The Use of Service Dogs as an Adaptive Strategy: A Qualitative Study

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Objective. The purpose of this study was to describe, qualitatively, the use of service dogs by persons with physical disabilities and the meaning of this experience.

Method. Five service dog owners were observed and interviewed on multiple occasions through an ethnographic approach.

Results. Identified themes were increased community participation, “closer than family,” increased social contact, personal skill development, having fun, responsibility, adjustment, challenges, independence, “someone to watch over me,” and “feel like an able-bodied person.”

Conclusion. Service dogs are used to enhance independence in occupational performance areas and contribute to improvements in psychosocial functioning. Given these benefits, service dogs could be viewed as a form of assistive technology that occupational therapists may want to consider as an alternative to traditional devices for some clients.

Although occupational therapists commonly recommend assistive devices to compensate for functional deficits, the abandonment rate for these devices has been estimated to be as high as 75%, highlighting the importance for therapists to make appropriate equipment recommendations that best match their clients’ needs (Scherer & Galvin, 1994). One alternative that could be viewed as a form of assistive technology is the use of service dogs to provide compensatory functions both at home and in the community (Hanebrink & Dillon, 2000).

Service dogs 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). In addition to increasing independence in these occupational performance areas, service dog ownership also has been shown to have important psychosocial benefits, such as improved self-esteem, increased social interaction, decreased stress, and greater internal locus of control (Eddy, Hart, & Boltz, 1988; Mader, Hart, & Bergin, 1989; Valentine, Kiddoo, & LaFleur, 1993; Winkler, Fairnie, Gericevich, & Long, 1989). Despite these benefits, most occupational therapists do not recommend service dogs as a means of compensation for functional deficits (Zapf, 1998). Considering the high rate of abandonment for other assistive devices, it may be useful for therapists to consider service dogs as a potential alternative for some clients.
Background

Assistive Technology

According to the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals With Disabilities Act of 1988 (Public Law 100–407), assistive technology is defined as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (§ 00.16). The use of assistive technology has been shown to have significant benefits, including increased environmental control and greater independence in all occupational performance areas (Campbell, 1991; Dickey & Shealey, 1987; McDonald, Boyle, & Schumann, 1989; Platts & Fraser, 1993). Clients who use assistive technology have also reported improvements in psychosocial factors, such as social interaction and self-esteem (Swinth, 1997). Despite these benefits, assistive technology has been shown to have major drawbacks, including cost, device mobility, and high rates of abandonment, among others (Carey & Sale, 1994; Todis & Walker, 1993).

Quality of life issues were frequently cited as predictors of assistive technology use or disuse (Scherer, 1993; Swinth, 1997). Swinth (1997) found that adolescents differentiated assistive technology into two categories: one that separated them from their peers by emphasizing their differences and technology that united them with their peers by providing tools for social interaction and independence. The adolescents in her study also described the effects of technology on their perceived autonomy, noting that assistive technology provided an increased opportunity for independence but, at times, fostered feelings of dependence because of their need to rely on the technology for so many functions. These quality of life issues of social interaction and autonomy may substantially influence satisfaction with assistive devices and must be accounted for in the assistive technology selection process.

Service Dogs as an Alternative Assistive Technology Solution

One potential adaptation for occupational performance limitations that occupational therapists rarely recommend is the use of a service dog (Zapf, 1998). Service dogs are specially trained to help persons with disabilities to maximize their independence in a variety of performance areas (Delta Society, 2000). Because service dog training is tailored to match specific client needs, the particular tasks that a service dog performs vary. Some examples of these duties are moving laundry from the washer to the dryer, giving money or a credit card to a cashier, dialing 911 or alerting passersby of an emergency, retrieving a ringing telephone, and opening the door for a delivery person (Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Delta Society, 2000; Sunderlin, 1999; Zarbock, 1997). Given these functions, service dogs could be considered a form of assistive technology under the Technology Act in that they also are “used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.” The State of Montana Medicaid Program has recently acknowledged this classification by expanding its reimbursement of assistive technology to include the purchase and upkeep of service dogs for persons with disabilities on the basis of assessment findings of an interdisciplinary team, including an occupational therapist (Rough, 2000).

