

Work or Play?

An Exploration of the Relationships between People and their Service Dogs in Leisure Activities

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Abstract

This study explored the relationships between adults with disabilities and service dogs through leisure participation. The relationships between service dog and owner and perceptions of and access to leisure were explored via semi-structured interviews. Emergent themes included feelings of interdependence and a lifelong emotional connection. Themes related to perceptions of and access to leisure included service dog orientation and the influence of lifestyle. Owners felt that having a service dog was a positive influence on leisure activities. The emotional connection between owner and service dog was multidimensional, inclusive of trust, maintaining independence, increased socialization, and creating a need to participate in leisure experiences. The cognitive hierarchy model, and experiential learning and transformational learning theories were applied.

Keywords: *service dogs, guide dogs, companion animals, leisure, relationship, disability, human-animal bond, emotion, attachment*

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"I would like to explore what might possibly be meant by love in a way that disrupts various romanticisms, troubles certain kinds of certainties about the relationship that we have with this other complex species, dogs, and perhaps leads us to a place I have tried to get throughout most of my work. That is, elsewhere."

—Donna Haraway

(*Harvard University Gazette* 2002, via Solomon, 2010)

Just as it was Haraway's, so too, is it our intention to explore "elsewhere." Inspired indirectly by many and directly by Solomon (2010) who wrote about the social interactions between therapy dogs and children with autism, we wish to expand previous knowledge related to the relationship between owners and their guide dogs by exploring the leisure impacts of emotional bonds between adults with disabilities and service dogs. Solomon (2010) championed the idea that dogs lead humans elsewhere, "and this elsewhere is often better than where we have been before" (p. 146). She wrote of numerous situations in which dogs shared space with humans, allowing people to retrospectively and narratively chronicle the transformative experiences that had occurred. We wish to use leisure as a lens to explore these transformative relationships.

Adults with various disabilities commonly use service dogs for assistance in activities of daily living (Camp, 2000). Service dogs are trained vigorously and in many cases specifically to work for their owners' needs. Generally, it is recognized that owning a service dog has many positive and beneficial implications for individuals with disabilities. These benefits include increasing quality of life, independence, increased socialization, and providing emotional support (Shintani et al., 2010). However, little is known about how the relationship between service dogs and their owners impacts their leisure participation, leisure choices, or access to leisure opportunities.

Our aim is to contribute to the disability literature by expanding upon existing research that identified the emotional connections between humans and service dogs. This topic is of particular interest, especially provided recent changes in the Americans with Disabilities Act that no longer allow emotion-based connections between human and canine as a justification for possession of a service dog. According to the ADA (2011), some examples of physical work or tasks that a service dog may perform include, but are not limited to assisting individuals who are blind or have low vision with navigation, alerting individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing to the presence of people or sounds, and helping persons with psychiatric and neurological disabilities by preventing or interrupting impulsive or destructive behaviors. Social or personal benefits such as emotional security might be provided by an animal are no longer considered a viable reason for receiving or keeping a service dog.

We also hope to contribute to the leisure literature by providing in-depth examination of an under-researched subject (human-animal interactions) in the context of a population of people with disabilities. In particular, we wish to expand upon the growing, but still limited list of research considering the relationships that exist between adults with disabilities and their service dogs. To this point, much research has concentrated on the physical benefits of service dogs. We will posit that although myriad physical benefits exist in the relationships between humans and service dogs, the emotional and psychological benefits of service dog ownership may be just as great.

Very little is known about how the Human-Animal Bond (HAB) impacts leisure behavior or perceived access to leisure. We believe there is great potential to explore not only the HAB that exists between owners and their service dogs, but also to explore the ways in which relationships

with their service dogs impact their owners' leisure behaviors and attitudes toward leisure. The specific objectives of the study are 1) to explore the relationships between service/guide dogs and adults with disabilities and 2) to examine the role of service/guide dogs in owners' perceptions of leisure and their perceived access to leisure.

Literature Review

Melson (2002) suggested that historically, human-animal relationships have generally been ignored and that little seems to be changing in the present (p. 347). Similarly, Sanders (2003) offered: "In failing to recognize the fact that we live in an interactional community composed of both human and nonhuman members, we have ignored an area of social life that is commonplace, emotionally rich, and of significant analytic interest" (p. 421).

In the past decade, while there has been increased consideration of human-animal relationships in academic literature, many questions remain. Although pertinent research is not common, there does exist a literature from which to draw insight. In this section, we will consider literature related to the history and utility of the human-canine relationship, the emotional and psychological benefits of dogs, and the role of service/guide dogs in leisure contexts. Previous research has often used terms such as "emotion," "affect," "mood," and "feeling" interchangeably. The use of similar terms to identify multiple meanings presents a dilemma for scholars hoping to connect knowledge between literature streams. For this study, we will not attempt to nuance emotion, affect, mood, feeling or other similar terms. Rather we will refer to "emotional connections" to identify any outward expression of feeling/emotion associated with service dog ownership.

Benefits of the Human-Canine Relationship

The bonds that exist between humans and dogs are longstanding, going back centuries, to the earliest days of domestication. As a result of this lengthy relationship, "dogs have evolved a genetic predisposition to understanding human cues better than any other animal" (Milan, 2004, p. 5). Miles (2004) suggested that canine loyalty and "desire to please" are among the chief reasons dogs are superior to current technology and may never be replaced, even as technology advances.

