

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

TRUST YOUR DOG:
TRAINING SERVICE DOGS FOR U.S. VETERANS WITH PTSD

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This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Erica Antonucci, and to my mother, Karen Henderson.

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Abstract

Trust Your Dog: Training Service Dogs for U.S. Veterans with PTSD investigates what it means for veterans with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) to come to trust their service dogs by means of training with non-for-profit organizations that instruct and/or provide dogs at no expense. Ethnographic research for this dissertation took place in Chicago and Wisconsin part-time for two years and full time for a year with four organizations that train service dogs. I shadowed dog trainings, both in training centers and in public, attended graduations and dedications, worked dogs in training, and followed trainers and veterans with their service dogs in training. The research also included virtual interviews with out of state organizations, where I learned about the history of the service dog industry and about general training standards. This dissertation analyzes the tensions inherent in a veteran trusting a service dog: even though the dog appears to lack agency due to its operant conditioning, the dog does take initiative to alert and task for its veteran. Veterans can trust their dogs expressly because the dogs act on their own discretion when needed and at other times maintain strict obedience.

The dissertation starts by looking at the institutional history of the service dog industry, which, due to a lack of governmental standardization, led to a crisis of legitimacy: without any certification, how can a dog be legitimized and thereby trusted to be safe in public with disabled persons? Out of this came accrediting organizations as experts that set “standards of excellence” and eventually collaborated with government agencies. These accrediting organizations – alongside non-accredited organizations, veterans, dogs, trainers, and so forth – make up the PTSD service dog industry, which, by focusing on public access, projects onto veterans the moral project of achieving ordinary American sociality with a service dog by feeling safe in public as consumers. The service dog allows for disabled veterans to live a good life in the

everyday present rather than focusing on a future cure, in part because the service dog makes veterans feel safe in public and also because the dog functions as medical equipment for its veteran. Service dogs are an animated kind of medical equipment that can accomplish tasks material medical objects cannot, such as sensing an oncoming panic attack. They can do this because the dogs and veterans are connected through affective bonds that we may envisage as motivation for the dog to work and encouragement for the veteran to trust their dog. It is because the dog has agency in an unequal relation of symbiosis in submission that dogs can learn obedience and decide to improvise when they run out of ways to draw their veteran's attention to anxiety or some kind of physical condition.

Introduction

The service dog graduation was a small affair. Only four teams were graduating, since ten washed out in the process of training. I showed up to the center that had been decorated with American flags and streamers. Catered food sat ready for the guests after the ceremony was over. We milled about, family and friends joining trainers and puppy raisers, before taking our seats. Liam¹ briefly congratulated the teams before we stood for the national anthem: veterans in salute and civilians with hands on our hearts. Usually there was a color guard² from the American Legion, but they could not make it that day.

Before starting the ceremony, Liam remembers a board member, Robert, who passed away from COVID last year. His call sign Ghost was assigned to veteran William's German Shepherd after being reared by Lily, his puppy raiser whom the reader will hear from in Chapter Four.

The ceremony started with a short, formal, performative speech from Liam that was meant to turn veteran/service dog pairs from "in training" to "official" service dog.

To all who should see these present greetings, know ye that responding special trust and confidence in the fidelity and abilities of Rachel and Bella, William and Ghost, Nora and Finn, Jack and Charlie. I do appoint these teams as official Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin service dog teams and canines from this day forth [...] shall be known as Liberty Hounds Bella, Liberty Hounds Ghost, Liberty Hounds Finn, and Liberty Hounds Charlie. With all the privileges set forth with and by the US Department of Justice and the Americans with Disabilities Act. These service dog teams will therefore carefully and diligently carry out the duties and etiquette set forth by all laws established for service dogs, as well as all protocols set forth by Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin. Given by my hand, on this 29th day of October, in the year of our lord 2022.

¹ This is a pseudonym. All participants and organization names are pseudonyms. For organizations, I tried to preserve the sense of patriotism in the titles without repeating registered names.

² The color guard is a group of soldiers – in this case veterans – charged with protecting the national flag and other regimental flags. In the ceremony they present the flags and parade them in front of the guests and service dog teams. The color guard leader usually offers some words of advice for the new service dog teams.

The veterans remained standing for a coin ceremony, where the veterans were presented with a challenge coin, a tradition in the military to identify service men and women as part of a particular regiment. The coin thereby identified the veterans as part of Liberty Hounds graduated team.

Finally the dogs were vested. Previously the dogs wore “in training” vests. Now they were graduating to a fine beige mesh vest with Liberty Hounds markings and a card that identifies the dogs as Liberty Hounds dogs and includes their rights according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Ghost’s vest honored Robert by including insignia from his military regiment. Robert’s daughter and board member, Hazel, asked the dog: “Are you ready to become official?”

To wrap up, Liam reminded the teams to “always trust your dog. Remember we’ve talked to you that if I can leave you with one thing, it’s always trust your dog. Listen up, trust them.” He also encouraged the graduates to “maintain your dog. Keep them in shape and in standard. Because we all... we’ve talked about that. You know you’ve got to keep them in shape. Use your dog. You have the rights to use your dog, use it. Because if you shelf it, they will spoil. We talked about that I want you to always remember that.”³ Finally, he welcomed the graduates into the Liberty Hounds family.

The graduation took place about ten months into my ethnographic research with Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin. Since I was based in Chicago, I drove up to Wisconsin three to four times a month to attend classes in the center, public access in the community, and finally the graduation. Looking back on that day, several things stuck out to me that would come to form the

³ Throughout the training, Liam consistently reminded the veterans to trust their dogs and not to shelve them, so it is not surprising that he would bring this up again at the graduation.

foundation of my dissertation. The first is that Liam's speech mentions the US Department of Justice and the ADA. As I will explain in Chapter One, there is no way for a dog to be granted certified status according to the ADA. The graduation is a way for this service dog organization to set a kind of barometer of quality which, since ten training pairs washed out, is held to a very high standard. They are also held to the standard of the accreditation organization of which Liberty Hounds is a member. Liam is seeking accreditation for an even stricter organization so that his veterans can be involved in government programs that only recognize this group. Then, during the vesting ceremony, the dogs switch out their in-training vests to a Liberty Hounds vest. Hazel asks if the dog is ready to be "official," which again is a way for Liberty Hounds to imbue the dogs with some kind of "official" – or perhaps legitimate, as I discuss in Chapter One – status, even though no such standard exists according to the ADA.

After nearly a year of working with Liam, I was used to him telling the veterans to "trust your dog." He is full of stories of veterans who took his advice and avoided dangerous situations, such as avoiding getting into a car accident. Trusting one's dog also means reading the dog's body language; trusting is attending to the other. As I will explain in Chapter Four, dogs will do anything, even disobey commands they know, if it means alerting their handler to a possible panic attack or seizure. Liam also often tells the veterans not to shelve their dog, otherwise they will lose their skills. They have frequent recertifications and it is clear when a dog has not been out in public for several months because the dog might whine or pull on the leash.

Trust Your Dog

The central objects of study for this dissertation are the veterans with PTSD who learn to trust their dogs through training, the service dog organizations that lead the training, and the service dogs themselves. What does it mean for veterans to “trust” a service dog?

To approach this question, I draw on Tim Ingold’s discussion of “trust” and “domination” in his work *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000). “To trust someone is to act with that person in mind, in the hope and expectation that she will do likewise – responding in ways favourable to you – so long as you do nothing to curb her autonomy to act otherwise” (Ingold 2000, 69-70). In this case of the hunter-gatherer, the animals that serve as prey “present themselves” to the hunter based on a relationship of trust between the two parties (Ingold 2000, 71). “For coercion, the attempt to extract by force, represents a betrayal of the trust that underwrites the willingness to give. Animals thus maltreated will desert the hunter, or even cause him ill fortune” (Ingold 2000, 71). In this way, relations of trust entail an “element of risk”: “the risk that the other on whose actions I depend, but which I cannot in any way control, may act contrary to my expectations” (Ingold 2000, 70). On the other hand, Ingold presents domination of animals as a feature of pastoral society. “And although the relations pastoralists establish with animals are quite different from those established by hunters, they rest, at a more fundamental level, on the same premise, namely that animals are, like human beings, endowed with powers of sentience and autonomous action which have either to be respected, as in hunting, or overcome through superior force, as in pastoralism (Ingold 2000, 74). Ingold draws a distinction between domination and domestication; the former is “a form of social control exercised over subject-persons” and the latter is “a form of mechanical control exercised over object-things” (Ingold

2000, 74).⁴ “Whether the regime be one of hunting or of pastoralism, humans and animals relate to one another not in mind or body alone but as undivided centres of intention and action, as whole beings” (Ingold 2000, 75). The modality of objectification-as-domestication of animals, according to Ingold, has only really emerged in the livestock industry, where animals are neither trusted nor dominated (Ingold 2000, 75).

Following Ingold, I propose that service dogs are indeed dominated – kept on a leash and obedience trained – but that they affiliate with their veterans in relations of trust. Paradoxically, to trust a dog depends on its “initiative” and “volition” (Ingold 2000, 70) despite the fact that, when well-trained, dogs are expected to obey taught commands; indeed, as my dissertation will show, service dogs do make choices when helping their veterans overcome mental and physical obstacles. In this way, the dogs “present themselves” to the veteran.

Each chapter touches on the question of trust in some way. How does the expertise of service dog organizations produce legitimate service dogs that veterans can trust? How do veterans trust service dogs to keep vigilant in public and thus reduce PTSD symptoms and improve life in the present? How does having a service dog to trust produce a subjective bond that allows dogs to act as medical objects? And how can veterans as handlers trust service dogs to be obedient and thus misbehave as a last resort if the veteran is in trouble? As these questions unfold over the course of the dissertation, I illustrate the ways in which veterans come to trust their dogs: legitimate service dogs can be trusted to keep watch and make decisions to alert their veteran to anxiety or physical issue.

⁴ As I will explain in Chapter Three, service dogs are both “subject-persons” and “object-things” in the sense that they form bonds of love and trust with their veterans, but also expect dogs to act as medical equipment. Reading this alongside Ingold, there seems to be elements of both domination and domestication for service dogs, except that dogs are always dominated and only sometimes domesticated.

Field Sites

This dissertation relies on two years of part-time and a year of full-time ethnographic research. Until recently, the Association of Service Dog Providers (ASDP) broke up organizations into two types: “community” and “national” models. For the former, trainers train veterans to train their own dogs and for the latter trainers fully train dogs and place them with veterans. ASDP recently did away with this distinction because the board felt the outcomes were the same. This project will focus on the formally “community” model; I made this decision because these were the organizations within driving distance. To fill the gap, I interviewed several organizations virtually that exemplify the formally “national” model.

The organization I spent the most quality time with was Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin. The center is small; the working area is broken up into two sections, one with a TV and white board. When I first started visiting Liberty Hounds, there were only six or seven karanda beds lined up next to chairs for the veteran. Later one of the trainers had the idea of placing yellow tape around the center to index the tasks for the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test.

Figure 1: CGC tape / Photo by author



In the picture above is half of the CGC test. The tape indicates “x” when the dog is supposed to start and end. It also indicates when to drop the leash and pick it back up again (see the crossed lines in the top left corner). The lines in the top right corner indicate where the dog is supposed to do recalls – responding to their name or a command like “here!” – or wait for its handler to walk away and come back. Liberty Hounds also acquired some agility equipment to help build the dogs’ confidence. In addition to two offices and a boardroom, the center contains a kitchen where dog/veteran teams practice what it would be like to go into a restaurant. Classes are broken up into cohorts and the cohorts who started at the same time attend graduation ceremonies together. Teams that did not pass receive honorable mention. Veteran/dog teams must come back after six months for recertification, then one year, then every two years following this.

The second organization, Freedom Puppies, is a small organization on the outskirts of Chicago. Mia, the founder and head trainer, allowed me to sit in training classes. We would often also spend time afterwards chatting about her experiences, giving me a chance to ask questions about what I saw during the training sessions. She ran puppy, intermediate, and advanced classes, usually on Saturdays. Her center also contained a collection of agility training tools, like risers, a tunnel, and a small swimming pool full of empty water bottles. She explained to me that this kind of equipment helps to build dogs’ confidence. Mia also has her own service dog, due to her disability. She suffers from anxiety and cannot go back to work due to a severe back injury that ended her engineering career and Schutzhund training.⁵ Schutzhund training requires running around and bite work, which she can no longer do, so she decided to refocus her efforts on training service dogs. As Chapter One will illustrate, service dog trainers often started out as

⁵ Schutzhund training involves obedience and protection work, similar to how police dogs are trained. <https://www.germanshepherddog.com/about/schutzhund-training/>

sport dog or obedience trainers who were asked by veterans to train them a service dog. Dogs at Freedom Puppies train at different speeds and thus they do not hold any graduation ceremonies.

The third organization, Independence Paws, held training classes on Thursday nights and Sunday mornings. Veterans would sign up for a particular time, but it was common for veterans to show up late or early or not show up at all. The center when I first visited had an A-frame for dogs to run over and a tunnel to run through. Lining the edge of the working area were about six karanda bed frames that dogs could use as a “place”⁶ for them to practice duration of commands. The head trainer, Anthony, showed up intermittently on Sundays, but the assistant trainer, Ella, whom I believe has now been promoted, would always show up, often with her four children and her own dogs. At the trainings, each team was at a different level, so the trainers would go around the room and practice with the handler teams while other teams continued to work on skills they had been assigned, such as loose leash walking. During these sessions, a volunteer staff member videoed and took pictures that he edited and posted to the Independence Paws’ webpage. Twice a year, Independence Dogs holds a dedication fundraiser that hundreds of people attend. The dedication includes a ceremony where the dog was presented to the veteran after parading throughout the room. At the dedications I attended, everyone stood and cheered and wept; it was quite an emotional event. The ceremony ended with a vesting, much like with Liberty Hounds, but unlike Liberty Hounds, the dogs continued their training and there was no clear-cut official marker of a service dog.

The fourth organization, Joliet Dogs, does not focus only on veterans, but on anyone with a disability, from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to seizures to mobility issues. When I started with the group, it held downtown classes with an ambitious young trainer. We went to

⁶ The “place” command is a key obedience skill. The dog is told to remain in a “place” and not move until the handler releases it.

Target and practiced retrieving items off shelves and to the mall to practice using escalators and elevators. When this trainer left, I attended weekly trainings on Mondays with Jane, the founder and head trainer. Nearly all the dogs were Golden Retrievers that were brothers and sisters, having been bred by a female that Jane kept at her home. During class we worked on obstacle courses and Jane would always give me a dog to work. My experience here made me realize how difficult dog training can be. Due to the stress of running such a large service dog organization – there were at least twenty dogs – Jane decided to cancel the program, placing the already trained dogs as service dogs in a variety of new homes. She now hopes to run a therapy dog⁷ training program, with some service dog work on the side.

In addition to fieldwork, I conducted seventy interviews with veterans, trainers, and staff. Most of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, but I did a few in Liberty Hounds' board room. The idea behind interviewing virtually was that for veterans with PTSD it would be more comfortable with them to be in their homes. I also interviewed trainers and staff who were far from Chicago via Zoom. The people I interviewed all agreed to permit video recording, so this allowed me to return to the interviews and read body language. In my interviews with veterans, I asked about their involvement in the U.S. military; their diagnosis and current treatment; their history with dogs; what led them to apply for a service dog; their experience training their

⁷ “Therapy dogs play a different helping role than service dogs and emotional support animals. They aren’t trained to live with a specific handler. Rather, these are dogs that, with their human teammate (often the dog’s owner), volunteer in clinical settings. These locations include hospitals, mental health institutions, hospices, schools, and nursing homes. These dogs provide comfort, affection, and even love in the course of their work. Therapy dogs are trained to be comfortable in new environments and to interact with different people. They should have a calm temperament, be unfazed by unfamiliar noises and movements, be comfortable being handled, and love people. Although they’re defined as comfort dogs and often used in therapeutic settings, therapy dogs aren’t considered service dogs under the ADA. Therefore, they don’t have the same legal right to access in public spaces. There are no uniform state or national rules that regulate and certify therapy dogs, and different organizations have different guidelines. As a general rule, therapy dogs should be trained, insured, and licensed by the non-profit that’s offering their services.” (AKC “What’s the Difference,” 2024).

service dog; how the dog has impacted their lives; and whether they were connected to other service dog owners. In interviews with trainers and staff, I asked about their professional history; if they were involved in the military; what their history was with dogs; how they got involved in whatever organization they are part of; what are the goals of the organization; what populations they serve; what is the process of training; and how they distinguish their dogs from “fake” service dogs.

In addition to fieldwork and interviews, I attended two Association of Service Dog Providers (ASDP) conferences. I learned a lot about the service dog industry⁸, from different models of organization to basic obedience training, to state of the science, to government run initiatives, to suggestions for how to reach out to legislative representatives. Attending these conferences also produced connections for later interviews.

All of the veterans, and many of the trainers and staff, were diagnosed with PTSD. I did my best to avoid triggering flashbacks, such as by not approaching them from behind or asking too many questions. Despite my best efforts, I was occasionally warned by a veteran or staff member. Mia, for example, pushed back against my efforts to gain informed consent from the veterans in the class, thinking it would put them on edge.

For the sake of full disclosure, and to explain how I gained rapport with some veterans and trainers that I got close with, I should mention that I am also diagnosed with several mental health conditions that I experience as disabilities. I considered training my own service dog as a kind of autoethnographic experience, and Mia even offered to do the training, but with the travel to Wisconsin, it would not have been fair to the dog. While I have no background in the military,

⁸ “Service dog industry” is an emic term, but what it refers to is not monolithic. I use this term to refer to all organizations that have some connection with each other, such as joining accrediting organizations or participating in conferences, even if they are not affiliated, or even being aware of other organizations.

except for my grandfather's service in Korea, having my own disability and a history of trauma makes it easier for me to understand the perspectives of the veterans.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

At the heart of this study are organizations that train service dogs for veterans with PTSD and the veterans themselves who have PTSD, often along with several other physical and mental health diagnoses. For all the organizations I worked with, at least a Master's level clinician needs to provide a note verifying the veteran's diagnosis and disability. In order to understand certain presentations of PTSD in the following chapters, it is worth spending some time reviewing the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

Figure 2: Diagnostic criteria for PTSD / National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI, n.d.)

DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD

- A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
 - 1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
 - 2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
 - 3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
 - 4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). **Note:** Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.⁹
- B. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:
 - 1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s).
 - 2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s).
 - 3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.)

⁹ In my previous research with anti-Assad Syrian activists in Chicago, I found that watching violent videos on social media from the warzone in Syria was traumatizing for the activists and produced a kind of cognitive dissonance where they had to live in the present in Chicago while also being engrossed in the war in Syria.

Figure 2 continued

4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
 5. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by one or both of the following:
1. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
 2. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
- D. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
1. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia, and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).
 2. Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous,” “My whole nervous system is permanently ruined”).
 3. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.
 4. Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame).
 5. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities.
 6. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.
 7. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).
- E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation), typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
 2. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
 3. Hypervigilance.
 4. Exaggerated startle response.
 5. Problems with concentration.
 6. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).
- F. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria B, C, D and E) is more than 1 month.
- G. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition.

In the course of my research, I encountered many of these symptoms in the veterans I met, but some were more observable than others. I am not a psychologist and am not trained in diagnostics, so I relied on disclosure by veterans or observations by trainers for identify PTSD

symptoms. The first criterion, “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,” held true for all the veterans I talked with, but their experiences were often quite different. Nearly all the women I interviewed had Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and were not deployed to combat zones; they were not safe even in their desk jobs. One of the veterans developed her PTSD from listening to radio correspondences of soldiers in the field.

The intrusion symptoms were harder to track because I never witnessed firsthand any of the flashbacks – technically called “dissociative reactions” – that many of the veterans experienced. Instead, I commonly saw “physiological reactions,” such as panic attacks or heightened anxiety when triggered, such as by going into big box stores. Veterans and trainers alike often mentioned “distressing dreams” – what we would call nightmares – of the traumatic experience. Indeed, one of the most common service dog tasks is to calm veterans down from an anxiety attack or to wake up the veteran during a nightmare.

Avoidance came up frequently as a symptom of PTSD. Avoidance basically entails trying to avoid situations where the veteran is emotionally triggered. For example, one of the veterans I interviewed had been raped several times during her service. They were surprise attacks, and thus this veteran avoided being in situations where someone might come up behind her. Indeed, this was one of the main service dog tasks that helped to mitigate her PTSD.

“Negative alterations” look similar to depression and in fact many of the veterans I talk to were dual diagnosed. During one of my interviews, the veteran was unable to attend a family occasion that he was excited about, in part because of the aforementioned avoidance, but perhaps also because he had trouble participating in “significant activities.” An experience of estrangement also often came up in my interviews, since veterans tended to have small social networks. One veteran I talked to expressed that he had only one friend who he communicated

with via text. As I discuss further in Chapter Two, even the veterans who trained with each other did not form lasting bonds.

“Alterations in arousal and reactivity” were the most obvious symptoms that I encountered in fieldwork and during interviews. Veterans, especially men, reported dealing with anger at home with their families; this is often the reason a veteran seeks a service dog: because their significant other thinks it will help with this. The other common issue was hypervigilance, which means “the elevated state of constantly assessing potential threats.”¹⁰ While doing public access training – going to stores or restaurants – veterans with PTSD struggle with getting a sense of who is around them, so they are not startled when someone comes up behind them. Again, the dog plays a huge role here by staying vigilant on behalf of their veteran. Veterans often mentioned that the dog’s unique physical abilities mean that the dog is more able to sense when someone is coming up to them than they are, so they begin to relax.

A Brief Socio-History of PTSD

How has trauma emerged as a category of experience central to PTSD as a psychiatric diagnosis? According to Allan Young, the commonly accepted vision of PTSD – which he pushes back against – is that “the disorder itself has been around from the earliest times” and that the same kind of trauma we see today can be inferred back to ancient times, including in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Young 1995, 5). Young goes on to explain that physician John Erichsen investigated what he called “railway spine” and Charcot, Janet, and Freud inferred that a similar syndrome could be generated by psychological trauma, which they called hysteria (Young 1995, 5). According to Young, interest in trauma emerged again after WWI with soldiers returning with

¹⁰ <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-is-hypervigilance>

“traumatogenic shell shock”; further, in the 1940s, Abram Kardiner, who treated veterans with trauma, codified the features of trauma in its delayed and chronic forms, but his classification was largely ignored (Young 1995, 5). In 1980, a group of Vietnam veterans lobbied the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to add PTSD, “which described a cluster of symptoms that was common, to a greater or lesser degree, to all our veterans” (Van Der Kolk 2014, 19). Van Der Kolk claims that this made possible a “radical change” in understanding patients and led to “an explosion of research and attempts at finding effective treatments” (Van Der Kolk 2014, 19).

Despite this history, which researchers in psychology like Van Der Kolk would most likely accept, Young argues that this picture of PTSD is “mistaken”: “[t]he disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources” (Young 1995, 5). The diagnosis of PTSD makes us organize our perception of reality in certain ways. Fassin and Rechtman’s research shows how trauma went from being viewed with “suspicion” to having the “value of proof” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 5). The diagnosis of PTSD emerged out of a variety of socio-political projects, from “professional circles of psychiatry and psychology” to “social movements demanding rights,” such as veterans and women who have experienced violence (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 6). Even with the publication in 1980 of the DSM III, which included PTSD, many in the field of psychiatry gave it little attention. As I will explain in Chapter One, the diagnosis of PTSD came to the fore with soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, which eventually produced a need for service dogs. Zoë Wool reports that approximately 20% of veterans returning from tours abroad develop

PTSD (Wool 2015, 19), but half a century ago the intervention of psychiatrists in situations of trauma would not have made sense.