Several popular press articles have described how service dogs can increase the participation and independence of persons with disabilities (Sunderlin, 1999; Zarbock, 1997). Seldom, however, have service dogs been studied through a rigorous methodology that would allow generalizability to a larger population. In a rare randomized controlled study, Allen and Blascovich (1996) assigned 48 adult participants with severe mobility disabilities to either an experimental group that received service dogs 1 month after the study began or to a control group that received service dogs only at the completion of the study. The experimental group demonstrated significant increases in school attendance, part-time employment, use of public transportation, and community integration measures. This group also experienced a 68% decrease in paid or unpaid assistance hours. Five of these participants moved to more independent living situations, and others reported plans to move provided that they could find residences where their service dogs would be welcomed. The control group demonstrated similar improvements after receiving their dogs. The longitudinal, experimental design of this study provided dramatic evidence of improvements in functional independence after service dog acquisition.

Other researchers have studied improvements in social interactions after service dog acquisition (Eddy et al., 1988; Fick, 1993; Hart, Hart, & Bergin, 1987; Mader et al., 1989). Eddy et al. (1988) examined the social acknowledgments (e.g., smiles, conversation, eye contact, touch) that adults with physical disabilities received in a shopping mall and a university campus with and without a service dog present. Participants with a service dog present received significantly more social acknowledgments and fewer episodes of gaze aversion or path avoidance than the participants without a service dog present. In a follow-up study, Mader et al. (1989) found similar results with child participants between 10 and 15 years of age who were observed both on a school playground and in a shopping mall with or without a service dog present. These studies suggest a socializing effect of service dog ownership that may help to counteract the documented social barriers often experienced by persons with disabilities (Schneider & Anderson, 1980).

The interaction between persons and their service dogs has also been shown to improve psychological factors, such as self-esteem, internal locus of control, and assertiveness, and to decrease depression and loneliness (Allen &
Blascovich, 1996; Fick, 1993; Valentine et al., 1993; Winkler et al., 1989). In Valentine et al.’s (1993) survey of 24 service dog owners, 90% reported that they felt safer, less lonely, and more independent since acquiring their dog. Of the participants with mobility impairments, all indicated that they had “more freedom to be capable” (p. 117) since acquiring their dogs.

Despite these documented psychosocial and occupational performance benefits, service dogs are not commonly recommended by occupational therapists as an adaptive strategy. In a survey of 43 occupational therapists, Zapf (1998) found that of the 74.4% who assessed their clients’ assistive technology needs, only 27% had ever considered using a service dog as a potential adaptation. This discrepancy may be partly explained by limited empirical research on the use of service dogs from an occupational therapy perspective.

Virtually all service dog research has been done from the perspective of social work and traditional medical models (Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Eddy et al., 1988; Hart et al., 1987; Valentine et al., 1993). Findings from this research provide convincing evidence that improvements in functional independence and psychological factors can be achieved through service dog ownership. However, research does not explore why or how service dogs facilitated these improvements, nor does it identify factors in the service dog–owner interaction that promote a successful match to the owners’ needs. Research that examines these issues is essential to lay the groundwork from which therapists can consider service dog recommendations when assessing potential adaptations for their clients with physical disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to describe, qualitatively, the use of service dogs by persons with physical disabilities and to understand the meaning of this experience for these service dog owners. Findings document the ways in which service dogs promote independence in occupational performance areas and increase the information available to occupational therapists about this adaptive strategy.

Method

Design

I used an ethnographic approach, combining interviews and observation, to describe the use of service dogs as an adaptive strategy by persons with physical disabilities (Spradley, 1979). The “insider perspective” derived from this research approach is well suited to the client-centered philosophy of occupational therapy and provides a rich description of the phenomenon and meaning of service dog ownership. Furthermore, a qualitative approach was chosen because the use of service dogs as an adaptive strategy has not been well studied. I hoped that the depth of description afforded by this qualitative approach would be useful for generating future research questions.

Participants

Participants included five persons with mobility impairments (3 men, 2 women) who owned service dogs at the time of the study. Persons who had owned their service dogs for less than 6 months, did not obtain their service dogs through an established service dog training program, or used their dogs solely for seizure alert, hearing deficits, or visual impairments were excluded from the study.