Such superiority and reliability have led to an unparalleled functional relationship. Dogs raised and trained for service perform a variety of tasks for their humans, including dressing, shopping, and food preparation (Allen & Blascovich, 1996). Even with technological advancement, dogs persist as most well suited for these and similar tasks. Allen and Blascovich (1996) noted that while more sophisticated technology increased the ease of personal care, many tasks could not and likely could never be handled by machines. Additionally, social needs considered by Allen and Blascovich (1996) "of at least equal importance" to conventional task performance, suggested that facilitation of social contact and community integration cannot be met solely by technology.

Dogs with different training are thought to be capable of having different values to humans. Generally speaking, dogs are divided into one of three groups: Companion, therapy, and service. *Companion animals* are most often thought of as pets (Messent, 1983). They are trained only as rigorously as their trainers and owners deem necessary for day-to-day social purposes; for instance, commands may include "sit," "stay," and "speak."

Therapy dogs are often utilized for emotional and psychological support and to stimulate and evoke emotional experiences as a basis for therapy. Therapy dogs can be found in places as

wide ranging as hospitals and prisons. In addition to basic commands, they are expected to be well behaved and to be perceived as supportive of their humans. They are capable of encouraging a sense of peace as well as mental stimulation and socialization for the people with whom they interact (ADA, 2011).

Service dogs, such as those studied here, are the most highly trained. They assist persons with disabilities to achieve greater independence in a variety of performance areas, including activities of daily living, home management, functional mobility, socialization, emergency alerting, and environmental control (Delta Society, 2000).

Companion, therapy, and service dogs each have different functions, but their emotional effects (companionship, calm, psychological and social support) on humans appear largely constant. Such was noted by DiSalvo et al. (2005) who suggested that while the training regimens of each of the dog types differed, human psychological benefits were numerous and held in relation to each dog type regardless of training.

The connection between people and dogs is broadly referred to as the Human-Animal Bond (HAB). According to Olson (2002), The HAB is

The mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment.

Early research has suggested that the human-animal bond can have a strong influence as an intervention strategy with a variety of people (Valentine et al., 1993). Moreover, animals are identified as “members of the family” (Cain, 1983; Voith, 1983; Wisdom, Saedi, & Green, 2009) that help humans connect with nature (Melson 2001; Myers & Saunders 2002), offer comfort, companionship, and empathy (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Garrity & Stallones, 1998; Serpell, 1986; Wisdom, Saedi, & Green, 2009), reinforce self-worth, support self-efficacy, strengthen a sense of empowerment, (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Corson & Corson, 1980; Lott, 1988; Melson, 1991, 1998; Wisdom, Saedi, & Green, 2009), and serve as “nonverbal communication mediators” that provide tactile comfort through their intermediacy (Corson & Corson, 1980, Serpell, 2000).

Perhaps not unexpectedly, dogs have prevailed as the most common and legally allowed potential service animal. Olson (2002) suggested “Dogs ... seem to enhance our overall physical and emotional health by their mere presence, ability to receive affection, and acceptance of many human frailties” (p. 352). Similarly, numerous authors have found that dogs serve to reduce stress in various age groups and all life stages, from children to the elderly (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991; Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent 1983; Melson, 2002; Siegel, 1990). Melson (2002) suggested this may be because dogs could function as “attachment figures” that “convey security and safety” to their owner or caretaker (p. 348).

Increased socialization is a prominent finding in research conducted on people with service dogs. In particular, persons with disabilities reported that they were eight times more likely to have positive encounters with other people when in the presence of a dog than without (Hart, Hart, & Bergin, 1987). Eddy, Hart, and Boltz (1988) also found that people with service dogs were significantly more likely to be acknowledged socially than those without. Fairman and Huebner (2001) found that the dogs helped people feel safe, increased their social interaction, and reduced physical assistance by others. Valentine et al. (1993) also confirmed “undeniable” psychosocial benefits of service dog ownership and asserted that placement of service dogs offered significant emotional and social benefits to owners.

Moreover, service dogs are credited with boosting independence in self-care, work and leisure activities, while providing emotional benefits including stable companionship, heightened feelings of security, increased self-esteem, confidence and social contact, lower depression, fewer feelings of loneliness, and a feeling of unconditional love (Eddy, Hart, & Boltz, 1988; Fairman & Heubner, 2000; Fitzgerald & Collins, 2005; Mader, Hart, & Bergin, 1989; Milan, 2004; Valentine et al., 1993).

Leisure Impacts of Service Dog Ownership

Despite the bevy of research that documented the increased socialization that occurred as a result of dog ownership, it is unclear whether this increased socialization translates to the increased perception of leisure access. Just as relatively few studies considered the emotional impacts of service dog ownership, even fewer considered the leisure impacts of service dog ownership. Further, only two that we encountered used the term “leisure,” specifically. Fairman and Heubner (2001) found that just over two thirds of survey respondents were able to participate in more play and leisure activities as a result of having a service dog, and a similar percentage participated directly with their service dogs in play and leisure activities. Milan (2004) suggested feelings of enhanced independence were present in leisure activities, but did not account for whether or to what degree that increased feeling of independence led to an increase in leisure-related behaviors when service dogs were utilized.

Although not specifically considering leisure impacts, Camp (2001) identified themes such as increased community participation, social contact, personal skill development, and a greater likelihood to have fun due to dog ownership. One respondent suggested that if not for her service dog, “It just wouldn’t be as fun. Life would be more boring” (p.514). Although Camp referred to “fun” rather than “leisure,” the respondents’ usage of the word suggests that in this case both terms may be used interchangeably. We intend to further explore the meanings and functions of these overlapping definitions and understandings of leisure.

This exploratory study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the relationships between adults with disabilities and their service dogs within the context of leisure participation. We believe that there exists an emotionally significant bond above and beyond the confines of a professional relationship. It is our goal to develop a deeper understanding of those bonds and if/how they impact leisure activity participation. Moreover, we wish to provide further context for the leisure roles of service dogs, and make recommendations for how those understandings might be utilized in practice.

