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Article *in* The Journal of Psychology Interdisciplinary and Applied · February 1988

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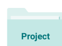

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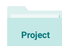

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The Journal of Psychology, *122*(1), 39–45

The Effects of Service Dogs on Social Acknowledgments of People in Wheelchairs

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ABSTRACT. Able-bodied people often exhibit behaviors that show them to be socially uncomfortable upon encountering a physically disabled stranger. These behaviors include less eye contact, gaze avoidance, greater personal distance, and briefer social interactions. This study examined whether persons in wheelchairs with service dogs receive more frequent social acknowledgement from able-bodied strangers than people in wheelchairs without dogs receive. Behaviors of passersby were recorded by an observer who followed a person in a wheelchair at a distance of 15 to 30 feet. Observations were made in public areas amid pedestrian traffic, areas such as shopping malls and a college campus. The behaviors of passersby to the person in a wheelchair, with or without a service dog, were recorded, including smiles, conversation, touch, gaze aversion, path avoidance, or no response. Results indicated that both smiles and conversations from passersby increased significantly when the dogs were present. These findings suggest that the benefits of service dogs for their owners extend beyond working tasks to include enhanced opportunities for social exchange. The service dogs substantially reduced the tendency of able-bodied people to ignore or avoid the disabled person.

PERSONS STIGMATIZED by physical impairments frequently evoke discomfort and stifled behavior from the able-bodied people they encounter. The behavioral changes that have been observed when able-bodied people interact with a disabled person include less eye contact (Edelman, 1984; Thompson, 1982), an increased personal distance (Kleck, Buck, Goller, London, Pfeiffer,

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& Vukcevic, 1968; Worthington, 1974), altered physiological responses, such as an increased psychogalvanic skin response (Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966), and inhibited motor activity (Kleck, 1968). Interestingly, similar behavioral alterations have been reported among people with disabilities when they encounter able-bodied persons (Comer & Piliavin, 1972).

In contrast with the experiences of persons with disabilities, people who are considered to be physically attractive may receive favorable treatment and a variety of positive attributions (Patzer, 1985). The tendency to ascribe positive traits to attractive peers has been reported in young children (Dion, 1973; Reaves & Friedman, 1982), teenaged girls (Weisfeld, Block, & Ivers, 1984), college men and women (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), and elderly people (Jones & Adams, 1982). Even babies, if attractive, are perceived as more intelligent, likable, and "good" (Stephan & Langlois, 1984). The presence of a pet apparently contributes to a person's attractiveness. In a study in which college students were shown five scenes with an animal present or absent, the people associated with animals in the scenes were judged as happier, friendlier, wealthier, more relaxed, less vulnerable, and less dangerous to others than those people pictured without animals (Lockwood, 1983).

Disabled people restricted to a wheelchair may acquire a service dog to perform a wide range of manual tasks. These dogs accompany their owners on all of their public outings. Several studies suggest that animals might serve to reduce the social awkwardness many people exhibit in the presence of people with disabilities. The term "social lubricant" was adopted in one study in which pets frequently were noted to serve as a focal point of conversation for the elderly pet owner and the family and friends who visited (Mugford & M'Comisky, 1974). The presence of pet animals can have a positive impact on the first impressions of people, similar to the impact of physical attractiveness. Messent (1984) directly observed people walking in parks with and without their dogs and noted that the presence of a dog was associated with a significant increase in both the number of greetings and the length of conversations.

In a retrospective survey of the socializing effects of service dogs for people in wheelchairs, the control group had no dogs, and the experimental group had service dogs that assisted them throughout the day (Hart, Hart, & Bergin, 1987). The people with disabilities reported an average of eight friendly approaches from adult strangers during their typical trips downtown when their service dogs were with them, as compared with one friendly ap-

This study was completed in partial fulfillment of requirements for an MSW degree for Jane Eddy at California State University, Sacramento.

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proach when their dogs were not with them. The average number of friendly approaches reported by the control group was also one.