Four participants were nominated in accordance with Krefting’s (1991) guidelines, which suggest that nomination of a sample increases the transferability of themes by selecting informants who are considered representative of a population. These service dog owners were nominated by the director of the Delta Society Service Dog Resource Center, which disseminates information on the use of service dogs and establishes national standards on their training. Emphasis was placed on nominating persons of varied age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and time since service dog acquisition in an effort to begin to characterize the variability of the experience of service dog ownership.

A fifth participant, John, was included in the study after a local newspaper article was run that described his use of a service dog to complement other assistive devices he owned. He was the state distributor for electronic aids for daily living, and I hoped that his experience using both a service dog and other assistive technology would provide a unique perspective on the research question. Table 1 details the participants’ demographic information. All names of participants and their dogs have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Procedure

After approval by the university Institutional Review Board, the director of the Service Dog Resource Center nominated potential participants and provided their con-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Paid Hours Assistance a Week</th>
<th>Time Owned Current Dog (Years)</th>
<th>Time Owned Service Dogs (Years)</th>
<th>Name of Dog</th>
<th>Age of Dog (Years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>T-5 SCI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seena</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy and lupus</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Muscular dystrophy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Rheumatoid arthrits and spina bifida</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>C-1 SCI</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Dakota</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note. SCI = spinal cord injury.
tact information with their permission. All nominated persons who volunteered to participate in repeated interviews and observations were included. Each gave written consent to participate in the research, including being audiotaped and videotaped.

Data were collected primarily through observation and interview in the participants’ homes or during community outings. I used Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interview technique to collect interview data so that the experience of service dog ownership could be characterized using the participants’ language and perspectives. Before undertaking the research, I practiced this interview approach with a researcher experienced in Spradley’s technique.

I began with a single grand tour question, “Tell me about owning a service dog.” I followed with open-ended questions to elaborate on topics introduced by the participants within the framework of the following four guiding concerns:

1. How is the service dog used as an adaptive strategy to increase independence in occupational performance?
2. What perceived benefits does the service dog provide for the owner?
3. What perceived drawbacks does the service dog have for the owner?
4. What is the meaning of the interaction between person and service dog for the owner?

Two to three interviews, each lasting approximately 1 hr, were performed with each participant. Follow-up interviews were used to confirm and expand on themes identified during the first interview. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. In addition, I recorded detailed observations in field notes of the interactions between owners and their service dogs and of their use of service dogs to assist with tasks. A portion of these observations was videotaped for later analysis. Observations served as a method of triangulation of data sources to increase the credibility of findings in accordance with Guba’s model (as cited in Kretting, 1991). I maintained a field journal to enhance credibility by (a) documenting the research process to provide an auditable trail and (b) examining my own thoughts, perspectives, and preconceptions.

Before undertaking this study, I volunteered with a service dog training program for 12 months and attended the Delta Society’s National Service Dog Conference as a means of enhancing prolonged engagement. Before beginning this study, I spent approximately 150 hr talking with service dog owners, health care workers, dog trainers, and service dog educators about their experiences with service dogs. Though data were not collected for analysis during this period, these experiences provided additional background from which I could begin to analyze data gathered from the participants.

Data Analysis

Interview content and observations were analyzed and coded into descriptive themes with NUD*IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997) as well as by hand. A semantic network (i.e., a web of phrases and concepts) was also created to understand how themes were connected in the minds of the participants (Good, 1977).

Data were recoded repeatedly both with NUD*IST and by hand as a means of triangulating data sources. Confirmations and inconsistencies among the interview themes and the videotaped interactions were examined in an effort to best characterize the participants’ perspectives.

Common Themes in the Experience of Owning a Service Dog

Themes that may help to guide occupational therapists when considering whether to recommend a service dog were identified for each of the four guiding concerns of this study. These themes are detailed as follows in reference to these four concerns.

Service Dogs as an Adaptive Strategy

Participants used their service dogs as an adaptive strategy to compensate for physical deficits, such as limited range of motion, strength, motor control, and endurance. They used their dogs to perform specific tasks to increase their independence in a number of performance areas and to increase their ability to participate in community activities.