Van Der Kolk claims that trauma is more than just a past event. “This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present” (Van Der Kolk 2014, 21). Using brain imaging techniques, scientists have discovered that PTSD brains differ from “normal” brains, especially when experiencing a flashback. The effects of trauma are similar to “the effects of physical lesions like strokes” (Van Der Kolk 2014, 43). The presentation of the problem with trauma is that “fragments of memory intrude into the present” (Van Der Kolk 2014, 66).

If elements of the trauma are replayed again and again, the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind. Ordinary, day-to-day events become less and less compelling. Not being able to deeply take in what is going on around them makes it impossible to feel fully alive. It becomes harder to feel the joys and aggravations of ordinary life, harder to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Not being fully alive in the present keeps them more firmly imprisoned in the past. (Van Der Kolk 2014, 67)

Living an ordinary life will come up in Chapter Two, where having a service dog allows for a good life in the present and for going back out into public to enjoy activities. Van Der Kolk describes: “Each patient demands that we suspend our sense of what is normal and accept that we are dealing with a dual reality: the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous ever-present past” (Van Der Kolk 2014, 197). However, for many veterans with hypervigilance, everyday life is experienced as insecure and unsafe.

What the DSM-III intended to achieve was to provide a way of talking about mental disorders that “is not particular to any theoretic orientation” because they derive from “overt behaviors, biochemic markers, cognitive deficits, and so on – that should be visible to any

competent observer”¹¹ (Young 1995, 94). What the DSM-III aimed to accomplish disability activists call the medical model, which as I will discuss later as an ideological perspective. The DSM-III relied on the “nosological perspective” of Emil Kraepelin, who believed that mental disorders are similar to physical diseases, that classifying mental disorders requires observation of “visible phenomena,” and that eventually empirical research will show that mental illnesses have “biomedical origins” (Young 1995, 95-96), as well as psychological origins. As Van Der Kolk demonstrates, PTSD indeed does show up in the body.

Disability Theory

PTSD, if it meets the criterion that “[t]he disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (see Figure 2) can be considered a disability. This is important because in order to gain monetary benefits from the Veterans Affairs (VA),¹² or to obtain a service dog, the veteran must have a disability that originated from military service. While having to rely on a disability diagnosis, veterans push back against the “disorder” aspect of the diagnosis. Following the veterans’ lead, my dissertation challenges perceptions of PTSD, especially by relying on “crip” or disability theory and disability anthropology. The terminology of “crip” is not used by veterans themselves, but, as I argue, it fits well in the ways that veterans are trying to live an everyday life in the present alongside disability.

Susan Wendell (1996) describes the many ways in which a person comes to be determined as disabled. Government bureaucracies and social services often determine who is

¹¹ Here Young quotes (Amer. Psychia. Assoc. 1980:4-5).

¹² Monthly financial benefits range from payments of \$171.23 at 10% disability rating to \$4,280.77 for 100% disability with a spouse and two parents: <https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/veteran-rates/>

disabled and thus entitled to assistance (Wendell 1996, 11). Disabilities might also be socially recognized by family and friends (Wendell 1996, 12). Definitions of disability sometimes also rely on self-identification (Wendell 1996, 12); even so, many people who claim disability are not officially or medically recognized as disabled and are expected to function as non-disabled people (Wendell 1996, 25). Responding to the UN definition of disability, Wendell suggests that “basic ability”¹³ depends on “how much [ability] is necessary to perform the most common tasks of daily living in a particular physical and social environment” (Wendell 1996, 16). In this way, the boundaries between the “biological reality” and “social construction” of a disability are blurred (Wendell 1996, 35). As Sunaura Taylor indicates, there is a medical model that situates the issues of a disabled person “within their own body,” whereas disability rights activists regard disability as a “social justice” problem (Taylor 2017, 13). Taylor here is saying that we naturalize things like stairs and view ramps as “specialized,” but there is no reason why a ramp should be less natural (Taylor 2017, 14).

Crip and disability theory challenge the way in which ableism shapes our world, from infrastructure to discourses of cure or amelioration. Rather than accepting the ableist assumption that the disabled need special accommodations to live in the non-disabled world, crip and disability theory sees the world as failing to provide essential supports to bodies with value. In terms of crip theory, I am interested in the ways that scholars and activists challenge the “medical model” of disability, whereby the word “crip” (much like the term “queer”) refers to the disruption of everyday life in order to produce alternate worlds and forms of being. Indeed, “crip” is a derogatory medical term appropriated by some in the disabled community (McRuer 2006; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Kafer 2013; Clare 2017 and 1999; Taylor 2017).

¹³ Here Wendell she draws on Ron Amundson, an Emeritus philosopher at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo.

The medical model is used to limit ways of being in the world for the disabled, seeing the cure of a disabled body as the only “desired future” (Kafer 2013, 7). Eli Clare (2017) challenges the field of techno-medicine that promises a cure. This is not to push back against all kinds of medical and surgical interventions; some disabilities or illnesses require mediation with the medical field. Clare also points out that trans-medicine opens a life of new gendered possibilities. However, Clare pushes back against the ableism that sees disability as something to be cured to live a good life (Clare 2017, 26). Further, the medical model has the effect of rendering disability “apolitical” blocking disabled persons from contesting the “relations of power” that make up the political realm (Kafer 2013, 9). This does not stop disability activists for fighting for their independence and inclusion; the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 is an example of success of the disability rights movement (Mayerson 1992). Even earlier, veterans and victims’ rights groups fought for the inclusion of PTSD in the DSM-III, published in 1980.

Ethnographers have also dealt with the question of disability. What does it mean to live a good life alongside disability, without resorting to limiting ableist thinking? Karen Nakamura (2013) offers a vision of an intentional community that accommodates people who have psychiatric disabilities in Japan. Ralph Laurence (2014) refers to the new lives of advocacy that give meaning to the lives of disabled post-gang members in Chicago. Don Kulick and Jens Rydstrom look at “sexual advisors” (Kulick and Rydstrom 2015, 18) in Denmark where “[u]nderstanding engagement with the sexual lives of people with disabilities” is a problem of “basic social justice” (Kulick and Rydstrom 2015, 21), whereas the ableist assumption is that pleasure is secondary to basic functioning. Sarah D. Phillips (2010) investigates the struggles of marginalized peoples, especially “invalids” (Phillips 2010, 2) with mobility disabilities, to acquire acknowledgement and funds “in the face of general economic and social uncertainty” in

post-Soviet Ukraine (Phillips 2010, 6). Chloe Silverman (2012) examines the ways in which love for children with autism allows caretakers to make the right decisions about their care.

These ethnographic texts are examples of what Hartblay names “disability anthropology,” calling on us to ask “What does the category of disability do? What does disability do, here? What are people doing with disability?” (Hartblay 2020, S32). Going back to Wendell, Hartblay takes disability as a socially constructed category that produces new ways of being in the world. She appeals to readers to look for disability expertise: “people with disabilities are already engineering and designing in their daily lives, engaging everyday expertise to navigate their environments, minimize pain, and facilitate capacity”¹⁴ (Hartblay 2020, S28). While Hartblay’s ethnographic example is mainly about physical disabilities, and my discussion mainly deals with PTSD, we can also think about how service dog teams enact a form of expertise through training.

The veterans I encountered during my fieldwork largely rejected the term PTSD, preferring to post-traumatic stress (PTS) or post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI). As I will discuss in more detail later, some veterans and trainers understood PTSD as resulting from an injury, not a disorder. Returning to the technical diagnosis of PTSD, experiencing an injury can be the foundational “traumatic event” that leads to the disorder, but the veterans and many staff I worked with preferred not to pathologize the injury as a disorder but as some kind of ongoing experience of a wound. My intervention into this field is to suggest we question the medical model that seeks a cure and instead focus on what Veena Das calls “moral striving” as a way of living in the everyday (Das 2010, 376). I read focusing on the everyday as looking towards new ways of being in social worlds in the present instead of toward a future cure. Service dogs might not cure post-traumatic stress, but they often allow for veterans to live better in the present. The

¹⁴ Here Hartblay cites (Hendren and Lynch 2016; see also Fritsch and Hamraie 2019:9)

service dog industry at large requires dogs and their veterans to master public access – such as shopping in stores or flying on planes – which I suggest means that ordinary American life is perceived as feeling safe in public as consumers. I suggest that while this verges on an ableist assumption, there is room for the social justice perspective of disability in this argument, in the sense that dogs produce a diversity of relationships of care in the world that make the world more accessible. I ask what it means to live a good life without reverting back to ableist assumptions about what is “normal.”

Human/Nonhuman Interactions

Several questions motivate my investigation of human/nonhuman interactions: how do human/nonhuman relations produce emergent assemblages related to moral projects? How do we locate nonhuman agency in unequal relations with humans? What kinds of animals are deserving of life?

While these questions seem at first to focus on companion species like dogs and horses – and indeed this dissertation focuses on dogs – it is important to recognize that even genetically remote animals have something to teach about agency, by which I mean engaging in intentional action. Agency is important because for veterans to trust their service dog, the dog must have “initiative” and “volition” (Ingold 2000, 70). Veterans need to trust their dog to intervene when they are experiencing anxiety and/or some kind of physical illness. Karen Barad (2014) describes how the brittlestar, a creature for which its entire skeleton is a visual apparatus, collapses ontology and epistemology. For Barad, in her “agential realist account [...] [i]ntelligibility is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad 2014, 233). These brittlestars are “agentive beings, lively configurations in of the world, with

more entanglements than arms” (Barad 2014, 234). If brittlestars are “agentive beings,” then it should seem obvious that dogs and horses are too. Yet the ways in which our companion species are trained often consider operant conditioning as non-agentive when it is successful. “Agentive beings” need not mean that brittlestars and dogs and humans are similarly or equally agentive, which is what Barad means by “differential becoming” (Barad 2014, 233). In Chapter Four, I argue that agency does not just mean resisting commands or pushing back against the domination of humans; agency is also found in the relation that emerges in submission of a dog to human.

The question of what kinds of animals deserve to live plays out in the issue of nonhuman disability: how do we imagine what kinds of physically and psychically disabled animals deserve to live (Braitman 2015)? Indeed, within the organizations I have contacted, ascribing mental illness to dogs is not uncommon; the trainer Mia at Freedom Puppies had to retire her service dog after it was hit by a car and developed a canine version of PTSD. Taylor (2017) interprets the way we imagine disabled animals as a matter of whether they are considered worth keeping alive or not. There is a gap between what kinds of life deserves living: if an animal is sick or disabled, should it be euthanized? Indeed, according to Taylor, “human assumptions about disability invariably shape the way animal behaviorists interpret it” (Taylor 2017, 30). Returning to the question of ableism, Taylor suggests that there are other ways to imagine disabled well-being in both human and animal worlds. Her research shows that many species do make room for their disabled kin, who can go on to live socially connected lives (Taylor 2017, 26-27).

Another perspective on nonhuman ethics comes out in Naisargi Dave’s discussion of animal activism in India. “The tyranny of consistency steals the something we need by collapsing something with everything, so that all we are left with (because everything is impossible) is nothing, which is both impossible and extinguishing” (Dave 2017, 38). I read

Dave as exposing the slippery slope that if one cannot save all animals, saving any animals is ethically futile, leading to the conclusion of helping none. Dave insists that her point does not mean that “something is better than nothing” but rather that “immanent ethics makes the something habitable all by itself, a durative present in which everything and nothing are not alternatives to it but are one and the same within it: every something is everything (because in this moment it is all that matters), and every something is nothing (because it needn’t be related, tyrannically, to anything else)” (Dave 2017, 38). This perspective situates service dogs in crip theory, in the sense that the “durative present” can be inhabited for disabled veterans even if future cure is not possible or even desirable.

Another alternative to universalizing morality approaches the idiosyncratic ways that nonhuman animals associate with humans, calling on certain individuals to care for and enter relationships of what Adam Smith would have called “sympathy” with animals vis-à-vis particular relationships. According to Cora Diamond (2008), for example, some people are moved to care about animal life – about the deaths of animals in the food, beauty, and pharmaceutical industries – and others are not (or differently) called. This opens the problem of what Lori Gruen calls “affective resonance,” whereby some are interpellated by certain ethical and political projects, but not others (Gruen 2014, 46). Further, caring for one animal need not mean that one is responsible for caring for and advocating on behalf of all animals equally, as Dave so deftly explicates. Caring for service dogs, for example, does not mean caring for all animals: in fact, a charity organization that supports Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin recommended having a meat auction to raise money for their organization. I found it somewhat paradoxical that caring for service dogs means other kinds of animals are killable.

Scholars grapple with the question of human/nonhuman interactions – and the ways they produce emergent assemblages situated in moral projects – in a variety of ways. Following a foreword by Bruno Latour, where he calls for us to see the world as “animated” (Latour 2016, xi), Vinciane Despret’s *What Would Animals Say if we Asked the Right Questions?* puts forward a series of short essays that contain moral stories about animals and how humans relate to them (Despret 2016). In Chapter Four I draw on her term for assemblages of human and nonhuman agency as “complicated *agencements*” (Despret 2016, 5). Other related texts include Kelly Oliver’s book, where the author discusses “not only to propose an animal ethics but also to show how ethics itself is transformed by considering animals” (Oliver 2009, 22). In Cynthia Willett’s book, “a speculative venture in social and political ethics [...] draws insights broadly from vast intellectual and social movements in the context of our unprecedented era to propose transspecies ideals of communitarianism and cosmopolitan peace” (Willett 2014, 2). Jane C. Desmond concentrates on “social practices enacted in time and space at specific locations and based on the intimate performative relations that mutually construct humans and animals through their embodied copresence” (Desmond 2016, 5). These texts relate to my interest in ethically situating the nonhuman alongside the human in ways that produce more than the sum of its parts.

My first intervention into human/nonhuman interactions is to draw on the emergent relationships that imbue alliances with meaning. In her book *Animal Intimacies*, Radhika Govindrajan uses the term “relatedness” to suggest that lives with animals are produced through affective entanglements where subjecthood is not limited to humans but also attributed to animals (Govindrajan 2018, 3). Similarly, Eduardo Kohn sees both human and nonhuman animals as “selves” in relations of “becoming” with each other: “knowing others” means “inhabiting their different [U]mwelts” (Kohn 2007, 7). “[I]n their mutual attempts to live

together and make sense of each other, dogs and people increasingly come to partake in a shared constellation of attributes and dispositions – a sort of shared transspecies habitus” (Kohn 2007, 7). This leads to a kind of knowing of other selves, such as knowing what it means when dogs dream. I argue that in the case of service dogs, handlers and dogs are in connections of “relatedness” or “becoming” by way of growing bonds of love and trust. These bonds provide motivation for service dogs – who have capabilities particular to their species that humans make use of – to work for their veteran as medical equipment, such as sensing an oncoming anxiety attack or seizure. The inequality of the relationship is why dogs can function as medical tools while doctors and nurses do not.

My second intervention draws on the concept of agency for human and nonhuman animals. Again, agency is at stake in the question of trust: veterans can trust their dogs because they are well-trained and can be counted on to intervene if necessary. I focus on Shelly R. Scott’s essay on racehorses to illustrate that horses not only have agency because they sometimes disobey, but also that they have agency when they form a kind of “symbiosis” between jockey and horse (Scott 2009, 57). Vicki Hearne (2017) carries this forward by explaining that through training, the handler earns the right to give commands to the dog as submissive being. The goal is to get to the point where the dog understands a command like “Fetch!” so well that it can expand upon the common language between dog and handler (Hearne 2017). Service dogs are so well-trained in obedience that they can make the choice to “improvise” (Scott 2009, 58) by rejecting direct commands when their handler is in trouble, such as being on the verge of a panic attack in public.

Chapters

In the first chapter – “Dogs could do this!” An Institutional History of Service Dogs in the Age of PTSD – I tell the institutional history of PTSD service dogs in relation to the lack of clear definitions and standards, which led to a crisis of legitimacy. Accrediting organizations have emerged to pick up the governmental slack by exercising expertise through “standards of excellence” for trainers and dogs, yet even so many organizations choose to remain unaffiliated and rely on their own expertise through experience. I also explain what happened when many veterans returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan: there developed a need for service dogs for veterans due to the public health crisis of veteran suicide. Non-for-profit organizations proliferated to train service dogs for veterans who could not afford their own \$25,000 dog. Veterans looked to the expertise of trainers in order to trust they are producing a legitimate service dog. The race is on to find scientific evidence beyond the anecdotal that service dogs are an effective adjunctive treatment for PTSD. There is much at stake here, especially the inclusion of service dogs in veterinarianian benefits for PTSD dogs. There are new government initiatives that are looking into the efficacy of service dogs and this has the potential to shake up the service dog industry, especially since government agencies are only working with certain accreditation organizations.

In the second chapter – Public Access: Ordinary, Safe Lives as American Consumers – I explain that service dogs differ from emotional support animals or pets by being allowed in public places like grocery stores or restaurants or planes. The service dog industry values public access to such a degree that it imagines an ordinary, American citizen as a person who feels safe while shopping in public. Veterans trust their dogs to watch their backs in public, thus reducing hypervigilance. I suggest that the assemblages of organizations, the service dog industry, doctors,

trainers, veterans, and dogs are involved in “moral striving” (Das 2010, 376) in the everyday that produces new ways of inhabiting a world with PTSD and pushes back against ableist notions of future “cure” for disabilities. Service dogs help veterans to live in the present by mitigating symptoms like hypervigilance in public and avoidance, helping them to live a non-ableist “good life” (MacIntyre 1981, 219). This perspective pushes back against the Veterans Affairs (VA) indication that service dogs stall progress in curing PTSD by preventing habituation of anxiety symptoms.

In the third chapter – Service Dogs as Subjects of Love and Objects of Medicine – I discuss how service dogs and their veterans bond with each other in order for the dog to function as medical equipment. I rely on the concepts of “relatedness” (Govindrajan 2018, 3) and “becoming” (Kohn 2007, 7) to describe the emergent relationships between human and dog. I trace the process of bonding from the first pairing to bonding through training as a kind of process of falling in love or courtship. Indeed, the veteran rely on the trust they have formed with their dog to keep them alive in dangerous situations. Paradoxically, service dogs are both subject/objects of love and trust and also objects of medical equipment. I argue that the bond between human and dog motivates the dog to work for its handler and the human to trust their dog.

In the fourth chapter – Obedient Disobedience: Agency, Improvisation, and Service Dog Training – I focus on the obedience training that prospective service dogs must endure to master their advanced service dog tasks. I also consider what trainers call “obedient disobedience,” which is what happens when service dogs try to get their handler’s attention. Dogs disobey commands to help their veterans: if a veteran is not responding to the dog’s alert, the dog may improvise and misbehave to call attention to a veteran’s anxiety or physical illness. Again, the

veteran can trust the dog to do its “job.” Finally in this chapter I argue that dogs have agency even when they are being trained by operant conditioning. Agency does not just mean choosing to disobey, but also when dogs are attuned to their veteran/handler through submission.

Chapter 1:
“Dogs could do this!” An Institutional History of Service Dogs in the Age of PTSD

Expertise and a Crisis of Legitimacy with Service Dogs Organizations

This chapter begins with an institutional history pieced together from interviews with individuals who consider themselves to be experts and have been in the service dog industry for as long as thirty or more years. It is also based on interviews and observations with individuals new to the industry or in the middle of their career. It is a history of expertise that emerged due to a crisis of legitimacy resulting from a lack of structure between organizations and eventually the vagueness of service dog standards in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Most literature on crises of legitimacy (Rosen 2023; Gok and Mehmetcik 2022; Schmidt 2020; Longo and Murray 2015; Habermas 1975) focuses on governance – national, regional, or global – where there is a failure to believe in a “person or institution exercising power” (Rosen 2023, 2). However, as Rosen points out, from an anthropological perspective, “it is the special province of culture to be the repository of those categories of personal and collective experience, ramified across the domains of kinship, politics, religion, and the arts, that give a sense of orderliness and meaning to the distribution of legitimate power” (Rosen 2023, 2). It is through the lens of culture that we evaluate the legitimacy of a person, organization, or government. The legitimacy of a service dog organization or trainer depends on the culture of the service dog industry as it situates itself in relation to other dog training groups through accreditation or through relations with government agencies. There is also crisis of legitimacy in terms of producing standardized service dogs that are safe in public; there is currently a problem of “fake” or poorly trained service dogs that misbehave in public and thereby make it harder for “true” service dogs to be received as legitimate.

The expert, according to Rosen, is a person – or perhaps a group of people – who “[assert] superior legitimacy based on education, experience, methodology, and personal insight” (Rosen 2023, 4). Dominic Boyer suggests that “we define an expert as an actor who has developed skills in, semiotic-epistemic competence for, and attentional concern with, some sphere of practical activity” (Boyer 2008, 39). In the case of service dogs, this sphere of practical activity revolves around the establishment of “standards of excellence”¹ through committees of diverse experts – including trainers and psychologists – in accreditation organizations. “We define *standardization* as the process of rendering things uniform, and *standard* as both the means and outcome of standardization. In the most general sense, a standard refers to a measure established by authority, customs, or general consent to be used as a point of reference” (Timmermans and Berg 2003, 24). In the service dog industry, standardization looks not only like the uniform formation of service dog training models, but also an establishment of standards for record keeping and general ways of running an organization. The two biggest accreditation organizations in the PTSD service dog world – Assistance Dogs International (ADI) and Association of Service Dogs Providers (ASDP) – both require candidates to undergo a several days audit of the facilities, paperwork, and training.

The experts that emerged out of the crisis of legitimacy gained their authority in part by communicating as experts. As E. Summerson Carr indicates in her review of expertise: “we can define an expert register as a way of speaking that is recognized as a special kind of knowledge and manifests in interaction as such” (Carr 2010, 20). Alongside the establishment of accrediting institution came a proliferation of documents and practices (such as conferences or accreditation processes) that standardize service dog training, but this “special kind of knowledge” is privy

¹ This is what Assistance Dogs International (ADI) call their standards.

only to organizations that have been accredited. Carr argues: “Yet perhaps what institutions do best is naturalize the expertise that has been produced in real-time interactions between putatively expert people and potentially valuable objects, allowing it to float across evermore empowering contexts”² (Carr 2010, 25). In this case, the naturalization of expertise by ADI made it possible for collaborations with state institutions, especially Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DOD), in terms of providing veterinarian benefits to service dogs. Newer initiatives from the DOD have started working with non-ADI organizations too, but ADI remains central to VA research into service dog efficacy.

As this chapter lays out, in the case of service dogs, expertise is not limited to standardization. As Boyer indicates: “cultures of expertise thus routinely encroach upon one another, challenging jurisdictions, borrowing ideas and re-functioning them for new purposes and audiences” (Boyer 2008, 43). In the case of service dogs, many organizations rely on their own expertise and regard accrediting organizations as “challenging jurisdictions.” In my experience of working with and interviewing service dog organizations, many seek accreditation, but many others do not want to pay membership fees or open their operations to scrutiny during the candidacy phase. Even so they “borrow ideas” such as advanced service dog techniques; Liberty Hounds, for example, uses an adaptation of the ADI public access test.

PTSD service dogs exploded in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The need for service dog organizations derives from a general understanding that veteran suicide is a public health crisis and dogs can help with this. Service dogs became a need for the community of veterans with trauma, leading to an even greater expansion of PTSD service dog organizations that sometimes do and sometimes do not seek candidacy in institutionalized accreditation organizations. Each

² Here Carr suggests the reader “(compare Foucault 1978, 1984).”

individual program has its own way of doing expertise, and in many cases at the very beginning trainers relied on peripheral kinds of knowledge, such as how to train sport dogs.