Theoretical Framework

Some previous efforts to understand HAB and animal-assisted therapy have utilized less-than rigorous methods and have lacked driving theories. We attempted to address those concerns by citing research that was most rigorous on the methodological and conceptual levels and through the identification of widely utilized theories as the basis for a guiding theoretical framework. We believe that well-founded, guiding theories are among the absent components in many previous research efforts. Developing a framework necessitated the consideration of several theories, each of which can help to frame different aspects of this study. Cognitive Hierarchy Model (CHM) (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 2004) as well as Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Daloz’s (1986) Psychodevelopmental perspective of Transformational Learning (TLT) were all considered. With this guiding framework, we believe we have increased the validity of the work and potentially created a model to guide similar future research.

Application of a Cognitive Hierarchy Model

The Cognitive Hierarchy model (CHM) (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 2004) is an often used theory within human dimensions of wildlife literature, although to the best of our knowledge, it is only used sporadically outside of that scope. CHM suggests that people respond to animals based upon a closed inverted pyramid. Within this inverted pyramid, the hierarchy is arranged in layers from bottom to top: values, value orientations (basic belief patterns), attitudes/norms, behavioral intentions, and behaviors. Values are firm beliefs about preferred end states and appropriate modes of conduct (Schwartz, 2004) and are considered to be few in number, transcendent of situation, and slow to change. At the top of the inverted pyramid, behaviors are considered to be numerous, situation-specific, and faster to change. In between, value orientations lead to the development of attitudes/norms, which lead to behavioral intentions (see Figure 1) thereby completing the process by which values lead to behaviors.

CHM is frequently cited but can be scrutinized for its perhaps narrow view of the process by which humans respond to animals. Specifically, CHM has a closed, linear structure that does not readily consider emotional connections. To be clear, CHM is intended to help illuminate cognitive processes, an umbrella for which emotion does not necessarily stand under. However, CHM can be useful when examining processes conventionally ascribed to be cognitive; in this case, the practical or utilitarian value of a dog. According to CHM, one's overarching values influence their beliefs or value orientations. Those beliefs influence attitudes and, influenced by normative standards, attitudes influence behaviors/choices. Applied to a practical setting, one's values about life in general might influence their beliefs about animals, which would influence their attitudes, which would impact behaviors/choices/decisions related to dogs. In that sense, CHM could be applied to virtually anything for which a person could have an attitude, from animal species, people, education, food and so on. In the case of this study, CHM is considered in an effort to illustrate how a person may have been previously exposed to animals (including dogs) and what influences their previous experiences might have on their present values, attitudes, beliefs, etc.

To incorporate emotion, we consider two theories of learning: Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984, 2000) and Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) (Daloiz, 1986; Mezirow, 1991), both of which will frame our findings related to the emotional value of service dogs.

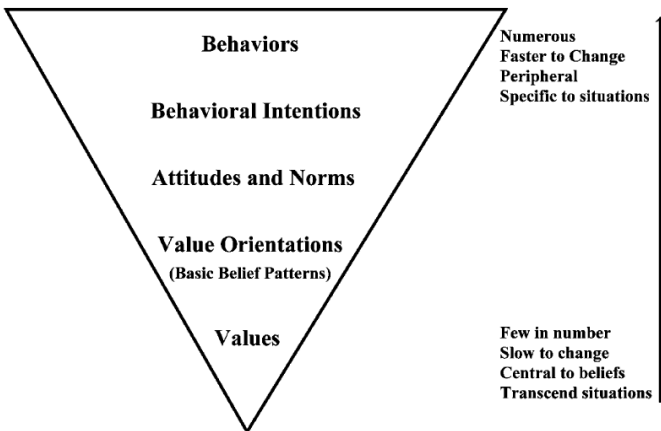


Figure 1. The Cognitive Hierarchy (Vaske & Donnelly, 1999)

Application of Experiential and Transformational Learning Theories

ELT serves as a way to consider how adults process and respond to information. Experiential learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Kolb (1984/2000) suggested that learning occurs on a continuous loop, from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization to active experimentation and back around again (see Figure 2). This experiential learning loop creates the knowledge that we bring with us into situations—in this case, into human-service dog interactions. It is with this frame of knowledge that people respond to their animals. It is our assertion that those reactions are not conscious cognitive processes initially, but instead, that they are emotional responses directly connected to their knowledge. In other words, emotion may be the bridge or the connective tissue that ties together previous knowledge with the process described in the cognitive hierarchy. Ballantyne, Packer, and Sutherland (2011) utilized ELT in their study of emotional responses to wildlife encounters in Australia and found that it explained many positive pre-dispositions toward animals as well as one’s likelihood to have an “emotional affinity” for certain species. These affinities manifested in respondents’ descriptions of feeling as though they had communicated with animals, or through the feeling that they were responsible for the animals’ well-being. Although human-wildlife interaction and human-animal bond research is not interchangeable, we feel it is appropriate to apply ELT in this instance as much of the aforementioned literature on the emotional connections reported that emotional connections were not confined to service animals, but seemed to stretch across both training and species lines.