The present study was designed to document in a prospective way the natural ongoing responses of passersby to a person in a wheelchair when a service dog is or is not present. All of the participants had actual physical disabilities and required wheelchairs to become mobile. Because the disabilities were not feigned, this study differs from much of the research involving persons stigmatized by contrived physical impairments. The interactions with passersby were also uncontrived and required no intervention or misrepresentation. We predicted that friendly, unsolicited acknowledgements offered by strange passersby would occur more often when a person with a disability was accompanied by a service dog, than if no dog were present.

Method

Subjects

All participants were visibly disabled adults, 20 to 40 years old, who use wheelchairs for mobility. For the experimental condition, persons with a service dog (four women, six men) elicited responses from passersby. For the control condition, persons alone (six women, four men) elicited responses from passersby. Because persons with service dogs spend all of their time accompanied by the dogs, different individuals participated in the two conditions. Those accompanied by service dogs were recruited through Canine Companions for Independence, Santa Rosa, California, where service dogs are trained for disabled people. The other participants were recruited from Services to Handicapped Students at the University of California, Davis.

As required in the human subjects protocol, all prospective participants were informed that the research study would assess the role of service dogs in the lives of persons who use wheelchairs. Although the participants were not aware that the social responses of passersby were being recorded, they did know they were being followed in the shopping malls.

Procedure

The observer followed a participant in a wheelchair at a distance of 15 to 30 ft (4.572 to 9.144 m) and recorded the behaviors of oncoming passersby. After pilot observations, an instrument was adapted from Messent (1984) and tested for reliability by three observers. The observer recorded the following behaviors exhibited by people who passed the participant: smiles, conversation, touch, gaze aversion, path avoidance, or no response. If the participant had a service dog, the passerby's responses to the dog (smiles, speech, or touch) were separately recorded. Also noted was whether the subject passerby

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was a stranger, acquaintance, child, or a salesperson. Some contexts required a response from a passerby, such as when the disabled person requested assistance or initiated a conversation, or when the passerby was an acquaintance. These transactions were considered obligatory and were excluded from the analysis of the observations.

All observations were made amid pedestrian traffic in suburban shopping centers, shopping malls, stores, and on the campus of the University of California, Davis. Observations took place either in sheltered areas, or outdoors when the temperatures were mild and precipitation was zero. Each site was familiar to the disabled person, and one where the person would normally move at a speed no faster than a walking pace. We observed those passersby who were able-bodied people and who passed the participant in an oncoming direction. If a group of two or more people passed, we observed the person closest to the participant. The procedure was intended to approximate real life situations in which able-bodied people encounter unfamiliar people with disabilities.

Results

Passersby smiled at the participants with dogs significantly more often than they smiled at the participants without dogs (Mann-Whitney one-tailed U test: $U = 21, p < .025$). Their mean scores, analyzed in terms of the percentage of passersby that smiled at the participant, were 18.1% with a dog present and 5% without a dog. Conversations with the participants accompanied by dogs occurred significantly more often than conversations with the participants without dogs; the mean respective scores were 7.2% and 1.5% ($U = 9$, $p < .001$). Smiles to the dogs, at a mean score of 20.8%, as well as conversations at 3.7%, also occurred more often than smiles and conversations with the participants in the control group. No passersby touched either the experimental or control participants; however, passersby did touch some of the dogs, mean score of 4.7%. Because some passersby acknowledged only the dog or the person, but not both, a person and a dog as a team received more smiles than did a person alone (sign test: $p < .05$).

Obvious gaze and path avoidance occurred less frequently than smiles and conversations, and the specific intention of the passerby was often ambiguous. Clear episodes of gaze avoidance or path aversion occurred with nine of the participants without dogs, and with only three of the participants with dogs.

In post-observational interviews, the participants frequently mentioned that they feel invisible in public. One participant without a service dog described the behavior of able-bodied strangers as "tuning out." He described an experience with a close family friend who had known him prior to his disabling injury. He was in his wheelchair one day and he passed the friend

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on the street and greeted her by name several times. She looked in his direction but did not recognize him. It was as if she was looking through him.