Assistance with daily tasks. Participants’ used their service dogs to assist with mobility, bracing to get up, opening doors, turning on and off lights, retrieving the telephone, placing clothing in the laundry, and other tasks specific to their individual needs. By far, the most common task that participants used their service dogs for was to retrieve dropped items. As Megan said, “He is worth his weight in gold just for picking things up that I drop.” The participants described how their dogs did this task automatically, often without being given the command. For example, Megan described an incident in which she was unaware that she had dropped a $10 bill while they were in the grocery store until her dog, Sam, picked it up and set it on her lap.

The participants readily adapted this task of retrieving items to match their specific needs. For example, Seena used her dog to get her water bottle when she was in the gym and to bring her food from the refrigerator so that she could conserve her energy for other activities. Megan frequently had Sam retrieve her medicine bottle when her arthritis was inflamed and her hands were “shaky.”
The American Journal of Occupational Therapy

Retrieval was not limited to small items, as Megan described, “On days when my hands are sore, picking up the phone book is out of the question. [Sam] has grabbed a phone book and [dragged] it to me.”

For John, a university student with quadriplegia resulting from a spinal cord injury at the C-1 level, his dog’s ability to open doors was even more important than retrieval. John described how he previously had to wait outside between classes, often on cold winter days, until someone passed by who could open the door. With his dog, Dakota, he was able to access university buildings and other public places without additional assistance. As he put it, “Before I had no control if I needed to get in or out, so I have really used the door part since I got her.” Although he owned two electronic aids for daily living that he had used to open doors at home before acquiring his service dog, Dakota had taken over this task.

Other participants also used their dogs to substitute for some of the functions of assistive technology. Jason said, “[My dog] is like a $10,000 wheelchair, and yet I get much more out of him.” Seena described her experience with assistive technology in this way, “A piece of equipment is a piece of equipment. You use it, but you don’t really bond with it. Pretty soon it will break down and then you will have trouble getting funding to get a new one.” Although Seena owned some assistive technology, she said that she preferred to use her service dog because the dog could complete tasks more quickly and easily than Seena could by using the equipment herself.

**Increased participation.** All of the participants described an increase in their participation in activities since acquiring their service dogs. The specific ways that their dogs helped to enhance their participation varied. For Jason, his dog pulled his wheelchair during sports or along the beach, replacing the recreation that he had lost after his spinal cord injury and a subsequent broken arm that did not heal properly. He described his dog’s impact on his recreation as follows:

> I broke my left arm in 1984, and my life changed dramatically. No more sports, no more physical activities, and no more hanging around with those people that I did them with. All of a sudden a huge part of my life was gone. Well, this dog renewed it and brought it back.

He expressed his dog’s importance, saying,

> You have this huge amount of choices recreating with friends, and I just do a few of them. So you take away that dog, all of a sudden, my number 1, and not just my number 1, but 80% of my recreation goes away.

Both Seena and Megan used their service dogs to complete tasks that would require large amounts of energy, such as loading the laundry or making the bed. Megan said:

> Having a service dog, I will do things that I wouldn’t have done without him. I will go to the mall and spend 3 hr window shopping, where if I didn’t have him I would spend a 1/2 hr because I am tired and sore.

Without their dogs, both women believed that they would not have the endurance to participate in a large percentage of their productive and leisure activities.

For Brian, his service dog increased his opportunities to participate in activities indirectly by enhancing his confidence when going out alone: “I feel a lot more secure. I feel like I can go anywhere now. I feel like I am an able-bodied person.” John believed that his service dog enhanced his ability to participate in community activities directly by opening doors to allow him access. He reported that having a service dog gave him “a lot more opportunities to do things. She allows me to go places by myself.” Without his service dog, John reported that he would not go out nearly as often because he would have to rely on other people for help.

**Benefits of Service Dog Ownership**

Participants identified a variety of benefits that they had gained from owning a service dog, including companionship, independence, increased self-esteem, security, increased social contact, skill development, and fun. As Jason put it, “Without a doubt, people don’t have a clue about the amount of rewards you are going to get out of a dog.”

> **Closer than family.** Participants’ relationships with their dogs were by far the most common topic they discussed. Seena characterized this experience by saying, “She is closer than family to me and like no other relationship I will ever have again.” The other participants also described how their dogs provided love, support, friendship, and laughter.

> Brian: “He is there all the time, more than any person ever could be. More than anyone.”

> Megan: “One of the real bright spots about him if I am having a bad day [is] he will make me laugh.”

> Jason: “I think the biggest thing my dog gave me was love.”