As I have indicated, the need for expertise in the case of service dogs came by way of a crisis of legitimacy for producing standardized, safe dogs in public. During the early stages of the service dog industry, organizations worked on their own with little collaboration. As I will explain in this chapter, ADI emerged in the mid 1980s as a way of standardizing practices to produce legitimate service dogs. Then with the publication of the ADA in 1990, service dog organizations gained some rules and expectations, but there was – and still is – no formal process that certifies service dogs. Each organization exercises its own expertise – sometimes assisted by an accreditation organization and sometimes not – to produce legitimate service dogs. But who judges whether a service dog is legitimate? Organizations each have their own method of endorsing dogs as legitimate service dogs, and I would not be surprised if organizations would disagree about what counts as a service dog. As Timmermans and Berg indicate, standards – perhaps as way of dealing with a crisis of legitimacy – “attempt to achieve the seemingly impossible: prescribe the behavior of professionals” (Timmermans and Berg 2003, 26). ADI, for example, expects trainers to not teach what they consider to be “guarding” behaviors like body blocking³, which is a task that nearly all non-accredited organizations teach their teams. While the service dog industry is not nearly as regulated as the medical field in Timmermans and Berg’s account, there are interventions in place to legitimate dogs through practices of standardization: “[s]tandards are political entities because they reorder practices and change the position of different actors” (Timmermans and Berg 2003, 22). Indeed, ADI standards often require candidates to reorganize their files and change some training techniques. ADI has the power to

³ Body blocking is when the dog stands in between the handler and passersby in public. Some organizations train the dog to do this on its own accord and others rely on a command of space.

require this of candidates because their accreditation comes with governmental recognition and benefits that lone organizations or other umbrella organizations do not have.

While the ADI likes to think of itself as a gold standard of dog training, the field of dog training is vastly heterogeneous. Some organizations consist of just one trainer/founder, whereas other larger organizations employ dozens of trainers and a full staff to run their operation.

Timmermans and Berg describe some pushback to standardization in the medical field, which is relevant also in the service dog industry: “[s]tandards undermine the expertise of professionals, constituting an unnecessary and harmful intrusion into a world of autonomous experts”

(Timmermans and Berg 2003, 20). Many organizations rely on their own practices to legitimate their dogs, such as holding dedication or graduation ceremonies. As I describe in the introduction, Liberty Hounds convenes a small ceremony to render “official” the dogs as graduates of their program; they are also part of a newer accreditation organization – Association of Service Dog Providers (ASDP) – that is in competition with ADI. Independence Paws holds lavish fundraising dedications, the heart of which is presenting the dog to the veteran to celebrate the hard work that the dog/veteran partners have put in. The purpose is to legitimize both the organization and the dog/veteran teams, even though Independence Paws fails to teach service dog tasks and thus might be considered as not meeting even vague ADA standards.

The goal of standardization of service dogs is that the dogs can be trusted by organizations and veterans to be safe in public, both for the veteran and the general public. The performances that legitimize service dogs – from graduations to testing – produce this kind of dog as public entity. In my experience, veterans paired with organizations within driving distance rather than based on accreditation or accolades. This is for organizations that train veterans to train their own dogs, whereas for organizations that place fully trained dogs, reputation may be

more important. Veterans trusted the trainers, and by way of training gained trust in their dog, which I will describe in more length in Chapter Three. The crisis of legitimacy relates not only to the prestige of an organization in the service dog industry, but also the ways in which veterans come to trust their dogs to help them with their PTSD symptoms.

I once heard from a trainer that “the only thing two trainers can agree on is that the third is doing it wrong.” This speaks to fractures in the service dog field even between organizations with the same accreditation. For example, I interviewed a one-woman operation who told me she instructs her veterans to lie in public, if asked about their disability, and say that they have a seizure disorder. When I brought this up with an ADI staff member, she was horrified. This goes to show that ADI has weaker authority to control its organizations than it might realize and that their legitimacy is not always coherent authority.

The First Service Dog

The institutional story goes that Bonnie Bergin trained the very first service dog in 1975. She had been traveling the world, especially South Asia and Turkey, and found people with mobility disabilities using donkeys and burros to aid in their mobility. Upon returning home, Bergin wondered what could be done for people with disabilities in the U.S. “I just sat there, and I have to tell you, I just went: dogs! Dogs could do this” (Bergin 2018).

Back in the states Bergin continued to think about how animals might help people with disabilities, especially limiting institutionalization and promoting freedom. Approaching guide dog organizations and other dog trainers near where she lived in California, she got push back. “Everyone told me it couldn’t be done. It wouldn’t work. Give it up. Throw it away, it’s not a good idea.” Finally she got a break: a local disability organization agreed to help her with the

dog training. The result was the golden-lab cross Abdul, the first modern service dog.⁴ The dog was trained to assist a multiple amputee with mobility issues; he learned tasks such as picking up objects and turning on lights.

After Abdul, Bergin encountered a lot of interest in training other service dogs. For the most part she claims she was flying blind, without any background in dog training. She repeatedly told me she was shy and not sure of what she was doing. But she did have a degree in education, and she used her teaching skills to train dogs. She eventually founded Canine Companions for Independence (CCI). The aim of the organization was to promote independence for people who have disabilities. The scope quickly spread to people with autism and other mental health problems; she also started to encounter deaf persons who wanted a hearing dog.

Bergin left CCI to form her own college as a training center for service dogs: the Assistance Dog Institute. The organization was formally recognized as a university in 2004 and changed name to the Bergin College of Canine studies (the board named it so in her honor). The university now offers several degrees: Associate of Science in Assistance Dog Education, Bachelor of Science Degree in Canine Studies (Cynology), and Master of Science in Human-Canine Life Sciences (Bergin University, n.d.).

An Institutional History of Service Dogs

In 1986, several organizations training service dogs had emerged, and at a meeting of these organizations, Bergin proposed working together. This meeting resulted in the foundation of

⁴ Some consider guide dogs for the blind as the first modern service dogs, but in this chapter, I consider service dogs as separate from guide dogs because their socio-histories differ significantly from each other. Now there is more coordination between guide and service dogs, but the service dog industry, according to an interview I did with an ADI representative, considers guide dogs, hearing dogs, and service dogs as separate kinds of working dogs.

ADI, of which Bergin was the first president. ADI initially was made up of seven organizations: six hearing dog organizations and one service dog (mainly mobility) organization.

Hearing dogs predate mobility service dogs by six years. In 1969, a 16-year-old named Linda Pritchard found that her German Shepherd named Skippy naturally alerted her to sounds in her environment. The family decided to hire a trainer – Sally Terroux – to build on Skippy’s tendency to let Linda know when there was an important sound. “She trained Skippy to alert Linda to a variety of sounds such as an alarm clock, a door knock, a whistling tea kettle and a smoke alarm” (O’Brian 2021). Most service dog organizations these days tend to not focus on hearing dogs as much anymore. Instead, organizations dedicated exclusively to hearing dogs have cropped up to fill this gap.

It may seem like a continuation of guide dog work – pairing trained dogs with people who are blind or have low vision – but in fact the kind of service dog that Bergin trained was received by the assistance dog industry as a totally new kind of working dog. Guide dogs date back to the 1700s, possibly the ancient world even, but in the modern sense they were first trained for veterans blinded by poisonous gas in World War I (IGDF “History of Guide Dogs,” n.d.). The training of dogs for the blind mainly took place in Europe until 1928 when Morris Frank (IGDF “Morris Frank,” n.d.) brought Buddy, a guide dog trained German Shepard, to New York (O’Brian 2021). This by far predates the first service dog, so it makes sense that guide dog organizations continued to think of themselves as separate from service dogs.

Guide dogs’ organizations formed their own accreditation organization through a series of negotiations in European states about setting standards for guide dogs. In 1988 the International Federation of Guide Dog Schools for the Blind was founded at a meeting of 40 organizations spread throughout the world. It went on to be renamed the International Guide Dog Foundation

(IGDF). Like ADI, joining the organization entails an extensive accreditation process that was implemented in the early 1990s (IGDF “History of IGDF,” n.d.). Along with ADI, the VA recognizes IGDF trained dogs as eligible for veterinarian benefits. After the formation of ADI, guide dog organizations eventually incorporated with ADI and began to work together with other kinds of assistance dogs.

As time went on the service dog organizations expanded. At its outset, as an ADI affiliate explained to me, ADI’s goals were to standardize the field of service dogs. While ADI started out with mainly hearing dogs, service dogs are now the “largest category” of assistance dog. In fact, while hearing dogs are still considered assistance dogs, they are no longer considered “service dogs.” A service dog is “trained to mitigate an individual’s disability other than vision or hearing disabilities.” ADI brought to the table a set of “standards of excellence” for service dogs. As one ADI affiliate told me:

There was a wide variance in the quality of dogs that were being trained, and so their initial objectives were really about raising the standards that all organizations could attain and to really ensure that the dogs that are being trained and placed out in public were meeting standards that made them safe in general public.⁵ That provided ethics of operations for dealing with the individuals receiving dogs as well as the health and safety of dogs being trained.

To this day, ADI continues to revise its standards, as recently as 2023, which saw the change from PTSD service dogs for veterans to psychiatric service dogs unspecified if military or civilian. This seems to be following the trend of service dogs for “invisible disabilities” in the wider public. Indeed, one of the ADI affiliates that I spoke with called the psychiatric service dog the new “it” dog. In this way, the expertise of ADI’s publications opened pathways for non-veterans to also obtain service dogs for psychiatric disorders, including but not limited to PTSD.

⁵ Public access is the core of what makes a service dog a service dog: emotional support animals and pets cannot enter grocery stores or restaurants like service dogs can. I will go into more detail about this in Chapter Two.

ADI expanded over the years, and when organizations started to focus on veterans with disabilities like PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or Military Sexual Trauma (MST), they went on to accredit more than forty organizations with programs focused especially on service dogs for veterans. At this point, starting in 2012, the VA will only cover the veterinarian costs for mobility or hearing service dogs obtained from an ADI organization.⁶ This relationship is an incentive for service dog organizations to team up with ADI and go through their extensive accreditation process. ADI charges a \$500 fee to apply for candidacy and \$1,000 yearly for membership. According to the ADI website:

Accreditation is a peer-review process that involves submission of paperwork in advance (a pre-packet) of an on-site survey by a trained accreditation assessor. The on-site survey is conducted over several days that includes the assessor interviewing staff, clients, volunteers, and board member; reviewing paperwork and files; observing clients and dog training; and inspecting the program's facilities in order to make sure that all of ADI's Standards are being met. All programs are required to be re-accredited every five years in order to maintain their ADI accreditation membership status. (ADI, n.d.)

An organization enters the accreditation process as a “candidate,” which, according to the ADI affiliate I spoke with, means that it is “an assistance dog organization that has met our requirements to become a candidate.” A candidate must abide by the following “guiding principles.” To summarize, members must have “direct responsibility for the operational training and placing of assistance dogs and assures the long-term support of the clients and dogs” and “the overall ethics of the program must be ‘charitable’ and must be stated by the program” (ADI n.d.). Apart from providing dogs at no cost to veterans, what counts as charitable is vague. I spoke with an organization that chooses to remain unaffiliated to any of the accreditation organizations, and she mentioned looking up the finances of one of the larger organizations on

⁶ As I will go into more detail later, PTSD service dogs are not eligible for veterinarian benefits like mobility, hearing, and guide dogs are because the VA believes that service dogs function as a crutch for veterans with PTSD and who thereby never recover from their anxiety.

their website. “They are taking home a huge paycheck!” she told me. She, on the other hand, put all her proceeds into her organization.

At the heart of the accreditation process is an extensive several days “survey,” where the ADI auditor looks through all the paperwork and finances of the candidate organization. As mentioned in the above quote, the auditor will interview all staff and volunteers; they will observe trainings; and they will survey the facilities. The candidate organization can plan to have this audit every five years. This extensive process of standardization again speaks to the crisis of legitimacy. When I spoke with ADI representatives, they always asked if I was talking to ADI affiliated groups, since they were top-notch. This again goes to show that ADI considers itself to be the gold standard of service dog training. With their power related to governmental bodies, it is plain to see why they consider themselves so.

The ADI candidate must also be willing to uphold the “standards of excellence” that the ADI designates. As I have suggested so far, the formation of standards by an accrediting organization is the core of the legitimization process, trusted to produce legitimate service dogs. The production of these standards is an exclusive mode of principles that figure in the accreditation process. As I mentioned earlier, certain commands that many service dog organizations train are off limits for ADI, and candidates have had to change their approach in order to become accredited. This is another barrier for unaffiliated organizations to join ADI.

In return for the efforts made at candidacy, the organizations have privileges that go beyond VA recognition: networking and education, support for reaching ADI standards, access to the ADI website, Facebook, and conferences, eligibility to receive the ENewsletter, and a link on the ADI website.

The Vagueness of the ADA

The service dog industry took a turn in 1990 with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA was introduced to congress in 1988, but the movement that led the charge “began with the establishment of the independent living movement which challenged the notion that people with disabilities needed to be institutionalized, and which fought for and provided services for people with disabilities to live in the community” (Mayerson 1992). Although the use of assistance animals is not a new phenomenon, use has increased since the ADA became law in 1990. The initial ADA that emerged in 1990 did not “specifically address the rights of individuals with disabilities to bring their animals to programs or services covered by the ADA. However, several years after the ADA was adopted, regulations addressing assistance animals were issued by both the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Transportation (DOT), including the definition of a service animal and the rights of individuals with disabilities” (Brown 2019). An ADI coordinator who I interviewed explained that the ADA brought awareness about the “expansion of dogs being trained for disabilities other than vision or blindness.”

The ADA includes a section about service dogs that outlines the guidelines for a service dog. The 2020 updated version⁷ explains that service animals are dogs trained to “work or perform tasks” for people with disabilities. These dogs must be allowed to enter public places – big box stores, groceries, planes – but the ADA leaves private estates – like churches – to the property owner’s discretion. Staff in public locations are allowed to ask a service dog team two questions: “is the dog a service animal required because of a disability” and “what work or task

⁷ The 1990 version of the ADA does not mention service animals, rather standards for dogs came about a few years later. The link for the ADA’s rules about service dogs is here: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-2010-requirements/>

has the dog been trained to perform” (ADA 2020). If a service dog is misbehaving in the store, the business must give the handler team the chance to get the dog back under control; if they fail to do this, they can be forced to leave.

The ADA is quite vague about what counts as a service dog, leading to a wide variety of organizations that mobilize various techniques. Indeed, the ADA considers it acceptable for handlers to train their dogs as service animals on their own. It is this lack of standardization that empowers organizations like ADI to formalize best practices and thereby produce legitimate dogs. Many of my interlocutors – trainers and staff from a variety of service dog organizations, not limited to ADI – indicated that they wish the ADA were more specific about training and certification. Despite efforts to standardize service dogs through organizations such as ADI, many organizations rely on their own internal standards and choose to remain unaffiliated. Even organizations that are affiliated are in control of many practices, such as how to obedience train puppies or how to deal with the public. In this way, expertise comes not only from standardization but also by individual practices.

Other Accrediting Institutions

Because the ADA is vague about what kind of training a service dog must undergo to be considered a legitimate service dog, accreditation organizations like ADI have cropped up to set their own standards in exchange for the community and support amongst dog trainers and dog handler teams.

In 1993, the International Association of Assistance Dog Partners (IAADP) was founded by a coalition of disabled persons with service dogs. The goal was to “establish an independent cross disability consumer organization that would represent all Assistance Dog Partners and

advance consumer interests in the assistance dog field” (IAADP “History,” n.d.). Unlike ADI, which granted membership to organizations, IAADP granted membership individuals with disabilities and service dogs. The goals were “education” about service dogs (for consumers and the public at large), “legislation” (to promote rights indicated in the ADA), “advocacy” (providing benefits to service dog pairs), and “mutual support” (sharing information) (IAADP “History,” n.d.). IAADP is closely associated with ADI, expecting its service dog team members to adhere to ADI standards (IAADP “Minimum Training,” n.d.).

The International Association of Canine Professionals (IACP) is an organization that again seeks to set standards for dog training. They mainly focus on education and training and work “actively to reduce cruelty and abuse in the canine industry” (IACP “Mission,” n.d.). Unlike many of the other accreditation organizations, IACP includes professionals, not only non-profit organizations. They essentially seek to create cooperation in a climate where organizations often disagree with each other. They also promote “responsible dog ownership” and the “establishment of dog parks, training and exercise areas within local communities” (IACP “Mission,” n.d.). They also have an outreach component, creating “public relations and advertising campaigns to promote a more positive image of dogs and their role within today’s society” (IACP “Mission,” n.d.).

Association of Service Dog Providers

Another major accreditation organization emerged in 2016 that focuses specifically on service dogs for veterans (mainly with PTSD) and, now recently, also first responders. It started with three organizations that focused only on service dogs for veterans; they felt it was necessary to establish an organization that focused on dogs for veterans with post-traumatic stress. The

Association of Service Dog Providers (ASDP, formerly The Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans) “unites non-profit organizations dedicated to serving military Veterans and First Responders struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and military sexual trauma/sexual assault. Our collective mission is to safeguard the well-being of these individuals, striving to prevent suicide and enhance mental health” (ASDP, n.d.). Much like the ADI, ASDP revolves around the establishment of standards and includes a three-day audit. At the time of writing, ASDP is undergoing a leadership change, and more changes can be expected. One of the major changes is that ASDP is now an accredited member of IACP, so members of ASDP receive a double accreditation from both organizations. They also have a new executive director: Shannon Walker at Northwest Battle Buddies. I spoke with a member of ASDP and they told me that ASDP is working on becoming more “professional.” This included a revamping of the standards, which was approved by the board of directors. ASDP wants to be competitive with ADI and thus produced even more stringent standards.

The accreditation process for ASDP mimics that of ADI. It involves an “administration and organizational review,” which includes looking at items like insurance policies and training documents (ASDP 2023, 2). Candidates must also train their staff in suicide intervention and lay out the application process for new veterans seeking dogs (ASDP 2023, 3). ASDP also requires a minimum of 360 hours of training, including a minimum of 60 hours of “public exposure” and 60 hours of training in a “public place” (ASDP 2024, 10). ASDP standards are detailed, going from a discussion of what training should look like – in class and in public – to keeping “uniform” records to facilitate audits (ASDP 2023, 10). It even goes so far as to discuss what to do if there is another dog or animal at home (ASDP 2024, 4). In conversations with members, I found that the standards that ASDP holds its members to include recommending spay/neuter,

making sure the dog is less than three years old, and be tested for temperament and vocality. All dogs go through a variety of tests: they must pass AKC Canine Good Citizen test (CGC) and CGC Urban. The dog at graduation must also perform the tasks that mitigate the handler's symptoms and assist them in going into public. It also details how the veteran candidacy program works, such as requiring a note from the VA explaining that the veteran's disability is service related (ASDP 2024, 3). The veteran must also have an honorable discharge. The training program must be tailored to work with veterans who have experienced trauma and are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress, which ASDP considers a medical disability (ASDP 2024, 7). The organizations must plan for recertifications at regular intervals (ASDP 2024 15). ASDP charges \$1,000 to apply and a yearly \$5,000 to retain their membership.

I had the opportunity to attend two ASDP conferences, and nearly all the presentations were given by accredited organizations, even though the audience was mostly non-affiliated. One of presentations was about how to train basic obedience and simple service dog tasks, which naturalized ASDP expertise by way of disseminating standards held by one of the founding organizations. In attendance of these conferences were many ADI organizations who sent a representative or two, perhaps to scope out the competition. The ADI conference, in contrast, is only open to ADI members. Apart from the ASDP focus on veterans and first responders, ADI and ASDP have a lot of overlap in terms of standards, except for the prohibition of blocking tasks. There is some tension between these two accreditation organizations because ASDP claims to have written the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Act (PAWS Act), but after making its way through congress and ultimately was implemented, the VA chose ADI organizations as their field sites. There are some hard feelings on the part of ASDP because of this.

The Shift to Working with Veterans

Early on, Bergin expanded her services to work at a juvenile detention center, bringing in dogs for therapeutic reasons such as giving purpose in life, stopping gang violence, and getting to experience the love of a dog that they did not receive in their early lives. “And then we just started to put two and two together and realize that these veterans that were coming back from the war were in need of the same or similar therapy, essentially.” The result was Paws for Purple Hearts, which gained non-for-profit status in 2011. Bergin explained: “The need is so great, and the number of suicides is so high. And the dogs are so amazing in what they offer to veterans. It’s just phenomenal.”

According to the ADI, it was largely in the mid-2010s that saw a proliferation of PTSD service dogs: “with the return of the veterans especially from the Afghan war, and the number of veterans coming back presenting with PTSD really exploded that type of service dog placement. So ADI was concerned that these veterans were different from other types of placements. And so they really felt the need to develop specific standards for that particular type of service dog placement.” Following a symposium in 2017, a set of standards were produced by ADI for veterans who have PTSD due to military experience. As I mentioned earlier, in 2023 this was updated to “Standards for Psychiatric Service Dogs.” The ADI affiliate I spoke with explained that ADI was responding to “trends or issues chang[ing] within the industry.” As a result, ADI recognized all persons with psychiatric disabilities, with veteran becoming a subset of this category.

Proliferation of Service Dogs Organizations for Veterans

In the late 2000s, early 2010s, there was a proliferation of organizations that train service dogs for veterans with PTSD. Trainers found themselves suddenly responding to a need for service dogs for veterans who had experienced mental and/or physical trauma while deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the need grew, veterans from earlier wars, like Vietnam, also sought out service dogs for their long undiagnosed PTSD. In this section I describe how diverse organizations and trainers found themselves working for non-profits that provide service dogs to veterans at no cost. It also illustrates the evolution of the PTSD service dog before standardization in 2017. “One is not born an expert; the phenomenology of expertise⁸ and the capacity to operate productively in a culture of expertise are acquired processually” (Boyer 2008, 44). Indeed, trainers learned to train PTSD service dogs as they went along, growing their expertise about PTSD.

Some individual trainers or dog training organizations tell the story of being approached by a veteran or psychologist and encouraged to try to train a service dog for a veteran. One trainer, for example, was approached by a psychologist about one of her clients that she thought might benefit from having a service dog.

She was counseling a veteran who was in really bad shape. So she asked me if I would talk to him, and so he came out. And I sat and talked to him and told him what dogs could do. He hung out with us for a while. She didn’t think that he would show up. But he did. And then she called me the next day, I guess she saw him the next day. And she asked me what I did to him. I said ‘well, what do you mean?’ And she said he came back and for the first time he had hope for the future.

For a veteran such as this one who likely did not improve significantly from standard treatments, the prospect of having a service dog provided a sense of hope. Another trainer tells a similar story:

⁸ Here Boyer references himself: (Boyer 2005:43-44).

When I got a call from a marine who had been on a traditional service dogs waiting list and was looking for a trainer to help him train a dog kind of as kind of his last hope. If you've ever spoken to someone, even on the phone, who has suicidal ideologies (sic), you can hear it come across. And so I simply said to him, if he was willing to take a chance on me, I would give it my best shot. That sent me down the path to learning about what issues our veterans were facing. Post-traumatic stress. How a service dog can help. Psychiatric service dogs at the time was very... pretty much new.

This story tells of the genesis of psychiatric service dogs by trainers willing to try their hand at PTSD service dog training. Most of the trainers I talked to expressed expertise in training, but not for PTSD service dogs. They were not familiar with PTSD or other kinds of non-mobility trauma. One trainer told me that "at the beginning I was just thrown into it. I was not familiar. I started seeing symptoms of it in varying levels of severity." This trainer later went on to join ASDP, at which point she became involved in a community of expert trainers working together to share information such as training tips or best practices in running a Non-for-Profit (NFP). The veteran in this case was willing to trust the trainer to produce a legitimate service dog, even though he had no evidence to show that their endeavor would be successful.