TLT is similar to ELT, insofar as it serves as a way to consider how adults who experience “life-changing” events might respond to their new understandings. Popularized by Mezirow (1991), numerous authors have added to or altered nuances of the theory. The knowledge loop in TLT is very similar to that of ELT, as reflection is a requirement for shifts in knowledge and understanding to occur. Unique from ELT is the element of transformation, which occurs as a result of the reflection. O’Sullivan (2002) suggested that “Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions,” and “is a

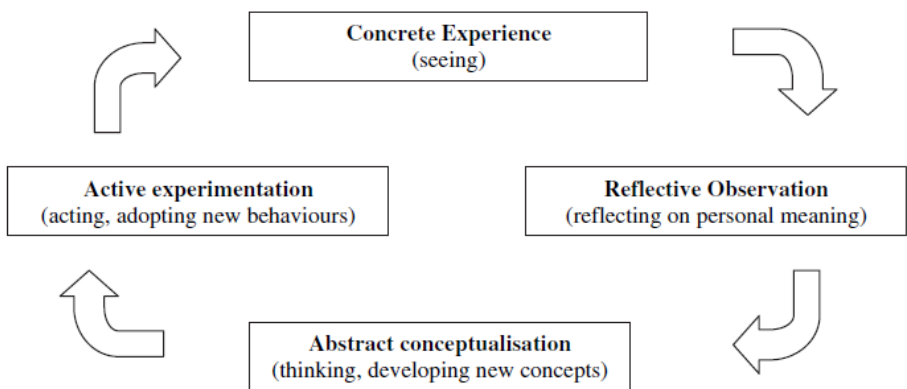


Figure 2. Experiential Learning cycle (Kolb, 1984)

shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world” (p. 18). This shift in how we see the world changes not only our view, but also our understandings, perceptions, beliefs, and values. CHM specifically notes the stability of values, so such transformative experiences, while rare, are incredibly significant.

Definitions of transformations are broad; in essence, a transformation is any dramatic shift of worldview or values. Although describing children, Solomon (2010) referred to the “transformative power that specially trained dogs seem to hold” (p. 143), and suggested that bonds with dogs could be the vehicle for dramatic personal shifts in people. Daloz’s (1986) view is particularly appropriate in this study, as he championed the importance of stories in developing deeper understandings of transformations. He saw transformations being affective and intuitive - a different view from Mezirow (1991), who believed transformations to be strictly cognitive or rational.

Methods

This study examined the roles of service dogs in the day-to-day lives of their human caretakers with relation to leisure choice and participation. As noted from the outset, the authors believed that—at least at this relative early stage of exploration—developing a deeper understanding of the human-service dog bond requires an approach that extends beyond the confines of surveys. With that in mind, the researchers utilized a qualitative approach, and specifically viewed our efforts through social constructivist paradigm (Schwandt, 1994). We believe that research of this type is a co-created process between researcher and subject.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone with participants with various disabilities who utilized service or guide dogs. Several open-ended questions were written in advance with the intention of allowing the participants to elaborate and take the questions in the direction of their interpretation. We believe this data collection strategy is most appropriate for this exploratory study as it allowed us the greatest opportunity to be guided by the participants’ understandings and allow participants to lead the interviewer where they wished to take their discussions. The result is much richer data that could not have been extracted via survey techniques.

Participants

Ten individuals between the ages of 26 and 64, including 6 females and 4 males, with various disabilities participated in semi-structured interviews. All participants had some type of visual impairment or were blind; one had visual and mobility impairments; two others had experienced previous short-term mobility impairments (broken bones). The mean age of participants was 53.7. Participants lived in both the United States and Canada. The interviews took place between the months of January and April 2012. Within the U.S., the participants lived in 9 states in both rural and urban areas. Three participants had owned one service dog, whereas others had owned as many as 10 service dogs.

Procedures

Participants were selected through snowball sampling utilizing a social network of individuals with disabilities who use service dogs as well as through online and service dog training connections. Participants with whom the researchers had personal knowledge were contacted via email to confirm their interest in participating and to schedule interviews. E-mail contact was also made with 16 service dog training agencies that forwarded our request for participants to their client lists. Several participants noted learning about the study through related online

Name	Age	Gender	Location	Disability type	# of service dogs	First service/guide dog	Described tasks
Doug	53	Male	Canada	Blind	1	2006	Mobility Socialization
Gia	56	Female	Alabama	Blind	1	2008	Mobility Safety
Gina	55	Female	Illinois	Blind	10	1975	Mobility
Cary	61	Male	Texas	Blind	2	2005	Mobility Safety
Laila	60	Female	Connecticut	Blind	3	1988	Mobility
John	26	Male	Texas	Blind	1	2007	Mobility Occupation
Elsa	42	Female	California	Blind	4	1988	Mobility Safety
Mara	68	Female	Minnesota	Blind & Mobility	9	1977	Mobility
Dana	64	Female	Florida & Oregon	Blind	2	1996	Mobility Socialization
Dale	52	Male	Canada	Blind	6	1981	Mobility Socialization

Figure 3. Participant Information

blogs and listservs. Respondents contacted the research team via e-mail, at which time they were able to ask questions and confirm their interest in participating. 12 potential participants contacted the research team; ten of whom committed to participating and completing interviews. Partial anonymity was maintained, as only e-mail addresses were used to identify participants. They are identified henceforth by pseudonyms.

Saturation was reached during the seventh interview, but interviews continued in an effort to bolster the strength of results. The first interview was utilized as a prototype in order to allow the interviewer to gain knowledge and make any necessary changes to the structure of the interview process. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and were recorded for transcription and analysis. Interview questions collected limited demographic data, but mostly intended to explore the relationship between service dog owners and how it impacted their leisure participation. For example, participants were asked, “Do you participate in any sports, leisure, or recreational activities with your service or guide dog and if yes, what activities?”, “How would you describe your relationship with your service dog?”, and “Do you feel that having a service dog has affected your leisure choice? Please explain”.