> John: “It’s just having somebody here. I don’t know how to put it into words. Sometimes it’s just better to have the companionship of a dog than to have the environmental part do all the work.”

Participants talked about their relationships with their dogs more than any other topic. For some, this relationship was even more important than the tasks that the dog could perform. Jason, for example, said that the relationship accounted for 90% of the benefits he received from his dog. He said, “The two biggest [benefits] are nonjudgmental love and acceptance.” More often, however, participants expressed the relational benefits as inseparable from the physical task benefits, as Brian described: “I got the dog to assist with the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges, I think that is a real good deal.”

**Social acknowledgments.** Participants also described how their service dogs greatly increased their opportunities to develop relationships with others. All talked about how many more passersby made eye contact or initiated conversations when they had their dogs with them. John described this experience as follows:

> People see the dog and then they see me. It’s a step in the right direc-
that bridge between man and the rest of society.”

**Personal skill development.** Another benefit that participants identified was the development of personal skills. Jason said, “It was tremendously rewarding learning different skills.” He described how his experience owning service dogs had helped him to develop the skills of being consistent, giving praise, and showing emotion. Before he received his first dog, he said that he had been very angry about his injury and had difficulty expressing emotion. He discovered, however, that part of maintaining the dog’s optimal performance was the ability to give praise and show affection when the dog acted appropriately. He developed these abilities, and others, as he learned dog-handling skills. He described how these skills carried over into other relationships as well as into his school presentations, helping him to interact more effectively with people.

Brian similarly noted how he had learned the importance of consistency when handling his service dog. Because his dog had not completed as much training as the others in this study, he had experienced many challenges with getting the dog to follow commands consistently. Although these challenges had been frustrating, he said, in reference to the training, “I have done a lot of that and it is rewarding…he is really coming along.”

Other participants also identified skills that they had developed through ongoing training with their dogs and community interactions. Seena talked about being a shy and unassertive person before acquiring her service dog. She learned to be more assertive when faced with persons who tried to deny her dog access to community venues. For example, she described a situation at the gym when a man tried to tell her that her dog was not allowed to enter. Despite feeling intimidated, she brought her dog in any- way, knowing that this was her legal right. Seena said, “Over time, he began to realize that there is no big deal about this woman and this dog being here.” She credited her dog for helping her to have the confidence to make this assertive stance and for putting her into situations in which she was able to develop this skill.

**Having fun.** When asked about their experiences owning a service dog, almost all participants described how much fun it had been. Jason used this word 15 times in the first interview. In speaking about his dog pulling him to the interview site, he said, “Not only did he get me down here as easily as you got down here, but he actually went into another spectrum and made it totally fun.” Seena talked about the fun times that she had with Annie pulling her along the ice while playing broomball. Megan said that without her service dog, “It just wouldn’t be as fun. Life would be more boring.” All the participants described fun experiences with their dogs in the community interacting with other people or just playing at home.

**“Drawbacks” of Service Dog Ownership**

Participants, for the most part, did not talk about the drawbacks of owning a service dog. Instead, they labeled difficulties as responsibilities, adjustment periods, and challenges. John, for instance, said, “I honestly haven’t had any difficulties at all.” Yet, he did describe some of the challenges and responsibilities associated with service dog ownership that he had faced over the past 6 months.

**Responsibilities.** Most of the owners mentioned the obvious responsibilities of owning a service dog, including feeding, grooming, toileting, and veterinary care. Further responsibilities included taking time to maintain the dog’s health through regular exercise and enhancing the dog’s abilities through ongoing training. The theme of responsibility was especially prevalent when I asked what they would say to someone who was considering getting a service dog. John answered, “It was great for me, but it does take a little work. You know, the cleaning and the feeding. It takes a lot of responsibility. I would recommend it to anybody that’s responsible enough to have it.” Jason defined responsibility even more broadly:

> The dog should be integrated into your life…it’s like having a baby, you can’t put them in the closet while you go out dancing at night, but you can do that with a dog….I don’t agree with that…you are mini-maxing him and not using him for what he is trained for.

For all of the participants, having a service dog also meant committing time and money to the care of another living creature. Even if the dog was initially donated by an organization, few organizations offered funding to maintain the dog’s care throughout its life span.