As time went on, more and more veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan sought out service dogs and found themselves faced with years of waiting lists and costs of \$25,000 and above. Perhaps for this reason word spread in the veteran community that there were trainers willing to provide service dogs at no cost to the veteran. As one trainer told me: "They started showing up more and more and they would tell... somebody else would tell and they started showing up." The trainer who responded to the marine found herself inundated within months of starting to train.

By the end of January, and just because of word of mouth, and my asking questions at certain places, I had three veteran clients. And in that moment it was like: okay, I think I can do this. And the concept of Dogs, Stars, and Stripes came into existence. And I did it for about eighteen months with funding from my savings, family and friends. When a friend said: 'Joanna, you can't keep doing this.' Because I think we were up to thirty

something clients at that point. ‘You got to form a non-profit.’ So that’s what started DSS as a non-profit. And we became a non-profit in September of 2011”

With so many veterans seeking service dogs, there developed a need that trainers responded to. As one trainer told me, the goal of the organization was “to close the gap a bit of those needing a dog and dogs available.” Another claimed that she “realized that there was a gap in the people that needed dogs and the ability, you know, and the availability of service dogs.” Finally another explained that “it became more and more veterans needed help, you know. Of course the word got out who we were. We start receiving more and more applications. The last few years have been... we exploded. Like, we went from, maybe like 8 or 10 dogs to like 23, 25 dogs. Busy.” This explosion of need suggests that many veterans do not experience enough relief of their symptoms from evidence supported treatments (EST) and are turning to service dogs as an adjunctive treatment. For some of the organizations and veterans I talked to, they were referred to their organizations from medical professionals or social workers familiar with various programs in the area.

One of the trainers I spoke to told me about how she started with training her own service dogs because however hard she looked, she could not find a mobility dog to help with her with a knee injury that left her disabled.

So I started looking for a service dog and again: just unattainable. There was nowhere, no one, thousands, twenty thousand, thirty thousand, fifty thousand dollars. Years and years of waitlists. And no guarantee that you’re ever going to get a dog. So I did a lot of research. I started looking up organizations that did advocacy for people with disabilities looking for a service dog and I started training my own service dog about 15 years ago.

Veterans faced the same difficulties as the trainer: lack of availability for service dogs. At the time that she started training service dogs there “wasn’t a lot of help available.” The founder was a veteran with PTSD and TBI and “it was the same kind of story like I had. She needed help, there was nothing, there was nobody, especially out here in the desert. There’s just not a lot.”

Training dogs to alert to trauma symptoms emerged around a few years after the government, especially the VA, was starting to diagnose PTSD more frequently and provide evidence-based treatments, which I will describe at greater length later. One staff member explained that their organization was founded after a non-military suicide in the family eleven years ago. “And he began to do research and find out how service dogs could be used to help people with mental health issues, and specifically veterans with PTSD.” He found that at this time “the military was not recognizing PTSD that well” and that “service dogs in helping PTSD was like a new thought.”

Some of the trainers are veterans themselves. One talked to me about her traumatic brain injury (TBI) that doctors told her she would not recover from. With the help of a service dog that she trained, she fully recovered, and now works with veterans suffering in similar ways.

The large goal was I just didn’t want anyone else to suffer like I did, by myself. With no help from the Department of Defense, and no help from the Army. I mean you don’t know there are all different branches, but... I just didn’t want somebody... I mean I felt very very alone. And again this was because there were no programs, there were absolutely no programs. And nobody cared about me. They literally were just going to let me die in that bed.

In this way, part of the need that developed came from a lack of sufficient care from the VA. The Walter Reed hospital scandal based on Pulitzer Prize reporting by the Washington Post – which I will discuss at greater length later – revealed the poor living conditions and bureaucratic red tape that plagued the military center. The VA was forced to change directions and improve care for wounded veterans, including those with PTSD. Even so, many veterans fall by the wayside, finding themselves unhoused or unable to obtain medical services.

Another staff member of an organization was also a veteran and he talked to me about his suicide attempts. Before he pulled the trigger, his dog came in and licked his cheek. He now attributes this to divine intervention. What is remarkable though is that he was and remained in

active duty at the time. He reports that there were no resources for him suffering from trauma when he needed help. According to him, there was no discharge because of medical reasons or psychological reasons back when he was enlisted. He started out training companion animals for veterans and bringing wounded veterans to interact with animals. “I wanted to help as many veterans as possible who were struggling with mental illness, like I was, that was living in the dark like I was. And get the dogs out of the shelters as fast as possible.”

As the previous example suggests, a lot of dogs came from animal shelters and are talked about as saving two lives at once. As one trainer told me, her goal was “save a warrior, save a dog.” Another rescue-only organization says their goal is “to save paws, and to save souls.” One reason another organization worked with rescue dog was to cut costs, but there are drawbacks: “With the rescue dogs it’s always so unpredictable. They would still have this really good companion that made a huge impact on their life regardless of if it had completed service training or not. It just became a good pet for them. And we found that even, just having a companion, helped a lot of people.”

Another organization started as a resource for an academy for troubled young men. They originally started a pet resort for the organization to be “self-sustainable funding-wise.” This also provided the men with utilizable work experience. The shift to focusing on veterans came later in 2014.

One of the managers of the pet resort, she was the one who had experience with training service dogs. She had her own service dog. And then she went to our founder and they discussed: hey, why don’t we, you know, maybe we can train some service dogs and see (I don’t know how the conversation went) to try and create a different avenue of experience for these guys. They could practice dog training because then it’s... they can take it and it can be a marketable skill that they can continue. And then with that and service dogs, and for who. And our founder was... is retired highway patrol, and he... he knew veterans, and first responders. There’s a lot of need there. And it kind of just grew from that.

In this way this organization both provided valuable work experience for troubled youth and also helped out veterans and first responders suffering from trauma. As the quote suggests, they were responding to a need for service dogs.

This organization is not alone in wanting to respond to the needs of first responders such as law enforcement, fire fighters, and EMTs who also have experienced trauma. Branching off from an organization that focuses on combat veterans, one trainer explained:

And so I have a ton of law enforcement friends and family members. I see how they are when they come home and just don't have an outlet to help them get rid of things that they've had to deal with during the daytime. And I looked around and I really didn't see a lot of organizations that are putting it out there that, you know, that service dogs can help with... you see a lot of service dogs for veterans, you know, helping with PTSD for veterans. Fire fighters and law enforcement officers also suffer from the same type of PTSD. It's not combat related, but it is definitely job related. So I wanted to be able to help them as well.

Most organizations focus only on veterans, but I have encountered other organizations that train service dog for first responders too, or even families of deceased soldiers ("gold star" families). At an organization where I conducted ethnographic research, I witnessed an active police officer and navy veteran train her own golden retriever to be a service dog she could use while on duty.

Now there are more than eighty, perhaps more organizations throughout the country that provide service dogs for veterans. Most organizations responded to local need for service dogs for veterans. The need is so localized that even Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin just heard about another service dog organization within the state of Wisconsin. What changed, however, is that the earlier programs from the late 2000s and early 2010s provided models for new organizations. This relates to Carr's discussion of apprenticeship, training, and socialization: "apprenticeship involves learning how to define and frame, as well as to interpret and engage objects in an expert way" (20). Nearly all organizations train the same alert tasks, such as nudging or otherwise alerting their handlers to an oncoming anxiety attack. Most dogs also provide "deep pressure

therapy,” usually called DPT, leaning against or on their handler to help them calm down or even as a prophylactic for anxiety. I also encountered ADI candidates who were using an adapted version of ADI’s public access test. There is controversy around some tasks, but I will touch on this in more depth in Chapter Two.

Suicide as Public Health Crisis

The cultural-political shift that the need for service dogs derives from is a view from the public and the state that there is a public health crisis of veteran suicide, especially for veterans with PTSD. Service dogs are thought of as a possible adjunctive treatment alongside therapy and pharmacology. According to the VA, 15 percent of veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) experienced PTSD at some point in the past year, with 29 percent experiencing PTSD at some point in their lives. This is a significant change from 5 percent in past year and 10 percent at some point in life for Vietnam veterans (VA, n.d.)

Provided as evidence for the public health crisis, the most commonly given number is 22 veteran suicides per day, based on a VA study in 2013. The 22 number is, as one trainer suggested to me, is a “rallying cry” to attract attention to the plight of veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress or some other kind of trauma. My research into the factuality of this number produced mixed results: one study suggested that “more than two-thirds of people in the study who killed themselves were at least 50 years old” (Price 2015). Another found that “veterans of recent military actions being at much higher relative and absolute risk of suicide than veterans of less recent wars or conflicts” (Gibbons, Brown, and Hur 2013, 49). One possible reason for this is that research into veteran suicide came after veterans of older wars have already killed themselves (Gibbons, Brown, and Hur 2013, 52).

One of the organizations I worked with is associated with a monument in Illinois to veterans who committed suicide called the Forgotten Warrior Memorial. One of the veterans I interviewed explained that the memorial “is there specifically for veterans that lose the battle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and end up committing suicide.”

Other kinds of advocacy on behalf of veterans at risk of suicide includes the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act, which was passed in 2015. The act was named after a young veteran who killed himself after sub-par treatment from the VA. Therapy was downplayed and medicine was thought of as the primary way to treat him. He was also granted only 30% disability rating⁹ despite being incapacitated. He appealed but did not hear back until after his death by suicide. The act aims to:

- Increase access to mental health care by, among other things, creating a peer support and community outreach pilot program to assist transitioning servicemembers as well as a one-stop, interactive website of available resources
- Better meet the demand for mental health care by starting a pilot program to repay the loan debt of students in psychiatry so it is easier for recruit them to work for the VA.
- Boost the accountability of mental health care by requiring an annual evaluation of VA mental health and suicide prevention programs. (IAVA, n.d.)

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of American (IAVA) pushed for this act to be passed and recently also worked with the legislature to pass the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019. “This vital legislation includes much-needed updates related to transition assistance, mental health care, care for women veterans, and telehealth care” (IAVA “Legacy,” n.d.).

⁹ As I mention in a footnote in the introduction, monthly financial benefits depend on a disability rating (from 0% to 100%). Veterans must present themselves to the VA as disabled to obtain these benefits.
<https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/veteran-rates/>

Politics of VA Care for Veterans: Walter Reed Scandal

As I mentioned earlier, part of the increase in diagnosis and care for veterans with PTSD came about following Dana Priest's and Anne Hull's series of Pulitzer Prize winning articles in the Washington Post in 2007 (Priest and Hull 2007). They write about how overwhelmed the Walter Reed medical center was by returning veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Much of what they reveal is bureaucratic red tape that prevents veterans from accessing financial and medical support for both physical and mental injuries. According to Priest and Hull, the return of a younger generation of veterans has largely displaced older veterans at Walter Reed outpatient housing: "Now, the silver walkers of retired generals convalescing from hip surgery have been replaced by prosthetics propped against Xbox games and Jessica Simpson posters smiling down on brain-rattled grunts" (Priest and Hull 2007).

For veterans to receive benefits for invisible injuries like PTSD and TBI, they must prove they were injured during combat. Often returning soldiers will be diagnosed with, for example, a "personality disorder" or deemed suffering from some kind of previous mental illness to prevent these veterans from benefitting financially. At stake here is the disability rating given to each evaluated veteran. Often lower ratings means being unable to support a decent lifestyle or support a family. Negotiating disability ratings might mean multiple evaluations and testimonies to provide evidence for veterans' claims.

Even so, more and more veterans are being diagnosed with PTSD. In 2007, when Priest and Hull broke the news of Walter Reed, nearly 30,000 returning veterans met the qualifications of PTSD. Priest and Hull explain:

One of the bitter legacies of Vietnam was the inadequate treatment of troops when they came back. Tens of thousands endured psychological disorders in silence, and too many ended up homeless, alcoholic, drug-addicted, imprisoned or dead before the government

acknowledged their conditions and in 1980 officially recognized PTSD as a medical diagnosis.

Yet nearly three decades later, the government still has not mastered the basics: how best to detect the disorder, the most effective ways to treat it, and the fairest means of compensating young men and women who served their country and returned unable to lead normal lives. (Priest and Hull 2007)

In the years since the Walter Reed papers were published, there has been a proliferation of advocacy projects and improvements to the kinds of treatments available. There seems to be movement that this generation of veterans will not be left behind, and the explosion of service dog organizations speaks to this goal.

New Initiatives for Service Dogs

The VA and the DOD have been unable to ignore the proliferation of service dog organizations. These state bodies have jumped into the fray of producing expert knowledge about service dogs that might inform future treatment possibilities. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the VA has implemented a five-year project in 2021 called the PAWS Act. The VA selected five different ADI sites to “conduct a pilot program to provide canine training to eligible veterans diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as an element of a complementary and integrative health program for such veterans” (VA 2022). Only ADI affiliated organizations are being selected to work on the PAWS Act project, which suggests that the VA and DOD are moving towards standardization by way of empowering ADI. The dogs are being taught mobility tasks, retrieve tasks, social interaction, and physical connection.

The Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program (WWSDP) is another incentive for the growth of service dog organizations. It started out as a federal grant awarded to service dog organizations, regardless of affiliation with ADI or ASDP. “In FY15, USU received

congressionally directed funding to establish the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program, a competitive grants program that supports nonprofit organizations committed to connecting assistance dogs with service members and veterans” (“Federal Grants” 2017). The program started as a grant distributed through the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, but it is now a subcontract run through California State University Long Beach. WWSDP is not technically a study, but organizations chosen to receive the funds must report back on 119 benchmarks to see what works and what does not. For example, there is a WWSDP benchmark that indicates veterans cannot receive service dogs until six months after discharge from inpatient treatment. The executive director of one of the sub-contract receiving organizations told me that veterans need their service dogs as soon as possible after being discharged, otherwise they might revert back to substances or suicidal ideations. This is something about which he will report and contribute to standards for service dog organizations.

These initiatives represent a huge shift, since at the moment PTSD dogs are not included in the veterinarian benefits program. According to the VA, and as I will talk about later in Chapter Two, “[r]ecovering from PTSD is a process” and “[e]vidence-based treatments for PTSD” can “help people feel better.” “Dogs can help you deal with some parts of living with PTSD, but they are not a substitute for effective PTSD treatment” (VA “Dogs”, n.d.). Because of this, the VA does not currently provide PTSD dogs with veterinarian benefits.

The move to evidence supported treatments (EST) emerged around 2006 as an alternative to psychodynamic approaches that considered PTSD a “lifelong disorder” (Finley 2011, 121). The main EST is “cognitive behavioral therapy” (CBT), of which “prolonged exposure therapy” (PET) and “cognitive processing therapy” (CPT) are subsets. For PET, veterans are exposed to triggers and then allowed to “habituate” (Finley 2011, 123). Habituation means that the human

body can only maintain a heightened level of anxiety for so long. Eventually anxiety will decrease, and veterans will learn that their triggers, such as crowds, do not actually indicate danger. Some clinicians push back against PET, suggesting that it re-traumatizes the veteran, but this is a proven technique especially for anxiety disorders. CPT involves 12 sessions that seek to “challenge and modify” detrimental beliefs about a veteran’s trauma. “In so doing, the patient creates a new understanding and conceptualization of the traumatic event so that it reduces its ongoing negative effects on current life” (APA 2017). A drawback to ESTs is that veterans are reluctant to start or complete these programs (Scotland-Coogan, Whitworth, and Wharton 2022, 548). One study suggests that having a service dog can help manage PTSD symptoms and promote completion of courses of PET and CPT (Scotland-Coogan, Whitworth, and Wharton 2022, 548). “Creating and investigating nontraditional treatment options, like service dog training programs, have therefore emerged as one alternative approach for veterans who are resistant or not ready for interventions based on CBT” (Scotland-Coogan, Whitworth, and Wharton 2022, 549).

Evidence for Efficacy of Service Dogs

This controversy is playing out on the field of “evidence,” whether it be “evidence supported treatments” like PET and CPT, or a growing field of affirmation that supports the belief that dogs can mitigate PTSD symptoms. The hunt is on for evidence that service dogs reduce PTSD symptoms and function as an adjunctive treatment for ESTs, beyond anecdotal evidence from experienced organizations. Research that focuses on scientific method to indicate the kind of expertise that organizations can use to lobby congress or encourage changes in the VA to support PTSD service dogs. In this case, institutions like universities or research programs for the VA

“naturalize the expertise” (Carr 2010, 25) of produced knowledge; this knowledge is validated and taken up through publication or sharing information at conferences.

Several recent studies have shown that service dogs have a small but significant effect on the experience of veterans with PTSD. In a study by O’Haire and Rodriguez (2018), the researchers found:

The results indicated that, compared with usual care alone, the provision of trained service dogs was associated with clinically significant reductions in PTSD symptoms as measured with the PCL. However, average scores were not lower than the diagnostic cutoff of 50 on the PCL, indicating that in their current form, service dogs do not appear to be associated with a loss of diagnosis. (O’Haire and Rodriguez, 2018, 184)

A recent yet unpublished study by Dr. Jeremy Ramirez found that service dogs “improved levels of depression, quality of life, social functioning, and work productivity” (Jeremy Ramirez, unpublished PowerPoint emailed to author, July 30, 2022). He also found that according to the PCL-5, veterans with dogs saw a decrease of more than 10 points. A Canadian study suggested that dogs might also be helpful in curbing substance use issues in veterans with PTSD (Husband, Ahmed, and Dell 2020).

Another study by Nieforth, Rodriguez, and O’Haire (2022) discovered a disparity between “expectations and experiences” in terms of benefits of having a service dog. Veterans in this study were either placed with a service dog or on a waiting list. The authors found that “Veterans on the waitlist expected service dogs to help with mental health symptoms more often than what was reported as experienced by Veterans with service dogs” (Nieforth, Rodriguez, and O’Haire 2022, 353). Veterans on the waiting list also anticipated drawbacks to be financial, but veterans with dogs listed mainly unwanted attention as the main drawback. The veterans with service dogs also mentioned the efficacy of tasks more than the waitlist veterans. “This

understanding may help to set realistic and evidence-based expectations for the service dog–Veteran partnership” (Nieforth, Rodriguez, and O’Haire 2022, 353).

Conclusion

This chapter tells the institutional history of service dogs for PTSD, discussing how a lack of standardization in the early years of service dogs led to the formation of ADI that established general standards and practices for the growing number of organizations to look to for inspiration. Unregulated by nature of the ADA’s description of service dogs, some organizations have rallied around the expertise of such accreditation organizations to set standards and interact with government bodies such as the VA and the DOD.

Yet many organizations still have no interest in accreditation. How initiatives such as Service Dog Pass (<https://www.servicedogpass.org/>) – which will provide validation that a dog is trained by a legitimate organization, thus making it easier for veterans with service dogs to bring their dog on planes or in public – might encourage non-affiliated organizations to sign up is yet to be seen. Service Dog Pass is only distributed to accredited organizations through ADI or ASDP, and perhaps other dog training organizations. The expertise and high standards for dogs are assumed by Service Dog Pass. How pilot projects like the PAWS Act and WWSDP might change the VA’s officially stated opinion about service dogs will also unfold in the coming years. While WWSDP does not require some kind of accreditation, the PAWS Act does, and this has the potential to shake up the service dog world.

Training her first service dog in 1975, Bergin may not have anticipated the service dog movement that she helped to create. Out of a vacuum of authority and standardization came a crisis of legitimacy that ADI and the many other accreditation organizations that I outline in this

chapter hoped to stabilize. These groups are, as Boyer explains, “challenging jurisdictions” in the sense that there are multiple, overlapping levels of expertise (Boyer 2008, 43). The service dog industry is a heterogenous field and even the strength of ADI is not enough to fully standardize the domain, even within their accredited organization.

Chapter 2:

Public Access: Ordinary, Safe Lives as American Consumers

It is public access test day. This is the final exam that the dogs must pass in order to graduate as service dogs with Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin. We break up into groups at Menards¹ and I tag along with Liam, who is evaluating Noah and his dog Flash and Oliver and his dog Harley. Noah is a tall man of few words; he seems calm and confident throughout the test. Oliver, on the other hand, has been panicking since the parking lot. One of the team therapists pairs up with Oliver to help him navigate the experience. Not only is Oliver distressed because of the test, but he also struggles to be out in public. This is clear based on his previous exposures to public places like Home Depot² or Harley Davidson³. While it is common for the veterans to struggle with public access, Oliver is an extreme case. The therapist suggests that we pause the test for Harley to perform deep pressure therapy (DPT)⁴ on Oliver. Harley jumps up and applies pressure to Oliver's chest while licking him vigorously. Finally the pairs reach the hardest test: separation from handler. For this task, a "stranger" holds the dog while the handler walks out of sight. The "stranger," however, is actually Liam, the head trainer. He instructs Oliver to not make eye-contact with Harley and Liam does the same. In fact, he goes one step forward and steps on the leash so Harley is forced into a down-stay. Oliver returns and the pair pass the exam and graduate on time.

* * *

¹ Menards is a large home improvement store based primarily in the Midwest.

² Home Depot is another large home improvement store found throughout the U.S.

³ Harley Davidson is a motorcycle brand and we visited their showroom as part of the public access practice.

⁴ The dog puts pressure on the handler's body to produce an effect similar to a weighted blanket.

All the organizations I worked with shared the goal of public access for their dog/handler teams. Dogs should go to the store with their veterans; they can sit in restaurants and fly on planes. Without this kind of intention, having an emotional support animal should be sufficient. Indeed, I interviewed several veterans at the start of their training and they already reported a positive impact on their mood and anxiety, especially about leaving the house. Public access is codified in the standards for an accrediting organization I mention in Chapter One: the Association of Service Dog Providers (ASDP). “The Veteran/First Responder must be shown how to use his/her Service Dog in public. In particular, the Training Program should include taking the Team into public and partaking in normal daily life activities including, but not limited to visiting stores, sitting down at restaurants, making purchases, visiting parks, and walking in busy shopping areas. Upon the completion of the Training Program, the Veteran/First Responder should feel comfortable utilizing his/her Service Dog in public” (ASDP 2024, 7).

As the ASDP quote indicates, public access means bringing the dogs into public spaces, such as big box stores like Menards or a grocery store or a restaurant or a park. This is the core of what the dogs are being trained to do, and it is often the hardest part for the veterans, who usually have a lot of anxiety about going out in public. One of the veterans – a 39-year-old army veteran named Emma – told me that when she signed up for Liberty Hounds, she was not expecting public access:

I was just picturing him just like being a buddy to me and being more attuned⁵. And us doing more things together. You know, like, I don’t know why, for whatever reason, I wasn’t picturing like going out in public. [laughs] Yea I was picturing, like, him um... you know, um... helping me at home. Like, like, getting out of bed. Things like that. But it wasn’t actually picturing going out in public.

⁵ Listening back to recording, I’m not sure if she is saying “attuned” or “in tuned,” but either way I think she is referring to the same thing.

Emma has organized her life in such a way that she can almost completely avoid people. She works from home, has her groceries delivered, and makes speedy trips to Costco at non-busy hours. She passed with flying colors at the last graduation I attended so it sounds like she has overcome, or at least has come to tolerate, public access.