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected they were transcribed and then analyzed by the researchers. Subsequently, common themes were teased from the transcriptions. Field notes were taken in conjunction and post interview by the second author via code memos (Emerson, Fret, & Shaw, 1995). This process entailed utilization of open coding, then axial coding, and finally selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcriptions were read separately then in conjunction with the researchers' notes that were collected at the time of the interview. A color assigned coding strategy was utilized to categorize emergent themes and was reviewed multiple times in order to increase trustworthiness.

Results

Findings have been categorized based upon emergent themes that collected data illustrate throughout this section. Themes related to relationships between dog and owner included feelings of interdependence and mutual benefit and a lifelong emotional connection. Themes related to perceptions of and access to leisure included service dog orientation, the influence of lifestyle, and leisure opportunities in formal settings. The themes discussed are arranged similarly to how most interviews played out; specifically, interviewees chronicled a process by which physical needs were met, an emotional relationship developed, and subsequently, leisure opportunities emerged or were altered.

The relationships between service dogs and adults with disabilities

Interdependence and mutual benefit. Interviews revealed that the relationship that developed between adults with disabilities and their service dogs created a feeling of interdependence and a perceived mutually beneficial relationship because both the individuals with a disability and their service dogs have an implied connection inclusive of a multidirectional relationship. In other words, the owners depended on their service dog for certain services to assist with their daily living and leisure activities and conversely the service dog depended on their owner for proper care, feeding, walking, etc. This relationship was multidirectional because of the joint responsibilities between the two. Participants described their service dog assisting so they did not “fall off steps” or “run into anything.” Service dogs also often helped participants with navigating curb cuts and other obstacles they could not view in various contexts. Other words used to describe the interdependence included “dependable” and “partnership.” Gina, employing her first guide dog for a fourth year, expressed appreciation toward her dog for helping her walk around and not run into obstacles or other people. She explained that her main leisure activity is walking, which she believed is good for both her and her dog. Gina added, “I groom him every day and brush his teeth, check nails, clean ears once a week...he’s just so sweet!” She expressed a genuine enjoyment for taking care of him, especially because she felt as though he looked after her even when not in his work harness. Gia said her dog, “...loves to be brushed and it’s good exercise for my arms... I also do body massages...It is more bonding and brings us closer because you’re paying good attention to him.” Owners described a “high sense of safety” and “trust” needed for their service dog to provide the services for which they are trained. Similarly, when referring to taking care of his dog, Cary reported, “It is a form of relaxation for both of us. And it is a form of continuing the bond, and keeping the bond going.”

Also noteworthy is that the relationship between owner and dog is a process that differentiates itself from utilizing a cane. Canes are among the most heavily used assistive aids. Each interviewee has utilized a cane at some point in their life before making the decision to instead employ a service dog. Participants spoke at length about the ways in which service dog ownership was more effective and personally gratifying. Dana, who has used a guide dog since 1996, expressed,

In my experience I have seen that the persons working with a guide dog versus those with canes are more mobile, more employed, and they tend to be more engaged, and they tend to be more involved socially than people with canes.

Gia explained, “I personally have been blind for 42 years and I used a cane for the first 38 years all the time and then I decided to get a guide dog and I just love it.”

The developed relationship between service dog and owner also helped minimize the stress associated with everyday tasks such as grocery shopping. Explained Laila,

...I know if I had a cane, I wouldn't do as much walking as I do. It's not that I don't have the cane skills, but it is a lot more tiring to use the cane because you have to think about things and be more diligent, not that I am not diligent when I have a dog, but with a cane you can come across something in your path and you have to explore it, feel around it with your cane. Is this completely blocking the sidewalk? Which side is it better to go around? It's a lot more work with a cane.

Lifelong emotional connection. Emotional connections seemed to manifest almost immediately following placement, and continued throughout the life/death of the service dog. Owners need to learn how to use their service dog just as they would any other adaptive equipment. This process, however, was time consuming and required approximately one month of training for owners to learn the subtle nuances of direction from their dog, be appropriately matched with a dog, and develop their working relationship. John, the youngest interviewed participant (26 years of age), stated about his service dog, "it is uncanny because our personalities are extremely similar and that's a credit to the school I got him from. They did a wonderful job matching our personalities." John spoke compassionately about his relationship with his dog and how he utilized him within various contexts, including recreation and vocation for diverse needs even beyond that of the training intention. John in particular, being a teacher for children with disabilities, shared his affection toward his dog with his students, fiancée, and friends. John shared that his service dog was used as a "therapy guide" and "students read to my dog instead of me" when upset. Further John utilized his dog as an intervention because he felt that, "some of my students feel more comfortable talking to the dog about their problems instead of me as their teacher."

Emotional connectivity to service dogs was evident even when the match was not functional. In one such incident, a dog was utilized for one year but continually demonstrated behaviors that adversely affected the working relationship, so the dog was returned to the training school. Though the owner, Dale, did not want to keep the dog for functional purposes, he was still concerned with the treatment of the dog and spoke of him kindly.

If you're giving the dog back to them and they say you'll never see the dog again that's very hard. That's another reason why I went back to the school... because I get to make that decision about where he (his dog) goes and that kind of thing. I can't just let somebody else look after him. And so that's one of the main reasons that I went back. They don't have any say about where he goes or who gets to keep him. I am really pleased about that.

This demonstrated an initial sense of attachment to the service dog, and potentially a predisposition to animals as well. Elsa discussed that her third dog who she described as being a "lovely" did not get along well with her retired second guide dog. Elsa additionally said that when the dog was returned he "took a little piece of me when he left." These interviewees demonstrated a strong emotional connection to their dogs that extended beyond that of a formal working relationship. In each case, the dog did not meet the functional needs of the participants, yet an emotional connection remained.

