key component of successful AAS [48,49]. To help handlers ensure their dogs' welfare, AAS organizations should train handlers how to monitor their animals for stress, successfully navigate challenging situations, and assess when it is time for their animal to retire [23,30,32,50,51].

Despite many handlers expressing an intention to prioritize their dogs' welfare and to set boundaries with AAS recipients, handlers' views on animal welfare practices may still be at odds with canine preferences and the International Association of Human–Animal Interaction Organizations' (IAHAIO) welfare guidelines. IAHAIO guidelines recommend that AAS canines work for no more than 45 min per session and no more than three sessions per day; however, several respondents reported working longer hours [52]. Additionally,

many dogs are not comfortable being handled, petted, or hugged by unknown individuals, and although many respondents said their dog greatly enjoyed the extra pets, research has shown that humans are often unable to tell whether a dog is stressed or uncomfortable, especially if the signs are subtle (i.e., lick lipping, yawning, etc.) [53–55]. It is worth noting the inherent power asymmetry and the inability of animals to have agency and voice in advocating for their wish to participate in AAS. However, the increased bond between an owner and an AAS canine partner has been shown to enable a greater understanding of stress-related behaviors [53].

This study offers a nuanced, handler-centered examination of the motivational identity theory through the presentation of handlers' motivations, rewards, and challenges associated with providing AAS with dogs. Across roles, settings, and life stages, handlers consistently described their AAS work as meaningful, value-driven, and relationally grounded. They described how providing AAS offers them opportunities to make meaning of their role in society and to embody their value-driven mission to serve others and make the world a better place. Their narratives illustrate that AAS is not experienced merely as volunteer work, but as a shared, purpose-driven partnership between human and dog that fosters connections, healing, and a sense of contributing to something larger than oneself.

Handlers frequently described their dogs as collaborators, emphasizing mutual trust, communication, and attunement. Through this partnership, handlers reported enhanced capacity to support others during moments of vulnerability, while simultaneously strengthening their bond with their dog. These findings reinforce the centrality of the human–animal bond as both a mechanism of impact for recipients and a motivation for the handlers themselves. Importantly, the benefits described were not limited to recipients; handlers and dogs alike were perceived to gain purpose, stimulation, social connection, and emotional fulfillment.

At the same time, this study highlights that AAS is not without cost. Financial strain, emotionally charged environments, concerns about canine stress, and anticipatory grief surrounding retirement or loss were present in some narratives. Strong identification with their role as an AAS handler may intensify their grief and identity disruption when their dogs retire or die. These challenges underscore the responsibility of AAS organizations to provide ongoing support—not only during initial training, but throughout the lifespan of the handler–dog team. This training should normalize stress responses, support handlers in reading and responding to canine cues, and facilitate conversations about boundaries, rest, and retirement.

*Limitations*

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, participants were recruited through a single large AAS organization and one HAI-focused professional organization, which may have resulted in organizational loyalty bias and handlers who are more highly engaged, motivated, or positively oriented toward AAS than the broader population of handlers. As such, the experiences captured here may overrepresent individuals who find AAS especially meaningful or rewarding, while underrepresenting those who disengaged early or experienced significant strain. Additionally, handlers may have been influenced to participate in the study to receive access to AAS training videos.

Second, the sample was demographically homogeneous, with participants predominantly identifying as white, women, highly educated, and partnered. This limits the generalizability of findings and highlights the need for future research that intentionally recruits handlers with more diverse racial, cultural, socioeconomic, gender, and family backgrounds. Greater representation may reveal distinct motivations, structural barriers, stressors, or relational dynamics that were not captured in the present study. However, it

appears that this survey may have been representative of AAS volunteer demographics, as other studies conducted on AAS have similar demographic compositions of primarily white women and highly educated [30–34]. The high prevalence of women volunteers and respondents may be explained by previous research, which has found that women are more likely to exhibit prosocial and helping behaviors and thus are more likely to engage in volunteering [27–29]. Future studies should explore the reasons behind other factors (race, education, etc.) within this homogeneous volunteer group.

Third, this study relied on self-reported, retrospective qualitative data, which may be subject to recall bias, social desirability bias, or post hoc meaning-making. Handlers may unintentionally emphasize positive experiences or minimize challenges, particularly when describing work that is closely tied to identity, values, and purpose. Although the anonymous survey format may have reduced some social desirability pressures, future studies could benefit from longitudinal or mixed-method designs that capture changes in motivations, strain, and relational dynamics over time.

Fourth, the exclusive use of an online survey may have limited participation to individuals with consistent internet access and comfort with written reflection. While open-ended survey responses allowed participants to share rich narratives, in-depth interviews or observational methodologies could further illuminate nuanced relational processes, moment-to-moment decision-making, and dogs' behavioral responses during AAS interactions.

Finally, while this study focused on handlers' perceptions of benefits and stressors for their dogs, it did not include direct behavioral or physiological measures of canine welfare. Future research should integrate handler perspectives with objective indicators of animal stress, engagement, and enjoyment to better understand how perceived benefits align with dogs' lived experiences. This is particularly important for informing ethical guidelines, training protocols, and retirement decision-making within AAS organizations.

## 5. Conclusions

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that AAS is a fundamentally relational practice shaped by partnership, attunement, and shared purpose. Supporting handlers in this work requires attending not only to skill development, but also to the emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions of partnering with an animal in service to others. By centering handlers' lived experiences and honoring dogs as true partners in this work, this study contributes to scholarship that emphasizes the relational foundations of effective and sustainable AAS practice.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

| | |
|---|---|
| AAS | Animal-assisted services |
| AAT | Animal-assisted therapy |
| AAE | Animal-assisted education |
| HAB | Human–animal bond |
| HAI | Human–animal interaction |
| APA | American Psychological Association |

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