Liberty Hounds holds the veteran/dog pairs responsible for continuing to keep up with public access. As I mentioned in the introduction, Liam always tells his veterans that if you shelve your dog, they will lose their tasks: “training never ends with a working dog.” One such veteran went through a rough patch and did not leave the house for three months. When she came back for recertification – this takes place first at six months, then one year, then two years, and so on for the career of the dog – her dog whined and misbehaved. She had to spend a few months back in training before her dog passed the test again. Mia with Freedom Puppies requires the trainees to send her videos throughout the week so she can nip an issue in the bud before it becomes ingrained, but she does not keep track of in-home training. With Independence Paws, the head trainer calls veterans out on them when they are not working the dog at home. She can tell if they are making progress or not.

At Liberty Hounds, the last step before public access is an obstacle course in the center. There are shopping carts, tables with toys and treats, a hanger with shirts, a fake medical chair, and wheelchairs. My task was to go around asking the handler teams if I could pet their dogs, to which they were instructed to respond “no.” I would insist: “Please! He looks like he really wants to get petted!” Again the veteran turned me down and walked away. The dogs generally do well but there are always a few snacks that they manage to snag along the way.

Finally the dogs are prepared for public access. The day before the teams receive instructions for when and where they should meet Liam and the other trainers and psychologists

who help the veterans manage the stress of being in public. The dogs are always “pottied” first before arriving at the meeting point, usually the left side of the entrance. Early on Liam leads the group around the store in single file. It is clear when both veteran and dog are uncomfortable. As the weeks go by, the teams split up and walk around the stores usually paired with a trainer or psychologist, or sometimes with me.

During public access outings, it is not uncommon for people to ask to pet the dogs. Other times they face pushback. Once while walking with a Riley – the Liberty Hounds mascot-in-training – in a grocery store, Sophia, Liam’s daughter and office manager, passed by an older woman who made a displeased noise. We circled around a second time and the same thing happened. Sophia asked the woman if she is okay and the woman responded a vigorous “no!” Later a veteran expressed the difficulty of public access: “I’m used to working in the shadows and now I’ve got something with me that draws so much flipping attention.”

Once the dogs are nearing graduation and have succeeded in public excursions, they must pass three more tests: Canine Good Citizen (CGC) urban, CGC advanced, and a public access test adapted from the Assistance Dogs International (ADI) test. The three tests are quite similar. For CGCA the dog must sit/down while waiting for the handler, then walk loose leash, making turns and changes in speed. The dog must also loose leash through a crowd; lacking a real crowd, we as a group milled about close quarters while the dog in training walked through us. The dog must ignore a distraction dog and sit/stay in a small group. The dog must allow to be petted by someone carrying something that they put down. The dog must follow the “leave it” command near a distraction. The handler hooks up their dog to a long leash, walks 20 feet, picks up an item, and then returns to the dog. The test also includes a 20-foot recall with distractions. The dog must sit or stand while the handler moves through doors (AKC “Advanced”, n.d.). For

CGCU there is a lot of overlap, but the dog must keep its cool in an urban environment, such as “city distractions” like horns, skateboard, or a variety of surfaces. The dog must cross the street, ignore dropped food, and allow itself to be petted by someone carrying an item. In a public building the dog must down-stay for three minutes continuously. The dog should be able to climb steps and use an elevator. Finally the dog must enter a car under control (AKC “Urban”, n.d.).

The tests put a lot of stress on the veterans, so much so that once the trainers told the trainees they were just practicing the test, but actually they were giving the real test. The stakes are particularly high for veterans who received a dog from Liberty Hounds, because ownership of the dog is not transferred to the veteran until they graduate. The fear that the dog might be taken away from them after so much bonding is a key, though unlikely, concern.

What is it that all the training and testing is preparing the handler teams for? First of all, for a service dog to be ADA compliant, they must perform a task that directly mitigates the handler’s disability. A lot of these tasks can be performed at home. The Liberty Hounds deep pressure therapy trainer believes that twenty minutes of DPT can lead to two hours of prevention against debilitating anxiety. Dogs wake up their veterans during bad dreams. Dogs are taught to respond by nudging or generally misbehaving to get their handler’s attention if they are doing the behavior they do when anxious, like scratching their legs or making a fist. This task can and often is performed in public as well. In Chapter Four I will go into more detail regarding how these tasks are trained.

Some other tasks are only performed during public access. Perhaps the most important, and most controversial, task goes by many names: block and cover, crowd control, space command, or modified heel. In this task, the dog puts its body in between the veteran and other people in a public place. The goal is to trust the dog to watch out for its handler with PTSD, so

the handler can relax and feel safe in public locations, like stores or restaurants. Veterans expressed how important this task is in a variety of ways. The first is that the task mitigates hypervigilance, which, as I illustrated in the introduction, is a common symptom of PTSD. Joe, a tall and kind mannered Independence Paws veteran with a stocky German Shepherd named Apollo, has a dog that “reduces [...] hypervigilance.” He travels frequently for work in inspirational speaking and is trying to get Apollo to a level where he can travel with the dog. For Joe, the dog mimics the role of the “battle buddy” in the military, which I will discuss later. He explains that he does not need to be as “vigilant” because his dog is even more so than him. “It’s almost like a walking security blanket, per se.” Apollo notices people coming up behind him long before Joe does. “I’ve been standing with Apollo, and someone has come up behind me, not trying to be nefarious or doing anything, they just come up behind me and he’ll turn and look, like, you know, what’s up? And even before I know that person is there. So it’s a comfort thing.”

The Ordinary American

What kinds of everyday social worlds are these tests and tasks producing for the veteran with PTSD? Tasks and training at home are important, but ultimately it is the public access test that determines if the dog is a service dog or not. The service dog is trained to provide a sense of security in public, since, for many veterans, everyday life means constantly dealing with the problem of not feeling safe around groups or crowds of people. Public access encourages veterans to get out into the community even if they are feeling anxious or depressed. The service dog reshapes the worlds for veterans with PTSD based on the idea that everyday life should be safe, and that going out in public to go shopping or eating dinner is what an ordinary American does. The ordinary American is a particular kind of consumer who goes out to stores in public.

This is not to say that being in public is always safe. Interruptions of mass violence periodically burst the bubble that crowds or grocery stores or schools, for example, are intrinsically safe. But the fact that we find these events so shocking indicates that going to a store or a parade or a family gathering is perceived as safe.

All the veterans that I interviewed have experienced trauma in some way, resulting in PTSD, Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and/or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). In addition to hypervigilance, as I explain in the introduction, avoidance is a common symptom, where the veteran avoids triggering situations, like going out in public. Panic attacks – a kind of dissociative reaction – are another common symptom. Everyday life for many veterans with post-traumatic stress can be isolated and fearful. The goal of working with a service dog – for the service dog industry as much as the veterans with their service dogs – is to produce a kind of newness in ordinary life where the veteran feels safe in public. This shift in everyday life, rather than being something that we can assume will happen as a matter of course, is an “achievement” (Das 2010, 376). What might we gain by thinking of service dog training and labor as a process of achieving new possibilities in the everyday? These possibilities include an emergent sociality whereby veterans achieve a sense of safety in public. The purpose of the service dog is to give the veteran courage to go outside, perhaps to attend a training session or doctor’s appointment, or as a consumer buying groceries or shopping at a local store. In this way, training is not only a moment in which dogs learn how to serve and veterans learn how to handle, but it is also a challenge to previous patterns of secluded living.

As this chapter will illustrate, veterans and trainers believe the common PTSD symptom of hypervigilance is mitigated when the veterans trust their dogs to keep watch for them and therefore keep them safe. This is another way in which dogs form relations of trust with their

handlers. Veterans trust their service dogs to make the decision to, for example, create space between them and passersby in public. For handlers trained to give commands to establish a boundary, the veteran trusts the dog to follow their directions. The service dogs also help with avoidance, because veterans trust their dogs to alert them in public to oncoming anxiety, so they can use grounding techniques or remove themselves from the situation. They also trust the dog to perform tasks to mitigate these symptoms when they crop up. So even so the dog remains dominated on the leash, it exercises “volition” (Ingold 2000, 70), which is a core trait of trust.

When I use the term “ordinary” or “everyday” in the context of this chapter, I draw on the work of Veena Das (2007, 2010) and Zoë Wool (2015). In choosing the word “ordinary,” Wool indicates:

I use the term *ordinary* here rather than *everyday*⁶ (terms often used interchangeably in anthropology) both to emphasize the felt sense of life’s unmarkedness, its commonness and to emphasize the instability of such a mode of life, the fact that such a mode of living is always unstable, always extra/ordinary. Thinking through this tension of the extra/ordinary calls attention to the ways that what feels and can be counted as ordinary is emergent and particular and evocative of the possibilities and limits of a located social world. (Wool 2015, 22)

I align myself here with Wool’s focus on the precarity of the ordinary. Everybody in some way experiences ordinariness as a delicate situation; the ordinary, as Wool describes here, is a process of constructing and negotiating a coherent life. For many veterans dealing with trauma, every trip to the grocery store is a performance of the extra/ordinary, in the sense that the veteran is performing ordinary sociality despite the instability of a mode of life of “unmarkedness.” The veteran with a service dog cannot “pass” as unmarked because it draws the oft called “invisible disability” or “invisible wound” of PTSD into the realm of the observable. As William – a long-

⁶ In this chapter I use the terms “ordinary” and “everyday” not interchangeably, but when the author I am referencing uses one term or another. Veena Das, for example, often uses the term “everyday” alongside “ordinary,” and in those situations I might use one or the other.

bearded mid-30s veteran with a collection of higher education degrees and who can spend months not leaving his basement – told me: “Whenever I go into someplace new or something like that, I know that I’m walking around with a sandwich board that says ‘I’m fucked up.’” Emma, who I mentioned earlier, also had to come out to friends and family as having PTSD because she planned to bring her dog Indy wherever she went. Some brave souls even put a PTSD or PTS/PTSI (standing for post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress injury) tag on their dogs’ vests. At the same time, as I mentioned in the first chapter, service dogs are becoming an increasingly common, even ordinary public being, especially in veteran communities. The wife of one of the veterans told me that she sees increasing numbers of veterans with service dogs at Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) conventions. Service dogs simultaneously allow for the ordinariness of public access with a sense of safety and also the markedness of needing a service dog in order to deal with an invisible disability.

In her work, Veena Das has written about the ways in which those who have experienced mass violence – especially the Partition of India in 1947 and the massacre of Sikhs in India in 1984 – can come to “inhabit the same space” (Das 2007, 14). Das tells one story of a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl who fall in love and how their families and communities come to face the possibility violence alongside “the opportunity to learn how to inhabit this newness” (Das 2010, 396). She is gratified to find that “in this household struggling with everyday wants and needs, this labor of opening oneself to a different vision of what it might be to receive the other should be performed” (Das 2010, 397). What we “gain” by pushing back against traditional moral renderings “is the simple capacity to inhabit the everyday and to perform the labor of discovering what it is to engage the life of another” (Das 2010, 397). She calls this process of attuning oneself to the other “moral striving”: “moral striving shows up in everyday labors of caring for

the other, even in contexts where a mutual antagonism defines the relation” (Das 2010, 398-399). In Emily Martin’s review article, she glosses Das as saying that “with the passage of time, in unpredictable ways, new forms of what could be imagined emerged as people experimented with the possibilities life presented” (Martin 2007, 743). While the locality of the violence is different from the veterans I interviewed, many of whom experienced violence while deployed overseas and are now trying to make sense of life back in their pre-war situations where they no longer feel safe, the veterans and families, along with their trainers, doctors, and dogs, work on how to live with the new circumstances of PTSD and other forms of trauma. I argue that this is a kind of “moral striving,” with the difference being that one of the participants is not human.

Das encourages us to think of the relationship between the everyday and the event as intertwined. In her own work, this has to do with occupying the same location as mass violence in such a way that the event “folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary” (Das 2007, 1). What this turns out to be for the veterans I spoke with is a life cobbled together with a service dog to perform tasks that allow veterans to appear “ordinary” to the general public, even if the veterans are experiencing an internal struggle to feel safe. Das goes on to say that “...just as I think of the event as attached to the everyday, I think of the everyday itself as eventful” (Das 2007, 8). Going to the grocery store, for example, is eventful for veterans who grapple with being in public and find themselves triggered to a flashback, even if many would consider shopping an everyday activity. The everyday, in this case, does not mean easy or unmarked; in fact, Das describes it, “the experience of the everyday is also the site of trance, illusion, and danger” (Das 2010, 376). As Wool puts it, the veteran lives between the ordinary (an adjusted veteran who now performs the role of civilian) and the extraordinary (the recognition that the dog receives in public draws attention to the veteran’s disability) (Wool 2015).

Public access has a dual meaning: that service dogs are allowed in public places and that veterans actually go out into public. Public access makes possible the kinds of ordinary lives that the service dog industry imagines should be lived by well-adjusted Americans who feel safe in public. It is notable that public access focuses on sites of consumerism, such as to suggest that the act of shopping or eating out are expected of the ordinary American. I argue that this focus on public access elevates what many might think of as not particularly noteworthy – like taking a trip to the grocery store or flying on a plane – to the realm of the ethical. By “ethical,” I mean living what we might call a “good life.” Alasdair MacIntyre argues that “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is” (MacIntyre 1981, 219). A virtue in this case might be perseverance, which veterans cultivate while training their dogs, or courage, for veterans to leave the house and go into public. The good life is always embedded in a moral tradition, which in this case is the argument over what an ordinary, American life entails. The community that participates in this argument is the service dog industry that I outline in Chapter One – including trainers, staff, and accreditation organizations – alongside the medical field that write notes in support of service dogs for veterans, the government agencies that regulate service dog etiquette, and veterans with service dogs. For these interlocutors, the service dog’s contribution to this tradition is that the ordinary American engages in public access as safe consumers and thus is part of what it means to live a good life.

While MacIntyre and Das emerge from divergent philosophical traditions, MacIntyre’s “quest” (MacIntyre 1981, 219) for the good life and Das’ concept of “moral striving” (Das 2010, 398-399) strike some similarities in the case of public access for service dogs. The core issue

here is that public access – and feeling safe while in public – is elevated above staying at home as a moral project for veterans training their service dogs. Why else, if Emma can live her life avoiding people, must she continue to go out into public with her service dog? This question motivates my central concern in this chapter: how have service dogs, or in some cases simply dogs, produced moral relations of care by learning to attend to each other's needs? How are ethics tied up in narratives of the ordinary American veteran/civilian?

Questioning Ableism and the Pursuit of a Cure

The questions of moral striving and the good life are tied up with the problem of ableism. Part of the argument over disability and living well comes from the common belief that disabilities or other kinds of mind and body differences should be cured. “Ableism breeds discrimination and oppression, but it also informs how we define which embodiments are normal, which are valuable, and which are ‘inherently negative’” (Taylor 2017, 5). The idea is that to be “normal” or “natural” means seeking a cure for a disability (Clare 2017, 14). I would argue that while they appear synonymous, “normal” and “ordinary” are two different concepts in the way I use them here: the “ordinary” can be tied to a moral project and “normal” is a kind of social expectation. While the moral striving undertaken in public access may lead to what an outside observer might see as a normal life – in fact, ableism intersects with capitalism in the sense that it is “normal” to be able to go shopping in public without having a panic attack – a “normal” life is not the goal in the sense that while the service dog helps to mitigate symptoms in the present, ordinary life must be lived alongside the reality of PTSD. Eli Clare – a transmasculine writer and disability activist – draws attention to efforts to raise money for future cures for a variety of disabilities, but in searching for “the always-just-around-the-corner cures [...] we risk suspending our present-day

lives” (Clare 2017, 87). In this way, veterans with PTSD need a way to live everyday lives without relying on the promise of a cure. Trainers I talked with said that sometimes veterans expect getting a service dog will completely eradicate their PTSD, but it likely will not, even though as I mentioned in the previous chapter that from the “medical model” or perhaps scientific perspective (Taylor 2017, 13) having a service dog mitigates PTSD symptoms. From a “social justice” viewpoint, “disability is not caused by impairment, but by the way society is organized” (Taylor 2017, 13). For example, the way that “normal” life is expected to be lived in public pathologizes veterans who might need to take a day off from dealing with the anxiety that they experience in public, even despite having service dogs. In the case of the ordinary, small breakdowns like this are part of the moral striving that the veterans and their assemblages, both human and nonhuman, undertake in the everyday. “Disability is presented as pitiable, always in need of a cure, and a barrier to a full life, while disabled people are patronizingly referred to as ‘inspiring’ and ‘special’ and praised for ‘overcoming their disabilities’” (Taylor 2017, 12). This takes on another level for veterans who commonly hear “thank you for your service” as a kind of gratitude for engaging in activities on behalf of the U.S. and its citizens that led to their disability.

This does not mean that people living with PTSD do not want a cure, but what exactly *is* being cured? Many of the veterans and trainers I spoke with pushed back against seeing PTSD as a mental disorder – and therefore a disability – in the first place: “*disorder* means not only disordered but also wrong, broken, in need of repair” (Clare 2017, 43). Veterans generally prefer “post-traumatic stress” (PTS) or “post-traumatic stress injury” (PTSI)⁷ because the trauma that

⁷ Only Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin used the term PTSI, which derives from an interest of one of the psychologists in Peter A. Levine’s conceptualization of trauma. In an excerpt from his writing, Levine recalls: “Recently, a young Iraq veteran took issue with calling his combat anguish PTSD and, instead, poignantly referred to his pain and suffering as PTSI—the ‘I’ designating ‘injury.’ What he wisely discerned is that trauma is an injury, not a disorder

led to their diagnosis was a wound, mental and/or physical. As I discuss in the introduction, injury can serve as a criterion for PTSD, but many of the veterans I spoke with viewed their issue more as a continuation of a wound than a disorder. This perspective challenges the medical model, even though a PTSD diagnosis is required for getting a service dog, much like how Clare sought out a gender identity disorder diagnosis to get top-surgery and testosterone. “[D]iagnosis is a tool rather than a fact, an action rather than a state of being, one story among many” (Clare 2017, 45). Even if the veterans do not see themselves as disabled in the way someone else with a PTSD diagnosis might be expected to, the “desire for cure” is certainly present for veterans: “We remain tethered to our body-minds of the past, wanting to transport them into the future, imagining in essence a kind of time travel” (Clare 2017, 57). The problem here is that even if veterans might want to return to a time before the wound and project this into their futures, even the evidence-based treatments I talked about in Chapter One and service dogs may not fully make this happen.

What happens when we think of disability not as a deficiency but rather as a kind of diversity that renders viable new coalitions, such as convergences of humans and dogs, as well as an array of objects, subjects, and discourses? The service dog does not cure PTSD, but it does bring into being human/nonhuman assemblages of “care work”⁸ (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019) that would not have existed otherwise. These assemblages include trainers, doctors, psychologists, veterans and their service dogs, and fellow service dog teams. Rejecting ableism

like diabetes, which can be managed but not healed. In contrast, posttraumatic stress injury is an emotional wound, amenable to healing attention and transformation” (Levine 2019).

⁸ For Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “care webs” are made up by groups of disabled people who help each other meet their needs, physical and mental. She is particularly interested in disabled and sick QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color) care webs. She sees this kind of mutual care as “revolution work” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019, 35). In the context of this project, I understand care work more broadly as including white, non-disabled folk and non-human participants, while recognizing the limitations of this project. Most of the participants in the dog trainings were white, straight, and cis-gendered. Further research into this subject might involve looking at why most service dog recipients came from this position of privilege.

means not living in the pre-disability past or the future cure, but rather in the everyday present for which dogs allow what these assemblages imagine is a new life for veterans with PTSD, characterized by a moral argument over what an ordinary American life should look like with regards to safety and consumerism.

Henry's Story

Before receiving their dogs, veterans often tell the story of being locked up in their homes and apartments. Avoidance such as this is a hallmark of post-traumatic stress. An example of this is Henry, who I met while shadowing his training and public access activities; I later interviewed him by phone. Henry is an imposing, garrulous army veteran with a huge crop-eared grey Cane Corso named Chase. Perhaps because of the rarity of the breed, Chase gets a lot of attention in public. During our interview, Henry minimized the difficulties that his PTSD caused, laughing frequently, but still the symptoms of anxiety were loud and clear. I tell his story at length to illustrate a common story of trauma and how it impacts everyday life for veterans. To start, Henry struggles to leave the house at times.

It's all in my head. I literally get locked in my house. It's not fear of being out in public or anything like that. I'm still trying to figure it out. But I mean there have been times where... I know like one of the... so the effect is like literally I can't get out my front door, right? Sometimes it's yeaaa late for something because I can't get out the front door. Other times I'm damn pretty much staying in the house for about a week.

This tendency to stay at home has impacted his life significantly, causing him even to miss family events that he is excited about.

So it would either be at my aunt's lake house or at mom and dad's lake house. Get the boats out and the kids skiing and then all that stuff. Well, even like ah... It's just for the Labor Day weekend. But like... there was one year, hell I missed the whole first day, you know. Simply because I couldn't frickin' pack my bags and get them loaded in the truck, you know. I know it sounds stupid. For me packing up, spinning up to even go. You know, I don't know why but my anxiety goes through the roof and I can't function.

Literally to just pack a bag for a weekend and hit the road and go frickin' have fun. I missed the whole first day of the frickin' party. So just little things like that.

While recognizing that PTSD has caused Henry difficulties, such as missing family events or getting locked inside his house, he seems to think that hypervigilance, either on the part of the veteran or the dog, is reasonable:

I'm not big on hordes of people. I pretty much go to that heightened sense. Not that I'm freaking out or nothing, but it brings my anxiety up, but I'm not freaking out, it's more of a... I can walk into the front door of the bar – I don't go to the bar at all – and I can walk in and you know walk into the front door, full of people, right? By the time I'm ten feet in the door, I can tell you who's a threat and who's not. Who's going to get rambunctious tonight, you know, and etc. It's just that hypervigilance, you know? Hypervigilance. It's not you know... I don't see myself as crazy, I see myself as alert and aware of my surroundings. I don't lose my mind over it. But I don't enjoy it either. It's very hard to go in, have a beer, and relax.

Here Henry is ambivalent about his hypervigilance: while it prevents him from having a good time with friends and family, he also seems to think that a bar is a potentially dangerous environment. Chase, on the other hand, makes him feel safe.

You were there in the park last week. Or last Wednesday? When an old dude walked behind me and just stood there and stared Chase down. [...] A lot of creeps down there (laughs) you know as we're walking around. I'm like man do these people not work or what, you know? [...] There was another guy then later who walked behind me, stopped, I don't know, six to eight feet behind me. And Chase did what he was supposed to do just "whew" turned around rear sit. You know, watching your six. And the guy was just literally just staring at him. Well, to a dog that's a challenge. You know, you're challenging their authority. Not even just a dog, animals period. You know, you don't just stare down an animal. So, then Chase then kind of just let out a "woof," you know so I turned around. I didn't even realize this guy was there. So he let out a little "woof" and I turned around. And as I turned around after Chase let out that "woof." Then the guy kind of let out a "jook," like "jook,"⁹ towards him at Chase. Aw man. Then he was on guard. Like yep bring it, you know?

The narrative that Henry provides here is that his anxiety prevents him from living his full life, but he also seems to think that groups of people or strangers are genuinely dangerous and that Chase can and will protect him. Henry might not actually feel safe in general, but he experiences

⁹ Here Henry makes an emphasized sound that I imagine as sort of punching the air towards the dog.

a kind of safety filtered through the lens of his dog, whom he trusts. Might his Labor Day weekend have been different if he had Chase?

Watch Your Six

Henry talks about Chase “watching your six,” meaning the dog has his back. Another veteran I interviewed called this a “battle buddy”: “...in the army you had, I mean you couldn’t do anything without your battle buddy, that’s what they call it. And it was somebody that always had your back no matter what. Now I have that again; it’s just a dog instead of a person.” This trend came up frequently while observing public access and conducting interviews. The battle buddy-as-dog is a figure that can be trusted to “[have] your back.”