All of the participants described a unique relationship that developed between them and each dog they had utilized. During the interview process, owners seemed to thoroughly enjoy

answering questions relative to their relationship with current and past dogs. Cary, a participant working with his second dog, affectionately described the relationship:

The guide dog becomes your partner, your best friend, your protector, it's kind of hard to explain the bond you develop with a service animal. I have had other dogs as pets but it's totally different having the guide dog. They are very good, they watch out for you, they follow you everywhere, they don't protect you, but they are protective of you.

Another participant, John, stated that his guide dog was, "... an extension of myself. In a nutshell he is a friend, a utility, and a child all in one in a lot of ways." The fondness in speaking about ones' service dog was evident in the rich description and positive terminology used to describe the bonding between the two. Similarly, Mara, who used a wheelchair and a service dog claimed, "I just love being with him.... He is a huge part of my life." Mara expressed that even when her physical needs fluctuated due to disability she always wanted to keep her service dog and that they were "madly in love with each other" and her current dog was a "character and lots of fun."

Although he is currently with his sixth dog, including one that was returned, Dale stated that, "I've got good memories of all my dogs." Even owners who have had multiple dogs throughout the years were able to quickly list off the names, breeds, and personality descriptions of each of their dogs. Gina, who is on her 10th guide dog and has had a dog since 1975, listed the names of each of her dogs without pause and provided a reminiscent, fond emotive and physical description of each.

Typically, owners did not have "favorite" dogs, due to the diverse personalities and relationships experienced with each. However, two participants agreed that their first dog was special. Mara explained that she did not realize how special her first guide dog was until she had experienced other dogs. Mara summed up how she felt about the differing personalities and relationships experienced with each dog: "They are just such a joy; they know when you need a laugh. Every dog I have had, they all have such different personalities, just like people. No two are the same. They all have things that they love to do." The other participant, Elsa, favoring her first dog said, "The first one, she was a wonderful girl, unfortunately I didn't know then just how very special she was. She was a wonderful worker and very calm and confident and nothing would phase her."

The unique emotional connection between owner and service dog manifested throughout the duration of the partnership; however, particularly strong emotions were evidenced when the dog reached retirement age. For a service dog, "retirement age" is the time when it can no longer perform all of their functional necessities. In several cases, owners formed a deep connection with their service dogs that lasted longer than the service provided. Dana described losing a dog to which both she and her husband were emotionally connected as, "...the emotional attachment is like a river that runs from one to the next. The tide comes in and the tide comes out.... I just see that as a fluid emotional bond from one dog to the next." This particular participant and her husband went to great lengths to assure her retired guide dog was comfortable and maintained a high quality of life past that of his service to her. Dana kept her dog when he was officially retired from working. When the dog became ill, she rearranged her schedule and behaviors and took great care to assist in the dog's health and end of life arrangements. This included Dana traveling separately for work from her husband and her husband providing hospice care for the retired dog.

"It's never fun to say goodbye to a friend," said Dale. "Because these dogs spend all this time with us, they become a part of us." Many participants felt that they needed to find homes

for their dogs when the dogs reached a point where they could not provide services to them. Often retired dogs were given to family members or friends to ensure that the dog was taken care of appropriately after their retirement. Elsa, when speaking about one such dog said, "I still miss him, he took a little piece of me when he left." The emotional connection of the service dog outlasted the service provided by the dog when the dog became ill, passed away, or was too old to work effectively. In some cases, guide dogs were described as being kept past their functional peak as owners were not yet ready to retire their dogs and felt they needed to take care of their dog. Other owners were careful and ensured that they could keep their retired dog when getting a new guide dog. While some details differed, each retirement circumstance had the common characteristic demonstrating that a close emotional connection had been cultivated and that the owners genuinely cared for their dog past the point of servitude.

The Role of Service/Guide Dogs in Owners' Perceptions of Leisure and their Perceived Access to Leisure

Service dog orientation in leisure contexts. The emotional connection between owner and service/guide dog affected how the negotiation of leisure activities occurred. The overarching perception by all interviewees was that having a service dog was a positive influence. Owners reported participating in leisure activities including walking, hiking, swimming, tandem bicycling, bowling, going to movies, boating, fishing, dancing, races/track/gambling, theatre shows, knitting, choir, working out at the gym, sunbathing at the beach, canoeing, attending book club, and intramural sports/games.

Participants depended on their service dogs for a sense of safety, socialization, and emotional support, which seemed to influence, but not constrain their leisure involvement. The needs of the owner, dog, and others participating in the leisure activity were considered when deciding if their dog would accompany the owner. On occasion, placing their dogs' comfort above or equal to their own leisure preference was oftentimes their ideal choice. Mara explained,

With all of my guide dogs, I have found that traveling is really fun but I also find traveling in an unfamiliar place with a guide dog is actually more stressful. I worry about if the dog is doing OK with a harness on for hours and hours? Is there a good place to relieve? Is it safe for me to go out at night so he can relieve? So there are many times when I have gone on vacation, for example Disneyworld, where I have intentionally not brought my dog because I just felt like it would stress the dog and it would stress me.

Taking into account how others would feel about their service dog was also an important factor for owners. Gia, who is with her first guide dog, explained,

If I go swimming, like in someone's pool, I don't let him just jump in the pool, you need to be considerate of other people, but when I do go to the lake he swims at the lake. So I enjoy going to the lake.

However, while the dogs' needs were always considered, Gia spoke about accommodating others who may participate with her in leisure, saying,

He gets along with the rest of the family and everything, but I don't put him before all my friends and family. I heard some people go off the scale with it, and I am not that way. When I go to someone's house, I ask if they mind if he comes; and if they do, I make other arrangements.