**Adjustment period.** Participants who had recently acquired their service dogs spoke about the adjustments that they were making to integrate their dogs into their lives. During this period, they learned what they could expect from their dogs, how they could maximize their dogs’ abilities and adapt them to meet their individual needs, and how to incorporate their dogs into their daily routines. Patience seemed to be essential during this period. When asked to describe his experience of owning a service dog after only 7 months, Brian replied, “It takes a lot of patience.” He continued to use this word throughout the first interview. For him, his dog’s inconsistency in following commands was a source of frustration during this adjustment period. During the second interview, approximately 1 month later, Brian reported a marked improvement in his dog’s ability to follow commands consistently. He seemed more comfortable with his role of service dog owner, and the overall tone of the interview was much more positive.

Participants who had owned their service dogs for a
long time also remembered an initial adjustment period. Seena, who had owned Annie for 9 years, described this period as “like any new relationship; it took some adjustment and adaptation and patience and time. Just like any new marriage, you have to get a feel for what’s going to work.”

**Challenges.** Whether it was cleaning up an accident in front of the hospital elevator or trying to get the dog’s leash untangled from the wheelchair, every participant had a story about a challenging time with his or her service dog. Most commonly, they described instances when the dog was not doing what it was trained to do. Brian described a number of these instances when his dog would not pick up his hat or get his cane on the first try: “Sometimes he won’t cooperate...he’ll act like a 12-year-old, so that is challenging.” Challenges such as these, particularly evident during the first few months of ownership, further emphasize the importance of patience during the adjustment period.

**The Meaning of Using a Service Dog**

Although the meaning of using a service dog varied tremendously from one participant to the next, some themes seemed to be consistent across participants. These included a sense of independence, someone to watch over me, and “I feel like an able-bodied person.”

**Sense of independence.** Participants described many ways in which having a service dog made them feel more independent and enabled them to participate in activities without the aid of others. This independence came not only from the tasks that the dog completed, but also in the tasks that the participant and dog learned to do together. Seena said, “It is like we are in it together: We will figure it out, and we will work as a team.” This sense of autonomy made a tremendous difference in the participants’ perceptions of themselves, as Seena described:

I don’t have to depend on other people. Having that dependency, every time you have to ask for help...you think to yourself, either you are keeping a record of how many times you have to depend on someone else or they are....Independence really carves into your self-esteem....When you are stuck having to depend on someone else, your perception of yourself isn’t as high. A dog is not going to keep a record of how many times you have to ask it to do things for you.

Megan reported that she had recommended service dogs to people who were skeptical that they could effect their independence: ‘I’ll tell them that you’d be surprised how much more independent a dog will make you. It will just amaze you.” The sense of autonomy that the participants gained from their service dogs seemed to be an important factor in the meaning that this interaction had in their lives.

**Someone to watch over me.** This surprising theme was introduced over and over again by participants who said that their dogs seemed to “keep an eye” on them or that they “watched to make sure that everything was okay.” Brian described how Jake would wait outside his van to make sure that the lift would come down properly. If the terrain was uneven and the flap did not flatten, then Jake would push it down with his paws so that the wheelchair could travel smoothly. Similarly, Megan talked about how Sam would watch by the door of the kitchen in case she dropped her medicine bottle so that he could retrieve it for her. Seena said, “[Annie] keeps tabs on me….When I’m walking slower than she does, she’ll always come back and check on me.” Participants said that they felt more confident and secure knowing that their dogs always seemed to be watching out for them.

“I feel like an able-bodied person.” Although Brian was the only participant to state this verbatim, all the participants implied that their dogs made them feel less disabled. This was only partly the result of the tasks that the dog performed. More importantly, participants described how their dogs focused attention away from their disabilities. Megan said:

I find that when I am without him, a lot of people look and I get really self-conscious. I feel like they are looking at me because of my wheelchair or whatever, and if my dog is with me, then I feel they are looking at it.

**Having her dog with her changed Megan’s impression of how others perceived her.**

Other participants described how their dogs also made them feel less disabled by shifting focus away from their disabilities. John described this experience by saying:

I don’t think people realize that I am human. I do have a brain....They don’t know how to treat people with chairs I think is the best way to describe it. But now with the dog, it’s opened up a new climate.