Emily is a 50-something female veteran with a shock of blue hair. She rides a scooter due to injuries sustained in the field and can usually be seen puffing away on her vape. Her hand shakes constantly as a side effect of her medication for a psychiatric disorder. Her main trauma is MST, leaving her constantly on guard: “which to me is important because I was attacked unaware. The first rape I was so inebriated that most of it I don’t remember. And the others were kind of like surprise attacks.” Now with her dog Juno, who walks along diligently next to Emily’s scooter, Emily claims: “I feel safe enough to where I can go out in public. And I don’t have a... I’m not as defensive as what I was. And I talk to people more. I feel like I got somebody I can count on watching my back.” She goes on to explain: “I think that just knowing that she’s there and she’s got my back. You know, she watches around corners and everything. She lets me know if somebody is coming so I don’t get surprised. That’s one of the biggest thing I hate, is when people surprise me. I just got my heart in my throat sometimes. Because it just

happens.” As with Henry, Emily relies on Juno to watch out for people walking nearby, even before Emily realizes it.

Elijah and his dog Strider train at Independence Paws and for the most part are quite advanced. Most of the time during training sessions, Elijah would tell Strider “place” and point to a karanda bed. The task is to avoid leaving the bed even though Elijah wandered around and talked to other people. Strider was clearly distressed and whined, but never once did he leave the bed. Strider’s training was covered by a local girl scout group that raised money by selling cookies and donated their earnings to Independence Paws.

When Elijah got out of the army, he tried to live a “normal” civilian life but ended up “reclusive.” He did not leave the apartment for three or four months. He refused to go out to dinner or even to the store with his wife. He sought out help with the VA but there was a long wait time. Elijah’s wife eventually took action after seeing him in such distress and applied for a dog with Independence Paws. Training Strider, who Elijah already had before starting training, changed his world. It helps him go to stores because Strider creates distance between the public. They go “just about everywhere together now.” Especially on a bad day he will take Strider out on his errands and Strider “will make extra space for me while I’m standing in line.” Again, Strider acts as safety blanket for Elijah in public. Not only does Strider watch his back, but he also creates space between Elijah and other shoppers.

As the previous quotes suggest, the dogs not only watch their veteran’s back but also create space. At Liberty Hounds they call this “crowd control.” The dog is taught first with commands to circle the handler in a two-foot circle (they call this the “service dog pocket”). Eventually the dogs learn on their own to respond to people stepping too close and put their

bodies in between their handler and the other person. For other organizations, this is a taught command.

Lucas is in his early thirties and his dog Spark is a calm German Shepherd. Like his peers, he finds peace in having a service dog watch his back. Spark makes going out in public easier. In public he relies on a task he calls “blocking,” where he guides Spark in front of him when interacting with people. This differs slightly from “crowd control” because the dog responds to a command rather than acting on its own. Having Spark has increased Lucas’ confidence. With Spark he feels less “paranoid” and he does not need to worry about his back quite as much. “Even if it’s, you know, not really true that he’s covering it, just the fact that I believe that he is more helpful than him actually having my back. It’s just knowing if there’s a chance that he will do something to protect my back, at least I have that to believe in.” Lucas’ admission that he does not actually expect Spark to have to intervene in the case of trouble harks back to Henry’s story, where he really believes Chase is guarding him. Lucas also expects Spark to look out for his back but does not expect that he will need to use him for the purpose of protection.

Levi is a 50-something army veteran who trained with Liberty Hounds. He also isolated himself before training his service dog Eli. Levi relies on Eli to keep him safe in public. Before Eli, he only went outside for errands like doctor’s appointments or new glasses. “I very very seldom left the house. I was very isolated.” He only has one friend who he texts regularly. For his safety, Levi also relies on what he calls blocking. He shakes a lot in public because he is anxious. He especially has trouble with crowds, so if people get “too close to me too fast,” Eli will block even without a command. This pattern follows Liberty Hounds’ “crowd control”

because Levi's dog Eli circles around the two-foot service dog pocket to put space in between Levi and other shoppers or people in a crowd.

Training a dog to "watch your six" is a kind of achievement that brings human and nonhuman animals together in a relation of care because veteran and service dog work together to reduce hypervigilance in public locations. The veteran trusts the dog to alert them to passersby, making them feel they can be in public without a debilitating degree of hypervigilance. Having a service dog allows veterans to begin healing their wounds and engage everyday life in the present, which is perceived by the service dog industry and other interlocutors as going out in public as a consumer. On the side of the dog, the veteran cares for the dog by taking it out for walks and providing all its needs, such as food, affection, and play.

Dogs Before Service Dogs

I interviewed veterans at various levels of training. Space Ghost (he requested I call him by this name) and his German Shepherd Tori were at the beginning of the program, taking puppy classes, and when I attended the graduation ceremony of his service dog class, I learned that he was not graduating that day but rather had to do more training. When I talked to Space Ghost, he told me that before getting Tori he barely left the apartment. "I was a straight up fucking hermit." Now he takes Tori on long walks by the river and to therapy sessions. He is trying to socialize her, so she gets used to a variety of places. This shows that just having a dog and having to take her to training can have an impact on anxiety and depression, even before the dog is trained as a service dog. For example, Tori responds to Space Ghost's anxiety even before he realizes it coming on. He told me the story of watching a movie and feeling "the fuzzies and tinglies." Tori got up from her position on the floor and "planted on me." She started sniffing his face and licking him, and his distressing feelings "just wash away." He rewarded her with "jackpot"

treats. At least one of the other organizations I interviewed for this project during a different stage of my project only trained dogs that naturally responded to cortisol, the stress hormone. I presume that Tori is one such dog.

I also met Aria and Hunter, a black double doodle, at the start of their service dog journey. They too were unable to graduate but received recognition for their hard work and continue to train. Instead of obtaining a dog through Liberty Hounds, Aria brought Hunter with her as a puppy and took Liberty Hounds puppy classes with him. Like most of the veterans I have talked about so far, Aria's biggest issue is social anxiety and fear of being in public. Like many veterans, she also suffers from depression and the dog motivates her to engage in behavioral activations such as leaving the house or playing around. Right now, Aria does not go out except for work and even there she minimizes contact with coworkers. "I basically have to fake it until I get home and I can try to relax." But even at home she takes the stress with her. "And so sometimes just having Hunter forces me to just sit there and pet him for a little bit, and play with him, and then do training with him." Even before learning service dog tasks, Hunter responds to Aria's anxiety. Hunter "calms" her by doing DPT, trying to draw her attention to him. She must go out and take him for walks and thus gets out more. She also likes the group of other service dogs in training. This gives her a "group of people to be around, which I normally would never do." As Aria explains, often the only time the veterans in training leave the house is to attend dog training. This reminds me of Penelope and her dog Josie. Penelope is an air force veteran with severe agoraphobia. She leaves her home only to go to breakfast with two "gentlemen" and to dog training, where both she and Josie, who is "skittish" by nature, feel comfortable.

These are examples of how dogs, even before they are full-fledged service dogs, attend to their handler's needs and rely on their handler for care. Space Ghost takes care of Tori by letting her out and allowing her to explore her environment, and Tori cares for Space Ghost by alerting him to his anxiety. Aria pets and plays with Hunter, and Hunter performs DPT when Aria is anxious. Again, this is an example of moral relations, striving to care for each other in the newness of the canine/veteran pair. It also brings into being human and nonhuman relations that promote living in the present without focusing on future cure.

The “in-durable”

In her ethnography, Wool describes the kind of relationships that veterans at Walter Reed had with each other as “in-durable,” and I feel this fits well with the veterans in dog trainings as well.

Wool explains “in-durable” as:

...a way of being with others based in part on a common need for endurance but that is not itself enduring; a way of being in common that is based on the hardness (*dureté*) of life – both its difficulty and its explicit materiality – but that is also conditioned by the temporal limits of that togetherness, the awareness of many finite durations rather than the possibility of a single shared duration (*the* duration, or even the *longue duree*) (Wool 2015, 48).

In the case of the veterans training their service dogs, they experience a kind of camaraderie that appears during classes and outings based on common striving. But when I asked veterans if they were in touch with other service dog handlers, including those they met in class, they told me they were not. Wool continues: “The experience of togetherness and of being in common with other soldiers *and* the knowledge that that commonness will not endure are part of what makes Walter Reed in-durable” (Wool 2015, 48). This was one of the most surprising discoveries in my research, that while there is a strong dog training community, this did not carry through to the veterans themselves. Once they graduated, the handler pairs went their separate ways and for the

most part remained socially isolated despite having a service dog. In the introduction I mention that Liam thinks graduates are part of the Liberty Hounds family, but apart from recertifications, the veterans tend not to come back. I attended one such recertification, and despite their anxiety over passing the exam, the two veterans from the same cohort seemed happy to see each other again, even for the moment.

An example of the social isolation of in-durability is Abigail and Scout, a Vizsla mix. Abigail is an army veteran in her late thirties. She spends most of her time at home creating horror cosplay TikTok videos. She has more than 50,000 followers, including a viral post in which she burned her army uniform in protest of the Dobbs decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. After she graduated, she went through a tough patch in her family life, with her ex-husband seeking to have his new wife adopt their son. She did not leave the house for months, so when she went back for recertification, Scout failed at least one task. I met her while she was retaking classes with another cohort. Had she continued to take classes or perhaps have meet ups with other service dog pairs, she might have passed the first time around.

When I asked Abigail what she needs Scout for, she explained that Scout alerts to her migraines by licking her forehead. He wakes her up from nightmares and performs DPT. She reflected on the consequences of not “using” the “tool” – I will talk more about this terminology in Chapter Three – she had been given by pushing the dog away. Much like many of her peers that I have described so far, Abigail wants Scout for safety reasons. “I didn’t want like a big, you know, Cujo dog or anything, but, just, I mean... Cujo is a cute dog, but... I just wanted to feel safe going into stores and stuff. So having a dog to kind of like I guess like watch. Because he watches for me.” Instead of spending real time with friends – she has an impressive virtual community on TikTok – Scout keeps her from feeling lonely throughout the day. She does not

get in touch with people like she used to, so she has Scout to keep her company. He also helps with her eating disorder. “He helps me eat because if I don’t eat, if I give him his food, he doesn’t touch his food until I eat. So, I don’t... I don’t know if that’s something he picked up on himself with me and my eating issues.” Scout also “snuggles” and gives Abigail “something to love on.” Abigail wants to move closer to Liberty Hounds in order to keep up with Scout’s training and have more of a community, but again the problem of in-durability comes forth because the trainees come from all over the state and spend only the time needed for training at the center. While the veterans might develop a sense of camaraderie during the classes, the social relations they develop with each other generally do not endure.

This is not to say that the social relations that take place during class are insignificant. At Independence Paws, many people go to class because it is the only time during the week that they interact with people, especially other veterans. A pair even teamed up to carpool to class on the weekends. Rather than a strictly regimented class, Independence Paws allows for a lot of downtime and the veterans talk with each other. In this way, the in-durable relations are significant even if they do not last.

Psychological Safety

As it is clear from the previous stories, veterans rely on their dogs for a sense of safety in public. Another veteran I talked to spoke of safety from herself. Nora is in her mid-thirties, and she was placed with Finn who was trained in the prison program. She tended to call absent from class at short notice and there was some talk of her washing-out, but the pair made it through and are happily graduated now. One way her dog keeps her safe is by alerting to her anxiety. Once she was in “sobriety group” and someone was telling a story of trauma, which sparked a panic attack

in Nora without her realizing it yet. She was scratching her leg, which is her indication of anxiety. “And [Finn] right away comes up and puts his head there. And so I was like ‘Oh yea, you’re right!’” Nora was able to calm down and focus on the story, whereas in the past she probably would have left. In this example, Finn alerted to Nora’s anxiety so she could calm herself down before a full-on panic attack happened.

Nora struggles with depression and suicidal ideations and Finn is “going to make sure I’m safe” after a “really heavy [therapy] session.” Sometimes her depression is so bad that she wakes up not wanting to live. “I wake up regretting waking up.” This is one of the reasons she wanted a service dog: “if I wake up that way, you’re going to make sure I do get up.” Finn keeps Nora motivated despite her depression because dogs need a “routine”; she needs to care for her dog as much as it cares for her. When she “zones out,” Finn starts barking to get her out of it. This keeps her “safe” in case she starts to dissociate in public. She gave the example of going to the grocery store and finding that it has been rearranged.

I’m standing there with my list, and I can actually get a panic attack from like: oh crap, I don’t know where anything is now. And I’ll end up running around the store and the more I do it, the more my anxiety builds, and I can end up in a panic attack. What he does for me is he’s like: ‘woah, take a deep breath. Hey look there’s someone over there, let’s go over here’ whatever. So the crowd control helps because he’ll tell me someone’s near me.

In this way, Finn prevents Nora from having a full-on panic attack and successfully navigate an everyday task like going grocery shopping. Nora also gave a recent example from a trip to the grocery store. She was in a cooler picking out jalapenos when someone walked up and opened another cooler, hitting Nora in the process. Finn came around and pushed the door against them. “So I was like ‘you tell them, Finn!’ I was like what is wrong with you guys!” Finn knew what to do without her asking. “That’s something simple, but it’s so huge.”

In this way, Finn protects Nora not from a dangerous public, as with Henry, but from her own tendencies to having panic attacks and suicidal ideations. The routine of having a dog is an example of mutual care: Finn protects her from depression and anxiety in the process of taking care of his everyday needs. Nora and Finn engage in moral striving to take care of each other and thereby take a step forward towards achieving the social and ethical project of an ordinary American life. Their hard work and loyalty are virtues that form part of the argument over what it means to lead a good life that involves public access without panic attacks. Having Finn has allowed Nora to live in the present; even if he cannot cure her anxiety or depression, Finn can contribute to everyday living.

Dogs in Public

The problem with service dogs, however, is that people see a dog and immediately want to pet it. Veterans complain that people come up and pet their dog even despite its “Do Not Pet” tag. With many of the veterans I interviewed, their biggest wish was to have the public ignore their dogs.

William, who I mentioned earlier, described to me this issue to me:

I am still trying to get used to the gawking phase. I mean there's only like five stores that I'm going to go to on a regular basis. He's been to all five. That first and second time, I need like the fifth or sixth time to come to pass, so that all the employees know that he's coming in, know that he's there, you know what I mean?

As I mentioned earlier, the point of the service dog is to do tasks that an ordinary American might engage in without experiencing debilitating anxiety. But as Wool (2015) explains, there is a dialectic in or of the extra/ordinary. The dog allows the veteran to go out into public and perform the role of ordinary American consumer, but the dog also draws attention to the veteran, making it so that they are not so ordinary.

William imagines that people perceive him in public as “pretty well fucked up.” “If you see someone with a service dog, one: the service dog is doing something for a disability of some sort. But you combine it with I’ve got Liberty Hounds and military regalia on my service dog vest, and most general population see those two and equate: crazy in the head.” I told him I thought that was quite weird, but William insisted that his tattoos and dog vest “announces” his PTSD to the world. The gawking is worth it for William, who suffered during the two-year gap between his old and new service dogs, mostly staying at home and not leaving his basement. Now he must engage in everyday activities like getting out of bed and leaving the house, if only to potty Ghost. He trusts Ghost to protect him from his own anxiety.

Daniel, a 32-year-old army veteran with a Belgian Truven named Echo finds the opposite, that “people recognize that, like, he’s there and he’s working.” He now feels less awkward around people. “Before you kind of feel like an alien sometimes when you go to some places and there’s just all civilians, you can’t relate to half of what they’re saying.” Echo has helped with this. For Daniel it goes even further: he does not think as much about his trauma. Daniel is dedicated to Echo’s daily training. For Daniel there is a difference between the dog “working” and just being a dog at home. It seems Daniel has been lucky so far that he has not had issues with Echo in public, or that he is less wary of public encounters.

Leo is a 37-year-old navy veteran with a Belgian Malinois called Obie. Obie manages social situations for Leo when in what he calls “working mode,” meaning he is paying attention to Leo and his surroundings. He is a “man of few little words” and when people want to pet Obie in public, this is beyond his “comfort zone.” “He picks up on that and he’ll bark and let them ‘Okay, you have to back off now.’ Which most people do. He does have that tough alert for sure.” Obie’s reaction to the public trying to pet him or get too close to Leo reminds me of Henry

being alerted to a man standing behind him when Chase lightly woofed. Organizations like ADI would push back against this kind of behavior. Service dogs, according to ADI standards, are not supposed to be guard dogs that bark to protect. An alert such as a nudge or a command of space is fine, but guarding behaviors are not because they indicate aggression. This is an interesting limit to moral relations between veteran and service dog: the dogs should not guard in public or they risk getting thrown out of the store, even if they are doing these behaviors with the intention of helping their veteran. The reason for this is that the ordinary American does not need a guard dog in public to be safe. As I have mentioned earlier, according to the ADA, a dog/handler team can be kicked out of a store if the dog misbehaves and the handler cannot get the dog under control.

Bumblebee Tuna: Interacting with Staff

As I mentioned in Chapter One, according to the ADA, staff at a public location can ask someone with a service dog two questions: is this dog a service animal and what task has it been trained to perform. Emma, a veteran I mentioned earlier, struggles when people ask questions about what Indy is used for.

I'm in that stage where I get like anxiety answering questions about the service dog, because... it's not your business, right? And I know I had taken him to Ace Hardware and one of the... staff like comes up and was like 'oh, can I pet him?' And I'm like 'No. (laughs dryly) No.' And they were like 'oh is he still in training then?' And I'm like 'no, he's not.' And then I didn't leave any other questions. And then there was a guy that was standing there. He tries to be more friendly, he starts talking about other stuff, and then he starts asking: 'so what does he do?' I was like 'he alerts me to my medical condition.' And then I just turned around and like stopped talking to him, you know what I mean?

As Emma demonstrates here, vague answers are appropriate and sufficient for ADA compliance.

A long passed down story with Liberty Hounds is of a veteran who had such severe social anxiety that when approached by staff or the public in general, she would respond with

“bumblebee tuna!” It sounds like she got away with this and was eventually able to respond appropriately.

In my experience, most staff at stores do not know their rights as store employees interacting with a service dog. They usually are satisfied with some kind of paperwork indicating that the dog is a service dog. This is complicated, because there is no accrediting body that declares the dog is a “real” service dog. Once while walking around a grocery store with a veteran, I saw a staff member ask to see the dog’s paperwork. The veteran produced a card, which the staff accepted, and we were left alone. Even Liberty Hounds’ graduated veterans receive a card that indicates where the dog was trained and what the rights of the handler are under ADA. I would argue that even this is an example of narratives of ordinary Americans, since we rely on licensing bodies for proof similar to a driver’s license.

Psychiatric Service Dogs and the VA

The service dogs allow their veterans to perform everyday American tasks like going to a grocery store or restaurant or even a festival or conference while feeling relatively safe. But in order to be ordinary, they must be marked by the oddity of having a dog with them in public places where dogs usually do not enter. Ellie and Willow, two Liberty Hounds veterans, got chased out of a store once by a pair of store owners who insisted that dogs cannot have public access. They brought out their cameras and intimidated the two veterans. This is an extreme version of what might happen to dog/handler teams in public. A more common problem is that not only does the dog create a sense of safety in public, but it also opens up the public to interact with dog/handler teams. Sociability is another expectation for ordinary American life, but the veterans are accustomed to pushing the public away.

In part because of this, the Veterans Affairs (VA) acknowledges the benefits of having a dog for veterans with PTSD, but also resists the idea that service dogs are on par with evidence-based treatment for PTSD (VA “Dogs,” n.d.). Dogs “bring out feelings of love,” “are good companions,” “take orders well when trained,” “are fun and can help reduce stress,” and “are a good reason to get out of the house, spend time outdoor, and meet new people” (VA “Dogs,” n.d.). While dogs can help with “some parts of living with PTSD,” according to the VA dogs can become a crutch:

...there is some chance they may continue to believe that they cannot do certain things on their own. For example, if the dog keeps strangers from coming too close, the owner will not have a chance to learn that they can handle this situation without the dog. Becoming dependent on a dog can get in the way of the recovery process for PTSD. Based on what we know from research, evidence-based treatment provides the best chance of recovery from PTSD. (VA “Dogs,” n.d.)

Remember that most veterans prefer some kind of blocking command in order to feel safe in public. I understand the VA as saying that if a dog reduces hypervigilance, the veteran never learns to reduce anxiety in public on their own. The veteran relies on the dog and never makes any progress towards reducing baseline PTSD symptoms. This perspective is ableist in the sense that it prioritizes cure and conception of normalcy over striving for a good life with a service dog in the present.

Perhaps for this reason, the ADI includes a similar point in its standards of practice: “The program does not encourage, train behaviors, name cues, or give the perception of, any form of guarding, protecting, or searching for a perceived threat” (ADI 2023, 17). Having a dog search a room for a veteran is completely out of the question: how can the dog tell if a person is good or bad? Instead of blocking, the ADI representative I talked with encourages a “command of space” where the veteran asks the dog to stand in front or behind them. She explained how these two terms are different:

It's mostly the wording. And this is my opinion. Not ADI's opinion. But, you know, you don't want *block*. You don't... you want to bring the public in. That's the whole point of AD... of, of PTSD. You want them to be comfortable in public. It's mostly used, like, when the dog sits behind them, and some programs will call that 'watch my six.' We ask them not to. You know, it's a command of space. But I can tell you what K9s for Patriots does. And I think it's brilliant the easiest command in the world. When the public comes, like, if you're in the mall. And they say 'can we pet your dog?' Instead of keeping the public out, they do a "shake" command. They tell the dog to shake, and the dog looks at them, not at the person. So they feel that they have a little bit of control there. Easy task, easy task. And it's very... it's been very successful with K9s for Patriots. [...] And the dog is looking at them, because they know they're going to get praise. So they're looking... so the person doesn't feel like he's losing control of this dog to another person. You know what I'm saying?

In this way, the dogs are a social lubricant that allows veterans to interact with the public. I have also heard this command as "go visit!" The dog briefly allows itself to be petted or shakes hands and then returns to its person. At the ASDP conference I attended a session on interacting with political representatives, and the presenter encouraged having the dog "go visit" the representatives to garner favor and feel more personally connected to the service dog world.

I asked the ADI representative what she thought of Liberty Hounds' "crowd control," where the dog takes the initiative to put its body in between its handler and the public without a command. She thought this made sense if the veteran and dog team finds itself in a crowd, but not just if they are walking in the mall. "You want to encourage public interaction." Again ADI hopes to galvanize public interaction, drawing a difference between needing space in a crowd compared to a minor encounter with the public at a mall. This is a kind of debate over the good life that encompasses the moral tradition of ordinary American life: do service dog handlers engage in sociality with the public or do they turn the public away? Should a service dog block and guard in public or create space only in big crowds? Another aspect of this debate is what counts as an ableist assumption. What regarding the good life do we consider "normal" and how do we focus on everyday living in the present rather than seeking a future cure?

What ADI and the VA fail to recognize is the huge responsibility for veterans with service dogs interacting with the public. Ellie is a female veteran with short spikey hair; her dog Jersey has all sorts of neon equipment, from earmuffs to boots. She told me that service dogs both make things easier and harder at the same time. “A five-minute trip to the grocery store can take up to an hour because there’s no just in or out because people constantly stop you. People constantly trying to pet your dog. Kids running, screaming, asking questions. And you know it’s not bad things. But sometimes I just want to buy toilet paper and go home.” The problem here is that dogs as public beings are expected to be open to petting or treating. At Liberty Hounds we had a stand at the county fair and we brought Riley with us. Nearly everybody who approached the booth was interested in petting Riley. When we told them “no” or “she’s working” the visitor generally moved along without asking for more information about the organization. Might Liberty Hounds have gotten more donations if they allowed Riley to “shake”?