These considerations affected their leisure; however, participants did not describe it negatively. Additional planning was involved when making arrangements for leisure activities; however, this planning was dismissed as a barrier to leisure. When asked if having a service dog restricted ones' activities or if their activities had changed since owning a dog, all respondents either replied "no" or that having a service dog affected their leisure positively. Rather, planning was viewed as part of the responsibility of having a service dog. Participants seemed to express a genuine concern and consideration of their service dog when planning leisure activities but always explained that while their dog placed additional consideration on them it was not a drawback; it was merely part of their choice to have a service dog. According to Gia, "He is just a part of me really. I can't think of any (leisure) I haven't done."

Additionally, when asked, "Do you consider taking care of your dog a form of leisure?" most participants had never thought of their obligation to their dogs in that way. Offering participants this opportunity for reflection was well received by participants. Participants felt that taking care of their service dog was simultaneously both leisure and a responsibility. Tasks such as brushing or playing with one's dog on a daily basis were described as being mutual leisure for both Laila and her dog. Laila, who is with her fourth service dog, expressed her joy at taking care of dogs by further volunteering to be a puppy raiser for potential service/guide dogs. Cary also said for him caring for his dog "is a form of relaxation for both of us. And it is a form of continuing the bond, and keeping the bond going." Using a service dog in leisure activities, even as simple as walking was described with a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment. Dana stated,

When I am out with him, I have a tremendous sense of pride, partnership, and gratitude that I feel without him at my side, I wouldn't be as prominent a walker, getting to do what I want/ need to do, without a second thought.

Influence of lifestyle on leisure choice. Though participants did not identify their service dog as a constraint to leisure, the dog's presence during leisure pursuits influenced corresponding decisions. For example, Gia went on trips with an organization for individuals with no eye perception, which involved busing for several hours. Gia explained that she did not bring her dog with her because there would not be sufficient space for her dog to be comfortable: "I have to look out for him, too. I mean, I could bring him, he could lay at my feet, but would it really be good to have him scrunched up at my feet for those hours?" Gia preferred in this case to leave her dog with her husband so she was not stressed out about the additional planning and her dog could have more appropriate care.

Though not identified as "constraints," several factors directly or indirectly related to service dog ownership were cited for nonparticipation in leisure. These included time, opportunity, geographic location, physical structures, age, and transportation.

Using a service or guide dog was deemed as a positive influence on leisure as it encouraged socialization and physical activity. Laila enjoyed walking for leisure, and explained how her service dog's presence improved the experience:

The public seems to interact with me better than they would if I didn't have a dog. I noticed that when I used to have a cane until high school graduation people wouldn't interact with me as much as they do when I have a dog.

Similarly, Gina said, "When we go walking, it's just time we spend together and I just feel free. I can do what I want to do, go where I want to go, and he will keep me safe." Her perceived safety allowed Gina to interact more freely with others and her surroundings. Such a finding is similar to conclusions reached in previous research. For Gina, consciously or not, a primary benefit of

service dog ownership had become the sense of security, comfort, and autonomy that enabled her to go out and potentially engage with others through her walks.

Discussion

This study continued the process of illuminating the emotional connections that exist between humans and their service dogs. Moreover, we explored the leisure-related impacts of these bonds and examined concerns related to the human-canine matching process. Consistent, heart-felt human-animal bonds were present across our sample, with the relationships perceived to be mutually beneficial. Our interviews suggested that participants did not feel constrained in leisure by taking their service dogs' needs into account; however, they still accommodated and planned their activities—at least in part—around the needs of their dogs. To the best of our knowledge, this is a unique finding. In several instances, interviewees suggested that at least occasionally they would alter their leisure pursuits based on their perceptions of the dogs' preferences. Believing they knew what was best for their service dogs, humans negotiated compromises they perceived to be most appropriate for both person and canine. People believed that by avoiding certain places they would minimize stress on their service dog. Participants often took into account if their canine would enjoy their activity, how others would perceive interacting with their dog, and if they themselves wanted their dog to be with them or not. Most notable is the belief that they did not feel constrained by such decisions; rather they indicated that their own stress and guilt levels were lower, because while the dogs were placed for human benefit, the humans also identified themselves as caretakers of the dogs.

Somewhat unexpectedly, participants shared emotionally painful narratives of loss related to the service dog retirement process and death. Such instances provided us with fodder for further exploration. Specifically, though the anguish associated with losing an animal has been previously documented, it is rarely considered in the contexts of service dog ownership or leisure in general. With time and proximity, close relationships and emotional connections form between human and dog that are similar to human-human friendship. Just as with human friendships, those between people and animals “are characterized by commitment and ambivalence, rewards and problems, connectedness and loss” (Sanders, 2003). Dogs tend to have far shorter life spans than humans, offering up the possibility that a person might have several service dogs during their lifetime. Dealing with emotions such as disappointment and loss are not often factored into decisions about service dogs, and little is known about what tools people have to cope with animal loss.

Although our interviews yielded unexpected themes, they can still be framed by the principles of our guiding theories. Perhaps of greatest significance is the application of parts of the Cognitive Hierarchy Model to service animals. CHM has been applied to wildlife-related research for decades, however its application to companion and service animal research was largely unsubstantiated. CHM's potential applicability to human-service dog-related literature was most clearly demonstrated with what was reported to be some degree of affinity for dogs even prior to reception of a service dog. Specifically, all respondents reported that abstractly speaking they had positive views of dogs in many cases well before owning a service dog. In this study, as is supported by the CHM, we suggest that values developed early in life have a relationship with the eventual behavior of possessing a dog. Unclear is whether a negative value of dogs early in life might lead people with disabilities to avoid contact with service dogs in adulthood.