One participant described the effect of his service dog:

> I notice that when I am alone and I smile at someone—a pretty girl, say—or say "Hi," the person quickly looks away. But if I have (the dog) with me, the person smiles or says "Hi" right back. And when I go out alone, people see me out of the corner of their eye and—like they don't want to appear obvious—they start to fade out of my way or change their direction of travel. People don't need to deal with me at all. But with (the dog), it's okay not to move. Or people see the dog before they have a chance to move. They see (the dog) and it's, "Hey, check that out!" They're interested and friendly before they have a chance to react to my disability.

Another participant, who did not have a service dog, summarized some effects of being ignored or avoided:

> To go shopping, see a parade, or be a part of a crowd scene, I feel I need to have the energy to manage the social risk. I can use those times as an opportunity to teach, to impress, and be gregarious if I have the right energy. Or I can look upon the negative responses—stares, abruptly averted glances, and those people who stiffly turn away—as part of the social cost of being disabled, and not manage it effectively, and be undermined in terms of my self-worth.

Most of the passersby's conversations with the participants who had a service dog centered around the dog. Often the stranger praised the dog in some way, particularly in respect to the dog's training. Some people remarked on the dog's characteristics, including color, size, temperament, cuteness, and breed. Other passersby began the conversation with a question. Typical comments were, "What a smart dog," "I like your dog," "What kind of a dog is that?" and brief greetings to the dog such as, "Hi ya, cutie-pie."

Some problems were reported that related to the dog's role as social facilitator. One participant said he thought more people in town knew the name of his dog than knew his name. Another reported that he had to allow himself extra time when he went out with the dog because of the strangers who stopped to talk. Almost all of the participants said a few people were a social bother; they wanted to talk about dogs at length until the owner bowed out by saying something like, "Whoops! I'm late, I've got to get going," and then sped away in the wheelchair. Another problem was people who wanted to pet the dog. Petting interferes with the dog's concentration and training, and is particularly harmful with a newly acquired dog who has yet to bond strongly and develop a working relationship with the owner.

Discussion

Findings from the present study support the hypothesis that service dogs facilitate social interaction for people with disabilities. The results concur with

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the observational studies of able-bodied people (Messent, 1984) and with the retrospective interviews of people with disabilities (Hart, Hart, & Bergin, 1987).

It has been well-documented that people with disabilities are often subjected to social isolation; the presence of a service dog may contribute to overcoming social rejection. The socializing effects of animals can provide a focused solution to ameliorate loneliness for people who are particularly vulnerable and isolated. For various populations of society that are stigmatized (Eisenberg, 1982; Goffman, 1963), that are prejudged to be unattractive or different, or that are socially limited in other ways, a pet could overcome some social barriers.

Although the presence of a person with physical impairments creates discomfort in able-bodied people, competing response tendencies can override an able-bodied person's tendency to withdraw. Previous reports have shown that able-bodied people assess relative costs and rewards in deciding whether to approach a disabled person to perform a helping task (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972; Stephens, Cooper, & Kinney, 1985). The social approaches to disabled people described in the present study appear to allow for reciprocal interaction, rather than to be based simply on a wish to assist one who is perhaps helpless in a situation.

The training staff and participants associated with service dogs commonly report that major increases in assertiveness arise in participants as they assume responsibility for their dog's training and care. For example, when passersby approach the dog and participant as reported in this study, the participant may need to admonish someone not to pet or disrupt the dog. Approaches by strangers occur often enough that dogs routinely are taught a specific command to shake hands with a nearby person when instructed. When a stranger approaches, the disabled person can deliver the command to shake hands. In so doing, the person with disabilities demonstrates an ability to control the dog and to engage in a discussion with an able-bodied person. This entire sequence can serve to educate the able-bodied person about the mental competence of the person with the disability (Kerrill Knaus, Canine Companions for Independence, personal communication, March 29, 1987).

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Received July 23, 1987

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