Some of the veterans I interviewed did have positive interactions with the public and appreciated the sociality their dog produced. As Aria told me, she now has more interactions with people through Liberty Hounds and she gets outside more. She runs into neighbors or passersby; she even had someone pull over their car to say “cute dog”! “It brings attention for sure, he is definitely a cute puppy so... people like to comment on him and see him and stuff so. I think that’s increased and I think it is only going to increase more as we go through the training and finish up the service dog training.” She is probably right that continued training will increase public interactions because she will spend more time in public locations with Hunter. The question is whether she will turn the public away or encourage them to greet Hunter. Elijah also experienced having public interactions: “And of course everyone asks to pet the dog. Always.”

But he takes no issue with this as long as they pay attention to the vest and ask first to pet before getting too close.

Having a dog and experiencing an increased sense of security in public has also led some veterans to more interactions and less avoidance. Emily, for example, never used to talk to anybody. When she and her husband would stay at the American in Sheboygan, Emily would never say a word to the manager. Then after getting Juno, she thanked the manager for the nice stay. The manager told Emily's husband that this was "the first time that I had ever talked to him." In this situation, Emily performs ordinary sociality with someone she has met numerous times. It was strange to hear her speak because she usually remained silent. Having Juno created a sense of safety that opened her up to the public. In a way, Emily can be seen as achieving everyday sociality that is the sign of the power dogs have to mitigate, if not cure, Emily's MST and PTSD.

Conclusion

Returning to the vignette that started this chapter, Oliver and Harley are performing ordinary American civility in their execution of the public access test. This is made possible only by way of service dog. A service dog should allow their handler to be in public locations by reducing hypervigilance and making the veteran feel safe. For Oliver, being separated from Harley for only a few minutes is a huge test for both him and his dog.

This chapter has discussed the various ways in which organizations train service dogs, especially focusing on public access. Many veterans with PTSD struggle to attend family gatherings, visit grocery stores, or shop at big box stores that do not usually allow pets. Having a service dog makes the veteran feel relatively safe, which is an ordinary civilian reaction. The

way that the test is designed shows that the ordinary American who does not suffer from PTSD understands public places not only as generally safe, but also as an obligatory activity. If the veterans stop bringing their dogs in public, they will lose their skills and thus also their service dog status, as what happened with Abigail and her dog Scout. This is interesting in the age of COVID, where apps like “Instacart” allow for easy access to grocery delivery. If it is easily possible to live a life where the veteran does not interact with strangers, why is public access important?

John, a Vietnam veteran who is a man of few words, washed-out of the program even though his dog Scarlett performs all the tasks that he wants. The problem is that John and his wife Grace, who is a big advocate for her husband, live on a farm, so Scarlett does not get a lot of practice being in an urban environment. She cannot seem to pass the required CGC Urban test. Liam offered to find him a new dog, but John is deeply bonded to Scarlett. They got the dog after John attempted suicide and Scarlett has since improved his wellbeing. She keeps him calm and keeps his attention on her instead of his problems. She can tell when he is upset, and he feels she is watching out for him. Is it fair that Scarlett cannot be a service dog because he is “on alert” in the downtown of a medium sized town? This shows how important public access is to the concept of a service dog.

In this chapter I have argued that veterans and their service dogs produce moral relations by taking care of each other’s needs in public access. The veteran tends to the dog’s needs, such as going out for walks, and the dog watches out for the veteran in public, so they are not surprised by someone coming up behind them. These relations allow for veterans to feel safe in public, which assemblages of trainers, accrediting organizations, veterans, service dogs suggest is what an ordinary American should strive for. The argument over the good life focuses on how

the everyday American feels safe in public and goes to stores, sometimes as a consumer and other times as a window shopper just to make sure their dogs are in shape regarding their tasks. Consumerism intersects with ableism in the sense that shopping in public is considered “normal” whereas people with a disability due to trauma struggle with how society is arranged for those without a mental illness. Capitalism is therefore also part of the ethical debate over what counts as a good life. While the service dog industry agrees that public access is what makes a service dog different from a pet or emotional support animal, there is not a full agreement on what kinds of tasks dogs should perform in public. There is significant controversy around the most important public access task: creating space between the veteran and the public. There is a fine line between creating space and guarding, which, although many veterans want blocking, is sometimes understood as inappropriate for service dogs. There are also discrepancies between how the veteran and dog should interact with members of the public asking to pet their dog: do they refuse or allow the dog to “shake?” This shows that different organizations and trainers have contradictory notions of what ordinary American sociality looks like, which can be seen as participating in a debate over what the good life in this particular tradition entails.

Many veterans think that getting service dog will completely cure their PTSD, but this is unlikely. Drawing on Clare (2017) and Taylor (2017), it is ableist to assume that one must be cured of their disability to live well. However, we can also think of disability as a kind of diversity that creates assemblages of human/nonhuman animals that enter relations of care with one another. Veterans learn to trust their dogs to mitigate hypervigilance and avoidance, and the dog trusts their veteran to care for their everyday needs. This is not to say that seeking a cure is unreasonable, but Clare and Taylor suggest focusing on living in the present, which relates to my previous discussion of everyday moral striving.

Chapter 3: **Service Dogs as Subjects of Love and Objects of Medicine**

“Finn... he has already saved my life.”

Nora and I were wrapping our interview when she came to tears, remembering the nearly tragic event that proved Finn and Nora’s mutual trust. Finn was able to do his job as a service dog only because of this bond. The following story illustrates it.

Nora took Finn on her kayak, which she had done many times before. From the very beginning, when she first got Finn they went swimming frequently, which is well suited for a Labrador retriever. Then something happened: “and I don’t know... I moved to the right, he moved to the left, I don’t know, we were under water. Which happens, you know, no big deal.” It was no big deal until she tried to get Finn back onto the boat but failed. At some point “panic sets in, and instead of me breathing and focusing, I panicked.” Each time she tried to get Finn back on the boat, it flipped over. “I don’t know if you’ve ever been under a boat, and you pull in that air, it’s a very heavy air. And he really panicked.”

Nora finally got Finn out from under the boat and they unhooked the boat, but she became disoriented and was unable to tell where the shore was. “And I just start screaming. Because I don’t know what else to do. I have my life jacket on and I’m holding him. And it got to where I was so tired I could not... I couldn’t anymore. I just couldn’t. I literally lean back into my life jacket and held him on top of me. And I’m just screaming: save my dog, save my dog.” As fate would have it, there were two people on shore and one was a strong swimmer. She jumped in and swam to their boat. Nora at this point did not care what happened to her; she only wanted to save her dog. The bystander guided Finn to shore because Nora had a lifejacket.

Despite being saved, Finn continued to push towards going back to Nora. He is water safety trained to help her. “I knew he’s already exhausted, and he did try to go back in to come get me. And I’m trying to get to shore. I was like you have to hold on to him. And this literally woman almost had to sit on him to hold him down. To get him to not come to me.” Nora eventually made it back to shore. At this point the police had arrived and the other bystander was trying to retrieve her boat, because her medications were tied to the boat.

With Nora on shore, Finn sprang into action. “He’s just trying to make me breathe, trying to help me breathe. He literally does DPT¹ right then and there. And I’m just holding him and I’m like all I care about is my dog, I don’t even care about the boat, I don’t even care. I just care about my dog.” The police officer came over and asked if they needed an ambulance, since Nora has asthma and at this point was hyperventilating and was having trouble breathing. “And I said: no, I have my dog, he’s a service dog. I just need my inhaler that’s hooked to my boat, which, the way the current was, it eventually was coming up to shore.” Nora got access to her inhaler and even got help putting the boat on her car.

The police officer came back over to Nora and Finn, where the pair was sitting calmly, trying to bring themselves down from the terrifying event. The police officer told them: “You know what, you two are doing great. I don’t need to call an ambulance. I feel like he’s going to take care of you. You’ve got everything you need. You have someone coming?” Nora told her that there is someone on the way. Reflecting on the event, Nora explained to me: “I thought I was going to be gone. And all I cared about was my dog. And he just was there. He was there for me. You know, and... that was the scariest... one of my scariest moments of my life.”

¹ Deep Pressure Therapy: when the dog applies pressure to body of the handler in order to reduce anxiety.

For Nora the most important take-away from the event was “our bond which was very challenged that day.” The bond continues to this day. The pair still go swimming frequently, and Finn got a new lifejacket, but even so it took about three months for her to get back in the boat and she won’t take Finn along anymore. Nora believes the event scared Finn so much that he is protective of Nora in the water. “There’s a certain point... I’m not allowed to swim past a certain point anymore for him. And he’ll show me. Like he’ll come swim all the way out with me and he’ll be like this is it, this is it. Like he’ll start pulling me. This is the line, mommy! And he’ll go back in and go to shore. And then come back out. As long as I don’t go past the point for him, he’s fine.”

Reflecting on their bond, Nora remembered her feelings while trapped underneath the boat. “I think in that moment all we cared about was each other. And that’s... and I remember just lying back in the water and there was a moment where everything went calm. Like he literally was just laying on me, you know, we were using the life jacket at this point to keep us up. And he just licks my face, and he just looks so calm, he’s like: we got this, mom! And that’s when I saw the girl waving. But in that moment, when I thought everything... Jay I thought everything was done. I was try... in my mind, I was like how can I take my lifejacket off to put it on him. Was my mindset. Because I was like I didn’t think I was going to make it anymore. And all I cared about was like: how am I going to do this? And he just licks me and I was hugging him even harder then. Like the whole left side of my body was bruised from this for a while.”

Nora remembers the incident as both a moment of mutual trust and care between her and her dog and of crisis that challenged their bond. Without Finn, Nora might not have found the strength to carry on and survive the panic. Even with his own life in danger, Finn fought to save

his person and provided appropriate service dog tasks when they were both on shore. In a way, the pair saved each other's lives due to their bond.

* * *

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the service dog differentiates itself from pets or emotional support animals because it is allowed public access. This chapter explains that service dogs are allowed in public mainly because they are technically considered to be medical equipment for people with disabilities. However, this equipment only works if there is a bond between dog and handler. What does this bond look like? As I propose in the Chapter Two, the dog/handler team reanimates the camaraderie of the military. The dog and handler are battle buddies. There is also an element of kinship; for example, in Nora's story she imagines the dog calling her "mom." These are examples of human/nonhuman assemblages of care in the present rather than turning to the pre-disability (Nora has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD]) past or future cure.

How can we conceptualize a bond between human and nonhuman animals? In her book *Animal Intimacies*, Radhika Govindrajan describes the modality of relationships between human and animal entities as "relatedness" (Govindrajan 2018). She does so "to capture the myriad ways in which the potential and outcome of a life always and already unfolds *in relation to* that of another" (Govindrajan 2018, 3). I read Govindrajan here as suggesting that a life is never isolated and relationships are not the product of two or more entities coming together as individuals, but that lives are produced through the subjective entanglements between entities both human and nonhuman. For Govindrajan's interlocutors, nonhuman animals are subjects just as much as humans are. "Indeed, all the humans I knew believed that nonhuman animals were intentional and subjective persons like themselves and that relationships with them could be successful only if they emerged from that recognition" (Govindrajan 2018, 24). In the case of the

veteran/dog teams I interacted with over the course of my fieldwork, dogs are also “intentional and subjective,” even if they are not persons. Indeed, the bond between dog and handler depends on this. The dog, for example, needs to take initiative and task for their veteran during a crisis; in Chapter Four I will go into more detail about how dogs improvise when they have run out of trained responses to an emergency. The connection between veteran and dog speaks to “relatedness” because their bond is more than the sum of its participants, illustrated by the mutual trust and care between Nora and Finn in the opening vignette.

Similarly, Eduardo Kohn also views both human and nonhuman beings – not only persons – as “selves,” meaning “beings that have a point of view” (Kohn 2007, 4). In this way, dogs and humans take part in what Kohn calls an “ecology of selves” (Kohn 2007, 4). Similar to Govindrajan’s relatedness, Kohn discusses the idea of “becoming” (Kohn 2007, 7): “one of the implications of adopting the viewpoints of other kinds of beings is that knowing others requires inhabiting their different *Umwelts*.² When one does so, attributes and dispositions become dislodged from the bodies that produce them and ontological boundaries become blurred. I call this transformative process of blurring a ‘becoming’” (Kohn 2007, 7). According to João Biehl and Peter Locke, “[i]n becoming, as Deleuze saw it, one can achieve an ultimate existential stage in which life is simply immanent and open to new relations – camaraderie – and trajectories” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 317). “Becoming” and “relatedness” may not be interchangeable, but they both express the figure of emergence by discussing entanglements between subjectivities or selves as a way in which we can know each other in the world. “The belief that we can know the intentions, goals, and desires of other selves allows us to act in this world,” (Kohn 2007, 7). For Kohn, this means literally knowing what it means when dogs dream. For Govindrajan, this

²[T]he product of the interaction of the phenomenal worlds” (Kohn 2007, 4)

means knowing, for example, that a goat consents to sacrifice if it shakes water and rice off its back.

One of the dog trainers that I interviewed indicated that dogs are not “robots”: “they have good days and bad days just like people do. As much as they are highly trained, each dog has a quirk. They typically have something that is their kryptonite.” I draw on this quote to indicate that even though dogs are, formally, medical equipment, and thus allowed public access, they are still living beings that cannot be counted on to perform at 100% all the time. Service dogs begin with intensive obedience training, but even so they still have agency and will misbehave, especially with an inexperienced handler like most veterans are. Of course, inanimate medical equipment also cannot always be depended on. Wheelchair wheels can break; motorized chairs can run out of battery. But the difference with dogs is that they bring an element of intentionality into the mix. As Govindrajan asserts: “relatedness must always be understood as constituting a partial connection between beings who come to their relationship as unpredictable, unknowable, and unequal entities” (Govindrajan 2018, 25). By “partial connection,” drawing on Marilyn Strathern, Govindrajan indicates that there are never only individuals or only bonds, but some kind of partial – and often unequal, in the case of dogs – relationality (Govindrajan 2018, 4). As my informant explained, even as highly trained as they are, canines are living beings, not robots, and they cannot be expected to act consistently all the time. Indeed, as I will cover in Chapter Four, working dogs are submissive – not equal – agentive beings in their interactions with humans.

In one of the stories Govindrajan tells, the bond between her informants and their animals is one of kinship. A woman treated her goats as recipients of motherly love, otherwise they would not have been appropriate sacrifices. The goat is sprinkled with rice and water and they

are only seen as consenting to the sacrifice if they shake off the rice. Even though the goat eventually always shakes, this allows for a degree of uncertainty and impression of agency in the process. While some of the veterans with whom I worked use the language of kinship to describe the relationships with their dogs – such as Nora describing her dog as indicating “we got this, mom!” – I would argue that most of the time, the relationship is not one of kinship in the sense of civilian relationality. Instead, the dog is a kind of soldier that has their back. It mainly depends on the role that the veteran played in the military. Nora for the most time had a desk job and her trauma is not combat related, so it makes sense to rely more on the language of kinship.

Govindrajan and Kohn both describe nonhuman animals as subjects or selves, but service dogs are also in an unusual state of being nonhuman medical objects. How can we differentiate between a subject capable of loving bonds and an object functioning as medical equipment when an entity exists as both at the same time? This question is partially addressed by Theodor Adorno, who argued: “The separation of subject and object is both real and illusory. True, because in the cognitive realm it serves to express the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development. False, because the resulting separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant” (Adorno 2014, 152). For Adorno, there are real objects in the world that do not act as subjects – although they might have social traces as created by humans – but these objects are not fixed in time and space.

This dialectic calls up Bruno Latour’s take on materiality such that objects also take part in “the course of action” (Latour 2005, 70). Latour argues that objects also perform what we in language call verbs, such as a kettle boiling water or a hammer hitting a nail (Latour 2005, 71). In his famous example of the role of a gun in killing someone, Latour calls the co-acting of actors – both human and material – translation: “displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the

creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents” (Latour 1994, 32). This recalls again the idea of “relatedness” as Govindrajan uses it but includes the possibility of material objects as actors. The questions that motivate this chapter are: how are service dogs dialectically subjects/objects of love, trust, and medical equipment and how is this made possible by the cultivation of an affective bond between veteran and dog?

The Pairing

The veterans that I interacted with and interviewed often talked about a bond that formed through training their dogs. The bond starts to form as soon as the dog is paired with their veteran. Sometimes veterans will come to training with a dog they are already bonded to, while others are provided with an older puppy that has been obedience trained either by puppy raisers or prison programs. Liberty Hounds, for example, held a bootcamp before starting the training program. For many veterans this was their first time working their dogs. I attended a boot camp and watched how the veterans tentatively played with their dogs and gave and received affection. The bond was already forming. For organizations that provide veterans with fully trained dogs who know over a hundred tasks, some of the trainers I interviewed reported watching the bond form between veteran and dog in the several week intensive training.

There are a variety of approaches to pairing dogs with their veterans. First of all, do the dogs come from breeding programs or are they rescues? For organizations, rescues are a kind of wildcard. They might pass the assessment in the shelter but behave differently at home. As one trainer explained, rescue dogs might need extra bonding time because they do not know yet that they have “a permanent home and a permanent master.” While the obvious benefit of rescuing a dog is to save a life and save money, many shelter dogs have experienced trauma in their lives,

which is not always the best for also traumatized veterans. For this reason, many organizations rely on donations from well-established breeding programs. A disabled veteran cannot be paired up with a disabled dog. There are several breeding programs that feed into service dog organizations, such as “Project 2 Heal.” This organization focuses on breeding service dogs specifically for veterans, indicating: “Most service dog organizations have no breeding program, often leaving no choice but to train dogs obtained from shelters. On average, only 1 out of 12 dogs shelter dogs becomes a success service dog, contributing to waiting periods of up to three years” (Project 2 Heal, n.d.). Anecdotally, organizations that train rescue dogs claim to have more success than this, but a well-bred puppy is ideal.

There are two main ways that organizations pair dogs with veterans. The first is to have the dog “pick” the veteran. Usually the way this works is to introduce the veterans to several dogs to see if the dog has an interest in one of the veterans. One trainer explained to me that she looks for a change in behavior in the dog when interacting with a veteran. They sit the veterans around in chairs and the dog will go to each veteran. “And it may do an alert³, which is their own natural response. They may... they may use the nose on every single veteran. What we’re looking for is a dog that will come up and usually if they smell something it is usually about a foot before they get to them or about a foot after. And we look for a dog that follows that scent. Let the nose lead them to that person.” The dog starts sniffing the veteran’s hands, then arms, and then face. She explains that the dog wants to smell the veteran’s mouth. “That’s what we look for, is a dog that smells the face first and then if it kisses that’s okay. But if it doesn’t use its nose at all, then it’s not a go.” While the dog relies on the nose to choose its veteran, it is not clear from the trainer what the dogs are smelling for, since it is likely that all the veterans are

³ An alert is some kind of response to a sign from whomever the dog is interacting with. The dog might sit or bark or nudge a person to indicate an alert.

producing cortisol in this stressful situation. What the trainers and veterans are hoping to find are the inklings of a bond.

One of the trainers that I spent a lot of time with also believes the dogs sometimes pick the veteran. “We’ve had where the dog came right out and just went right up to the veteran.” This idea of the dog coming right up to the veteran comes up time and again. “That’s the majority of the time how it happens. We’ve seen where the dog comes out to meet the... and like totally ignores the veteran like, has, like: nope, this is not my person. And then the next person the dog goes right up to the... the same dog goes right up to that person.” The trainer described this process as “beautiful.” I have also heard it called “magical” or “amazing.” In this way, for the organizations that allow the dog to pick its veteran rely on a mysterious process that they do not even fully understand, such as the way people describe falling in love. This is an example of relatedness: the emergent relation between dog and veteran works itself out in mystifying connection with each other.

Other organizations rely on the intuition of the trainer or some kind of algorithm to place dogs. These organizations tend to argue that the veteran should get the dog they need, not the dog they want. One of the veterans I spoke with told me he ended up with a totally opposite dog than what he was looking for. He wanted a small, calm dog, but ended up with a high energy Belgian Malinois.

As Nancy⁴ tells me, you know, it’s not what you think you want, it’s what we think you need. And you know, uh, they saw something, they saw something, you know, whether it was, you know, my depression or you know what have you. But they just decided I need an active dog. And the first day I met him, like, we bonded instantly. Yeah and they asked me if it was someone I wanted to bring home and you know the bond like instantly that day. And I brought him home and we’ve been together ever since. The complete opposite of what I wanted.

⁴ Nancy is the vice president of Independence Paws.

The dog got him out of the house and active despite his depression. In this case, the opposite personalities were the right call. Other trainers take the opposite approach, matching dogs and veterans based on their aligned personalities. As one trainer told me: “we make sure that if that veteran is not very active that it doesn’t get a very active dog. Or if this person is very active, it gets a very active dog. So we try to pair them up according, you know, the type of dog, the energy of the dog, the energy of the veteran. Can the vet handle this dog, you know?”

Another organization expressed a similar iteration of pairing the dog the veteran needs not that the veteran wants, but instead of having the dog pick the veteran, the head trainer makes the selection. First she talks with the veteran to determine their needs versus wants. “Like I said a lot of people want that... I want a German Shepherd and I want it to protect me and bark on command. Which is not a service dog. And that’s not always what you need when you’re having a dissociative PTSD attack and their dog is standing there barking while people are trying to assist them, that doesn’t get anybody the help they need.” She pays attention to how severe the PTSD of the veteran is, from “just a little bit nervous” to “full psychotic dissociative events.” She indicates: “Obviously the more severe, the more stable, sweet, accepting, friendly, calming dog I’m going to need. Now if this person over here who just is uncomfortable and just when the toaster goes off, then I could place a German Shepherd with them if that’s what their heart desired. But it is a different commitment level and different ability level for the team itself. So I do feel that’s one of the places where we have more success than others is, um, we base it on the needs of the disabilities.” This trainer regards this process as “scientific” – but she never explained exactly what this entails – and based on dog behavior, since the dogs are apparently trained using scientific method. Again she spoke of scientific method as if it were self-evident, which I read as a kind of attempt to prove the legitimacy of the dog (see Chapter One).

Another version of this method came out in another organization, where they have a survey that matches up the personalities of the dogs and the veterans. In one organization, seven family members and friends fill out a personality survey to help “understand, you know, are they an analytical personality, are they an expressive personality.” They also do the survey on the dog, allowing them to match up personalities. A different organization has a similar process. They have a survey they call “social style forms.” Similar to the previous organization, they have six friends and family fill out the form for the veteran, and six people who are acquainted with the dog fill it out for the dog. This might be the trainer or foster parent, for example. “It looks complicated but it’s really really not. So there’s just, um, thirty questions on here and we use the same form for the clients [...] So then you just rate how you think this specific dog is on the scales. So is this dog sociable? And then you would just rate it lower or high, and then how you see yourself as, as well. So you kind of go through this form and then at the end you put down, like, how does this dog or person, you know, relate to you.” While most organizations do not undergo such an extensive survey, some kind of interview with the veteran is standard.

A lot of the time, service dog organizations will allow veterans to bring their own dogs, pending a temperament test and medical exam (especially looking for hip dysplasia). The dogs also have to be fairly young in age, no older than two or three years old. The benefit to bringing their own dog is that the pair are usually already bonded. The downside is that the dog is used to being the family put and needs to relearn behaviors such as paying all its attention to the veteran.