John’s dog changed the way he believed that others perceived him and in so doing, helped him feel less disabled. For all participants, the meaning of having a service dog seemed to be connected with this shift of focus away from their disabilities and onto their abilities to accomplish tasks independently by using their dogs.

**Discussion**

Reilly (1962) stated that people have “a vital need for occupation” and “a need to master [their] environment, to alter and improve it” (p. 5). For the participants in this study, their service dogs provided not only a means of completing tasks, but also a means for fulfilling these needs. By increasing social participation, facilitating personal skill development, and providing responsibilities to care for another living being, their service dogs promoted occupation and provided opportunities to master and improve their environments. The service dogs helped to shift the participants from feelings of dependence to feelings of a renewed sense of efficacy and responsibility, restoring occupational roles that may have been lost to disability.

Benefits identified by participants were consistent with the literature, which details positive effects of service dog ownership on self-esteem, security, loneliness, depression, and social contact (Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Fick, 1993; Valentine et al., 1993; Winkler et al., 1989). Participants
also identified benefits such as personal skill development and having “someone to watch over me” that had not been cited in the literature.

The theme of “I feel like an able-bodied person” suggests that owning a service dog changed the way participants believed they were perceived by others and, thereby, shaped their perceptions of themselves. Swinth (1997) described both assistive technology that increased social isolation by emphasizing differences and assistive technology that promoted social interaction. As the theme of “social acknowledgments” suggests, service dogs seem to belong in this latter category. Unlike owning a wheelchair or electronic aid, owning a dog is an experience that is familiar to persons with or without disabilities. In this way, service dogs provide common ground, bridging the differences that may cause social isolation and facilitating a renewed sense of connection with others. Service dogs, therefore, appear to be one avenue of enhancing what the International Classification of Functioning and Disability terms, social participation (World Health Organization, 2000). By both shaping the perceptions of others and improving self-perceptions, service dogs help to facilitate increased participation.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

Hanebrink and Dillon (2000) defined service dogs as “the ultimate assistive technology” (p. 16). Considering the impact that the participants’ service dogs had on functional skills and psychosocial factors, this characterization seems appropriate. Furthermore, this definition provides a means of conceptualizing service dogs within an occupational therapy framework. According to the American Occupational Therapy Association (2000), “participation and occupational engagement are the broad overarching outcomes of occupational therapy intervention.” Given that participants in this study reported that their service dogs enhanced community participation, independence, social interactions, and personal skill development, service dogs could be classified under this framework as a potential occupational therapy intervention.

Because occupational therapists currently are one of the primary health care providers responsible for assessing clients’ assistive technology needs and recommending appropriate adaptations, they are in an ideal position to expand this role to include the evaluation and recommendation of service dogs as another potential adaptive strategy. Some occupational therapists in the state of Montana have already adopted this role under the Medicaid reimbursement system and are part of a multidisciplinary team responsible for assessing clients’ needs for a service dog (Rough, 2000). To be effective in this expanding practice area, occupational therapists must understand how persons with physical disabilities use their service dogs as an adaptive strategy and what factors affect the success of this strategy. Themes identified in this study, in combination with future research to clarify and expand these themes, provide a foundation from which occupational therapists can begin to consider the recommendation of service dogs for their clients.

Limitations

Despite efforts to sample a wide variety of service dog owners, all participants were European-Americans in a relatively narrow age range; thus, their experiences may not be representative of all service dog owners. Further, participants identified few drawbacks to service dog ownership perhaps because persons with predominantly positive experiences were more likely to stay in contact with the nominating source.

Directions for Future Research

Because the use of service dogs has only recently gained attention, research is extremely limited. This study has only begun to explore a number of common experiences among service dog owners and to identify some potential roles for occupational therapists working with this population. Sample questions for future research include the following: How are occupational therapists currently working with service dog owners? What evaluation strategies would be most effective to decide whether a service dog would be appropriate for a specific person? Would service dog trainers benefit from occupational therapy consultations to adapt training to meet particular needs? What role do occupational therapists have in the ongoing reevaluation and adaptation process? How do service dogs compare with other forms of assistive technology in terms of satisfaction, abandonment, ability to meet individual needs, and so forth? Hopefully, this study will foster further curiosity and spark continued interest in the exploration of service dogs as an adaptive strategy.

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References


516
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