Not only did our findings support the CHM, but the Experiential Learning Theory held true insofar as participants demonstrated a keen ability to reflect upon and refine the meanings

associated with their experiences. In other words, CHM predicted service dog ownership, while ELT predicted those values and beliefs would grow more sophisticated with additional experience and reflection. Although people enjoyed dogs before having a service dog, their appreciation for not only their dog but dogs in general, was enhanced by ownership. Such a process of reflection and reframing of knowledge and understanding is precisely what ELT predicted.

Less clear are the implications for future utilization of Transformational Learning Theory (Daloiz, 1986; Mezirow, 1991). Transformational experiences are considered to be those that lead to a noticeable and immediate shift in values and/or worldview. Interviewees did not clearly describe such a narrative. However, two situations involving perceived mistreatment of an unsuccessfully paired dog led to an immediate behavior shift in the form of the person choosing not to support the offending agencies. Such instances are important components of interviewees' narratives, but we cannot say without hesitation that these are manifestations of TLT. As an additional note, experiences such as the death of a service dog have the potential for owner transformations. Future studies might consider specific lines of questioning related to the ways in which owners processed the death of their service dogs, thereby shedding additional light on the value of TLT. Due to the changing policy pertaining to use of service dogs it is relevant to learn about the full scope of benefits and services provided through service dogs to their owners - even those that are unintended. Specific to leisure literature, there is a lack of information on individuals with disabilities who use service dogs and the impact that this resource has on leisure participation.

Limitations

The very nature of this exploratory study allows for limitations. The importance of narrative rather than statistics in depicting emotional relationships offers a nonquantitative approach that might be easily dismissed by some. However, it is our hope that thick description and increasingly sophisticated theoretical frameworks will allow us new vantage points from which to explore this topic quantitatively.

Moreover, the snowball sample technique exclusively yielded participants who are blind. This may or may not be problematic, as we do not have a comparison group from which to make inferences. While we have no reason to believe that participants who are blind would have different beliefs or behaviors than adults with other disabilities, we cannot make that statement without further research.

Conclusions

Implications for Policy and Practice

By recognizing connections or potential for connections between people and service dogs, policy makers might exercise more care in service dog placement. The ways in which an emotionally significant relationship with a service dogs affect the owners' leisure behaviors and recreational participation choices should be further explored and examined as data support positive impacts on the owners' life. If more knowledge is acquired, potential limitations to participation in various leisure activities can be reduced and become more inclusive of individuals with disabilities who utilize canine assistance.

Although service dogs are not pets and should not be misconstrued as such, there is evidence that they provide emotional support that is similar to those of companion animals. While the ADA does not recognize this as a reason to be given a service dog, failure to acknowledge this secondary benefit may have adverse implications for owners and potential service dog owners.

Clearly, emotional support is not the primary reason for dog placement. However, we posit that it does deserve consideration in matters of service dog retention. Dogs are not interchangeable, with each having unique attributes. Although their physical status may improve, owners cannot necessarily just “get a new dog” and have the same emotional bond or working relationship. Service dogs are placed with people for the health and benefits of the person; losing the service dog has the potential to cause emotional harm or a negative emotional transformation. In turn, we believe that consideration should be given to service dog caretakers if they prefer to retain their service dogs even if their physical condition has improved.

Valentine et al. (1993) identified two ways in which policy might be sculpted to ensure beneficial outcomes for people utilizing service dogs: first, social workers should be involved in promoting the placement and training of service dogs where appropriate and should be instructed about the emotional and psychological impacts of service dog ownership; and second, in situations in which service dogs and people are no longer able or allowed to work together, Valentine et al. suggested people should be offered grief counseling to prepare for and/or deal with the loss. “Recognizing the importance of the bond between owner and service dog when conducting individual or family therapy with individuals with disabilities would also be a critical component of clinical work” (p. 123).

Finally, Timmins (2008) considered how the well-being of service animals can be measured and managed. Timmins noted that stress impacts for some service dogs might be quite high as they are unwillingly placed in unfamiliar situations. To this point, human benefits are increasingly well documented, but impacts on the dogs are less clear. Answers to related questions will likely only come if researchers and practitioners work together to design mutually agreed upon measures. Regardless, the questions bear asking.

The connection between owner and service/guide dog is a deeply complex relationship that develops past the confines of servitude. While attachment takes time to evolve, an immediate connection is common and even enhances the working relationship as trust and interdependency grows. The interdependent relationship creates a mutual sense of enjoyment that is reflective of the service dog orientation within leisure participation, influence of lifestyle on leisure choice, and the retirement/transition process experienced by participants within this study.

Experiential learning leading to a more sophisticated understanding of having a service dog is evident, in that once participants first utilized a service dog, all have continued and plan to continue to do so. Additionally, several participants extended their involvement in disability and animal relationship experiences through awareness/education about disability including being active within their respective disability communities. Owners take great consideration to plan for the care of their service dog in relation to their leisure choice and participation.

The relationship between owner and service dog is representative of an in-depth and holistic sense of human and animal bond inclusive of servitude, emotional connection, and deeper complexity through the lens of leisure involvement. Specific to this point is the retirement/transition process and the emotional stress experienced by owners during this time. The context and participation of leisure further offers perspective into the relationship process of space, bond, and interdependence between owner and service dog. The potential and active benefits of a service dog are prevalent and engulfing, suggesting its merit for additional empirical study. The effects of the connection between the owner and service dog offers insight into the dialogue between where the person is and their experiential learning process of relating to an animal and living with an impairment. Indeed, with further exploration, we might fulfill the ambitions of Haraway (*Harvard University Gazette*, 2002, via Solomon, 2010) and move both our literatures and our ideologies in the direction of “elsewhere.”

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