The Bonding

Once the dog has been paired with the veteran, or the veteran’s own dog has passed temperament and medical tests, the bonding begins. As I explained earlier, the bond between dog and veteran

makes it possible for the dog to be recognized as medical equipment. But what does the bond look like? How can trainers tell that the dog is bonding with their veteran? First I will explain how the bonding process unfolds over time and then discuss how veterans experience the bond.

Bonding might begin immediately, but timing varies, and organizations have different techniques on how to further the bonding process. Tails for Patriots, for example, wants the “initial bond” to happen with the veteran, so he tells veterans to hand feed their dogs for a month. The Tails for Patriots trainer had other suggestions for improving the bond. He wants the veteran “to keep the dog by your side, right, so like if you are watching TV, have that dog lay down beside you. That you have the dog if it’s you know not crated at night, put the dog’s bed on your side of the bed, so it’s laying beside you.” A different organization has the veteran hand feed the dog for only three or four days, but they also teach the dog to “earn everything that they get. And so the dog really starts wanting to please the veteran and... and do things for the veteran.” In this way, the dogs are learning that they should only respond to their main handler, the veteran. Charlotte at Wags for Veterans also suggested that a crate where the dog is fed and watered helps to further along the bonding process: “because they’re dependent on that veteran to feed and then they’re in the crate. And the crate is like their apartment or their den or their cave or whatever... and besides that they need that to get away from us to destress too. Because of that, that helps bond.” Some people might think that crating is a punishment, but if dogs grow up resting in the crate, they sometimes come to like it and even seek it out. In this case, the crate is a tool for making sure the veteran is the only providing the dogs with their basic needs. In this way, if we think about bonding as a kind of mystical process like falling in love, then having the veteran handfeed the dog or feed it in its crate is a bit like courtship to deepen the bond.

This process of building a bond can take varying amounts of time. As one trainer explained to me: “it’s like with anybody. I mean some people immediately bond with the dog because they love dogs. Others can take a little bit long because, you know, maybe they’ve never had a dog before and they’re just trying to figure out how to house-break a dog. Generally within two to three weeks I start seeing, you know, a bond. By three or four months, yeah... sometimes it’s a really solid solid bond already.” Other organizations claim a bond forms within a few days or a week, or as long as six to twelve months. I suspect the difference in timing has to do with a varied understanding of what “bond” means. Bonds exist on a spectrum: the dog might bond on the first day, but the bond between veteran and dog after months of training is on a different level.

The bonding process for organizations that train veterans to train their own dogs looks different than organizations that pair fully trained dogs with veterans. The latter type of organization typically run a kind of several week bootcamp for the veterans or hold probationary periods before the dog is signed over to the veteran. Even so, organizations claim that the bond begins to form even during this whirlwind of two or so weeks where dog and veteran learn how to communicate with each other. One organization claims that the bonding “starts” during the two-week intensive training period, but that “it really takes hold once they go home as well, you know, the roots deepen as I kind of like to say. But yeah we can kind of see a good idea within the first few days of how that... what direction that is going.” Dogs, according to another trainer, might start “picking up on things that the veteran needs” in the first week, but bonding to the degree that the dog and handler are deeply entangled in each other’s lives takes longer. Another approach is a “two-week bonding period at home where no one is to interact with that dog but

the client, the veteran.” During this time the “dogs normally attach to them. So, you know, the dog really gets the feel, total feel of what this person does.”

The most important part of the process of bonding is training. Indeed, as Donna Haraway, drawing from philosopher and dog and horse trainer Vicki Hearne, explains: “A dog and handler discover happiness together in the labor of training” (Haraway 2003, 52). As the veterans learn how to train or handle their dogs, they develop a bond. This again looks different for different types of organizations, but some kind of continued training is essential for growing and maintaining the bond with the dog. As I explained in the introduction, some organizations teach veterans to train their own dogs. One trainer explained the efficacy of this approach as follows: “there’s a Chinese proverb, this partly what Dogs, Stars, and Stripes is based on, and that is if I give you a fish you’ll eat for a day, but if I teach you to fish you’ll eat for a lifetime. And so I would rather that we teach them how to effectively use the dog as opposed to having a robot at the end of the leash.” This kind of training process takes anywhere between six months to a year or so, depending on how diligent the veteran is in keeping up with homework and classes. As one trainer explained, the dogs need to train every day for an hour or longer. “We’re telling them make sure that bonding is taking place between you and your dog while you’re training. Like, you know, very much treat driven, right? Give them treats every time they do what you ask them to do. All of that will help form that very strong bond with the veteran.” The trainer advises the veteran not to have other family members in the house do the training or grooming until the dog has “really formed that bond with the veteran, and they’re focused on that veteran.” The bond with the veteran exists at the exclusion of other possible relationships. By giving treats as in the process of forming the bond, the connection between dog and human is lopsided. As I will

explain in Chapter Four, service dogs are strictly obedience trained in such a way that submission to their human is a dog's highest calling and expression of agency.

Training takes time, and some organizations have had to make adjustments to make sure the bond forms. One staff member explained: "previously we'd only have the veterans in for two weeks straight. We put them up in a hotel, they came here every day to work with their dogs. We didn't feel the bond was developing. We didn't feel that the veterans had time to absorb all of the knowledge that we were throwing at them almost fire hose style." This organization shifted to focusing on local veterans so they can spend more time training and thus building the bond. They introduced a series of phases: phase one is puppies up to six months old. In phase two the dogs get one-on-one 24/7 training at a correctional facility. For phase three the dogs are out of prison and preparing for the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test. Phase four has the dogs working on service dog skills. Phase five works with the veterans while the dogs stay with repeat, skilled fosters. The dogs spend the full day every other Saturday training together with their veterans. Eventually they spend "overnights" where the dog goes home with the veteran. This then increases to long weekends. Phase five lasts five months, during which time the dog bonds to the veteran through training. This organization finds that the dog takes a few months to really bond, which is why they switched up their training program. Having multiple handlers as well helps the dog be more flexible and more quickly adapt to new home environments.

While training is a way to form the bond between veteran and dog, and there are techniques to further along bonding, one of the veterans I spoke with insists the bond cannot be trained. "So it's basic obedience. You start with the real basics which is you know the sitting down, down-stay, those type of things. What you can't train is the bond. That's what just comes naturally." For Leo, a late-thirties family man and veteran, it took about a month for his dog Obie

to “[pick] up on all of my symptoms.” Something his dog pesters him when he comes home after a “rough day.”

So when it’s time for me to go to bed, when he knows I’ve had too much and should call it quits, he will run to the top of the stairs and will not come down, will not listen, until I go up. You know, at the point he runs to the room just so I can keep following him. ‘Til I lay down, then he lays down. Makes sure. And I’m pretty sure throughout the night, on bad days, he’ll sit up and check up on me because by morning time, you know, if I feel a little bit better. He’s just completely drained.

I asked Leo how he trained the dog to do this and he responded, laughing: “It’s the bond! It’s the bond, you know. When I had spoken to Ella⁵ whether it was a coincidence or not she told me everything starts as a coincidence, but as you start feeding into it, you’ll kind of realize: okay, dad is feeling this way, I can feel it.” As I mentioned at the beginning of the section, training can begin to form a bond between dog and handler, but it is through everyday interactions and growing relationships of care that the bond gains its strength. As I will describe further in Chapter Four, the highly trained dog can improvise and expand upon what its handler has taught.

The transformation that the bond produces can be extraordinary. One of the staff members at a service dog organization told me the story of one of their first recipients. They were attending an Elks veteran’s day dinner. The veteran “stood up in a room of, like, 200 people, and relived his trauma story and just, I mean he was just very expressive and very... and he was like: oh yea, this is my dog, and she’s going to say hi, and she’s very social.” The next day at work she found out that the veteran was a very different person before he got his dog: “he wouldn’t make eye contact with people, you couldn’t get more than like... a monosyllabic answer out of him, it was kind of just grunts.” The dog, she explained, was “on him like glue.” He helped him heal to the point where he could give a talk in front of 200 people. Even though

⁵ Head trainer at Independence Paws.

he healed, she explained that the dog was not the “cure.” As I explained in Chapter Two, in order to avoid ableist notions of disability, we can think of service dogs as making present lives possible rather than returning to a pre-disability state or waiting for a possible future cure. The dog, as I will revisit later, is a medical tool that can be used in the present to tackle some PTSD symptoms without the expectation of cure.

Love and Trust

The situation with Leo reminds me of what another trainer told me: “they’ll work their hearts out for you if they love you.” I also heard from a veteran that her trainer said: “you know that dog would probably do anything for you.” The bond therefore is one of mutual love, which, like Leo explains, cannot be taught. But what it can do is motivate the service dog to “work” (most people in the service dog industry use this term for training) for the veteran. The following ethnographic excerpt illustrates the bond of love between handler and dog.

“Good girl, Austin!” Samuel tells his German shepherd as she walks next to him at a dog-training center. Austin is a two-year-old service dog. The trainer, Mia, whispers to me that she finds the scene heartwarming: Samuel, a decorated marine, is now an older man who walks very slowly. Without pulling him, Austin walks at heel (on the left side). After practicing paced walking, the trainer has Austin wake up Samuel from a mock nightmare. The organization has dedicated one of the rooms in their center for exactly this purpose. Samuel climbs in bed and begins to make whimpering noises. Austin jumps up immediately and starts to lick Samuel’s face, mimicking waking him up. Samuel repeats his praise: “I love you!”

In this story, Samuel loves Austin and Austin works for Samuel because of the bond they share. By participating in the bond, Austin appears to the onlooker – perhaps a trainer or fellow service dog pair – to be a subject that gives love and affection and an object of love for Samuel.

In addition to love, veterans and dogs grow bonds of trust with each other. As I explain in the introduction, Liam always tells his cohorts of veterans to “trust your dog.” The veteran uses

the dog, according to an ADI affiliate, as a “bridge to his environment. And, you know, he begins to trust the dog and therefore learns to trust others through the dog.” In a practical sense, the dog and handler first learn to trust each other through training. As one veteran told me: “one of the bigger hurdles was putting him in a down-stay, and leaving the room where he can’t see me. Uh he’s gotten past that to where he doesn’t freak out immediately.” In this way the dog learns to trust that its handler is indeed coming back. He also likened this to going to a restaurant and putting a dog underneath the table. “They can’t see you. And you can’t think of it like a human where, you know, if you’re underneath the table, you know the people are there. But to a dog, you know, different thing. They might see your legs and smell you but they can’t actually see you as a whole person. So they think of things differently. And it might be foreign to them. So there’s a lot of trust that goes into that.” I met another veteran whose dog was so highly trained and so highly trusting that she could leave her dog in a room by itself covered in treats and he would not move. In this way, the dogs are trained in obedience and in service dog tasks to such a degree that a mutual trust has developed. This trust might be thought of as comparable to a childhood secure attachment style, where the child feels confident that their caregiver is available.⁶

Liam told me several stories of the benefit of trusting one’s dog. Most of the service dog industry believes that when a person is starting to become anxious, they produce cortisol, which the dog can sense. Or the veteran is acting differently. Liam explains that “if your dog is nudging on you and you don’t feel like you’re having anxiety yet, trust your dog. Start doing deep pressure therapy, get yourself out of the situation you’re in because something is about to

⁶ The possible attachment styles for children are “secure,” “anxious-avoidant, insecure,” “anxious-ambivalent/resistant, insecure,” and “disorganized/disoriented.” The trust the veteran placed in her dog is secure in the sense that the dog knows its veteran is a “secure base” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

happen.” He offered two examples of when trusting one’s dog saved the day. One veteran was driving his car when he “got a little bit frustrated, and the dog was tethered in the back seat but all of a sudden started nudging on my neck. And I didn’t listen to the dog and then all of a sudden I start thinking about, ‘well Liam said I should really pay attention to the dog.’ So I pulled over and then all of a sudden I went into full panic attack.” Trusting his dog got the veteran off the road and into a safer situation. Another veteran, a student, also reaped the benefits of trusting her dog.

Another person that was going to [undisclosed college]. She’s in class, have (sic) a dog in class she’s graduated, dog started nudging on her. She’s like ‘what are you doing, leave me alone, I’m fine.’ And she’s like ‘your voice come back into my head, always trust your dog.’ So I excused myself from class and went outside and full blown panic attack. And she goes I started thinking back what caused this and somebody that she seen walking down the hallway or something, looked like one of her offenders. And she didn’t think it bothered her, ultimately it did. And the dog knew it and she got to a safe place that she could deal with it and then she got to go back to class. Where she said in the past what would happen was I’d have to go home, I couldn’t go back to class until the next day, I miss the whole day. So the dog allowed her to get ahead of it. That’s what I want them to do. I want them to get ahead of the game. Get the deep pressure therapy from the dog if that’s what they need. Or use other techniques to help them ground themselves. And be able to carry on their day.

This story is an example of how trusting a dog that one is bonded to can function to reduce anxiety and take veterans out of dangerous situations.

These stories also recall Govindrajan’s use of the term “relatedness,” because the dog is a “bridge” to the veteran’s “environment.” The trust and love that the veterans feel for their dogs and imagine as also coming from their dogs illustrates how dogs are perceived as subjects in a relationship that “unfolds *in relation to* [the potential and outcome of a life] of another” (Govindrajan 2018, 3). As Kohn explained earlier, the world only makes sense if we assume that we can understand what other selves, including dogs, are thinking (Kohn 2007, 7). Dog and veteran unfold into a bonded pair characterized by love and trust. So what is the bond? When

Finn tried to swim back to the boat to rescue Nora, did he do so because he was trained or because he loved Nora? I would argue that the bond veterans experience with service dogs is as important as a relationship with a human, even more so for some veterans. Kathy Rudy finds herself in this situation and asks what kind of orientation it is to be in love not with gendered persons but with animals as non-sexual partners (Rudy 2011, 35). Kohn continues to discuss what the bond means: “Some notion of the motivations of others is necessary to get by in a world inhabited by volitional beings. We can never know what other selves – human or nonhuman – are ‘really’ thinking, just as we can never be so sure of what we ourselves are really thinking” (Kohn 2007, 9). Even though we cannot get inside the dog’s head, there is an undeniable relationship that forms between veteran and dog, and this relationship allows for care, but not cure.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, combat veterans often enter into relationships with dogs in order to seek a new “battle buddy.” In the military, everyone is assigned a battle buddy who has their back in the field. In Govindrajan’s writing, the relationship between a goat and the person caring for it is one of maternal love; that is the only reason it can be sacrificed in the place of a human. I propose that for combat veteran and service dog, the dog serves in place of a battle buddy specifically because the dog mimics the relationship of camaraderie experienced in the field. As I described previously, the dog and veteran bond is “becoming” in the sense that there is a receptiveness to emergent “camaraderie” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 317).

Medical Equipment

The purpose of the bond with a service dog rather than a regular pet is that the service dog also functions as medical equipment. This is why they are allowed into public places like grocery stores or restaurants. The ability of the dog to function as medical equipment depends on the

bond of trust and love between veteran and service dog that I have already explained. This is a paradoxical situation: pieces of mechanical medical equipment do not rely on a bond of trust and love, yet it takes this bond for the service dog to act as something like a machine or prosthesis. As one of the trainers told me: “I want to give them medical equipment. I don’t want to give them just a pet.” Often in training I heard the trainers talk about how the public interferes with service dog work by asking to pet the dog. A common response is: would you touch someone’s wheelchair? The dog functions as an object of medical equipment, yet they are also subjects that participate in the bond that makes this object-ness possible.

Even with a service dog vest that says “Do Not Pet,” which is not required of a service dog according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people often ask veterans to pet their dogs. One organization encourages veterans on day one to come up with fake name so the public cannot call away the dog, even though the dog should not respond anyway. “We teach them when somebody asks what your dog’s name is, they’ll say: you know, this is my service dog. We don’t give out their name because we find when we do people try to call them away. And then I’ve lost my medical equipment. And so what we’ve done is... we’ve answered... you know, we’ve explained to them why, not just ‘no you can’t.’ Because what you’re doing is taking away my medical equipment. And it’s educated someone.” It is not the veteran’s responsibility to teach the public unless they are up for it that day. Some veterans just want to get to the store, buy what they need, and get out without being harassed, even by someone friendly and respectful. But this goes to show that the public – quite understandably – does not think of service dogs as medical equipment and thus needs instruction.

Another trainer likened the service dog to a cane. “So I always say that if you saw someone with a cane, you would never think to go up to them and pull the cane away and say: oh

I just want to look at your cane. I'm just going to use your cane for a minute. I will walk away with your cane. Yet people do that with service dogs all the time." According to the trainer, distracting a service dog is the same as taking away someone's cane because the dog is "working."⁷ Again, there is a gap between what the public knows about service dogs and how trainers and staff think of their dogs as medical equipment. She particularly hates when someone asks "why do you have a dog?" because it forces them to relive their trauma in the military. "You're asking them to relive the trauma why they needed a service dog. You know, I was raped while I was in the Navy. I was... I watched children be blown up. It does not help them to have to have them repeat the story. So it's not your business. Any more than you would walk up to someone: 'why do you have a cane? Are you just lazy? Why do you have that? I don't think you need that.' It's not your business." In this situation, the dog is a medical tool much like a cane, but they only function as a tool because they are "working." Canes and wheelchair and oxygen tanks also "work," or perhaps "function," but what differentiates them from a dog is the bond that encourages the dog to intentionally work for its person. The dog decides to behave in public and task for the veteran when it is called for. I will go into this deeper in Chapter Four.

Dogs are also sometimes likened to medication. One trainer indicated that they seek a medical doctor's note as part of their application because it is like a prescription. "A service dog is like medication. It's like having a therapist with you 24 hours a day. And when the dog is truly trained and you're using the dog, that intervention to disrupt whatever is going on is really important. It's no different than, you know, a medication." In this way, the dog is a highly trained being, a material object of medication, and an anthropomorphized therapist all in one entity.

Another organization describes dogs as an adjunctive treatment to medication. They also require

⁷ This is the term used by the service dog industry for when the dog is on the job – especially in public – or being trained.

a diagnosis from a doctor and a note on what the doctor thinks the dog can do for the veteran “because I think it’s important, when you’re using a service dog as a medical device that your doctor is on board with using a service dog for your symptoms. Just like if you were taking medication. Basically you’re using a service dog in addition to the medication. And I have seen in the Tails for Patriots program, guys that no longer need to take their medication once they’ve started working with their dog and the dog is doing the things that the medication did before.” Indeed, several other organizations I spoke with told me that some veterans were able to reduce their medication after obtaining a service dog. The dog functions as medication and instead of pills.

Most organizations think of a dog as a medical tool to be used alongside standard treatments like therapy and medication. Some even require the veteran to continue talk therapy regularly. This pushes back against veterans who think that they will get a dog and all will be “fixed.” One trainer explained: “It’s not always the case that the dog will fix it. Because yes dogs give you love and there is that emotional connection just, just from having a pet. You know, just from having that bond with someone, something. But there’s also the... there is also the work that’s involved in it.” Even if a pet gives love and connection, they differ from the service dog in large part because pets are not allowed in public and because they have not been trained with advanced tasks that I will cover in more detail in Chapter Four. This organization trains the dogs to do over one hundred different skills, but the handler needs to maintain the training or the dog will fall back. “And sometimes that can get difficult if somebody is not prepared for it. If they just think: I’m going to take home a dog and everything is going to be completely, 180 degrees different without realizing that there is effort to put into it as well.” Just as therapy and

medication do not solve all the veterans' problems, the dog is not a cure, but, as one trainer indicated, a tool in a toolkit.

Part of what makes sense of this unusual situation – developing a bond between dog and handler in order to have the dog function as medical equipment – derives from the way trainers and organizations rely on the ADA to justify public access (see Chapter Two). Service dog rules are nestled within medical and legal discourses over access for wheelchairs or other kinds of material medical equipment. Service dogs do not cure PTSD, but in making possible bonds of love and trust between veteran and dog, the veteran is able to live a better life in the present. This allows us to think of disability not as a defect but as producing a diversity of ways of being and relating to each other. The bond is just one way of thinking of how subjects and objects are made possible by emergent assemblages of trainers, the service dog industry, the ADA, leashes and collars, disabled veterans, service dogs, and so on. A bond is not required for working a dog – trainers do this all the time, relying on their expertise and authority – but for inexperienced handlers it is critical.

Conclusion

It is obvious that dogs are not inanimate, material things, so what do we gain from seeing them as medical objects? Either we need to broaden our idea of what medical equipment is to include animate entities, or we need to reevaluate the boundaries of living beings and material objects. Again the paradox arises: we consider animate entities – dogs in this case – as medical equipment, but we would never consider doctors and nurses as medical tools. There is something about the dog being nonhuman that allows them to labor as objects of medicine. If dogs are medical objects, then they can be allowed out in public to “work” for their handler. It is a service

dog because it can provide tasks to its veteran. DPT, for example, is much like having a portable weighted blanket or taking a benzodiazepine pill. Dogs are the fleshy equivalent to inanimate medical things, both subject and object at the same time. Humans are also both subjects and objects in the situation of the bond: subjects of affection and objects of love. As Haraway indicates: “Dogs are not an alibi for other themes; dogs are fleshly material-semiotic presences⁸ in the body of technoscience. Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (Haraway 2003, 5). Perhaps one way to think of as “liv[ing] with” is the bond between dog and veteran. The bond between service dog and handler gives us more than just food for thought about, for example, animal agency, but it indicates the diversity of lives we can live alongside dogs.

The question that remains is whether “relatedness” or “becoming” can be applied to the functioning of a bond not only when dogs are subjects or selves, but also when they are medical objects. According to Kohn, “dogs really become human (biologically and in historically very specific ways) and the Runa really become puma; the need to survive encounters with feline semiotic selves requires it. Such becomings change what it means to be alive; they change what it means to be human just as much as they change what it means to be a dog or even a predator” (Kohn 2007, 18). If dogs really do function as medical equipment, and they are also unambiguously living beings, can, as Kohn suggests, dogs “change what it means to be alive” in relation to the humans to which they are bonded? Is this an ontological problem, or are dogs likened to medical equipment by way of analogy? I argue that dogs are indeed medical equipment, but clearly not material objects. In fact, as medical equipment, they often perform different tasks from material medical objects. Because of its abilities as a species, especially its

⁸ Also quoted in Eduardo Kohn’s “How Dogs Dream” (Kohn 2007, 5).

sense of smell, a trained dog can sense, for example, an oncoming seizure in their handler while out in public and can help them find a safe place or remind them to take medication. In this way, dogs are a kind of medical equipment that differs from the material medical tools they are likened to, like canes or wheelchairs.

The ADA describes the role of service dog using sterile language and does not touch on why a dog would want to serve in the first place. I propose that the mystique or magic of love and connection in pairing the dogs and bonding them to their veterans is the engine that we can envisage inspiring a dog to work for its veteran and a veteran to trust their dog. In her book about autism, Chloe Silverman discusses how “love” is a “form of labor” (Silverman 2012, 3) that makes caretakers able to “choose wisely” about their autistic children’s care (Silverman 2012, 9). Love as labor, in the case of service dogs, works alongside inanimate medical equipment, because the material and the animate perform different tasks. A cane might help someone walk, but a dog can sense oncoming anxiety in its bonded veteran and encourage them to remove themselves from their situation and use, for example, grounding techniques or medication; there is no material medical object that can accomplish this. Not even nurses or doctors can perform this task. Karen Barad calls this “differential becoming” (Barad 2014, 233) between dogs and humans as species with particular capabilities. This function depends on the bond of love and trust between veteran and service dog, which I have come to call a kind of “relatedness” as per Govindrajan. This relatedness is not necessarily equal; the dog has been obedience trained and is “dominated” (Ingold 2000, 70), but I argue that equality is not a prerequisite for love and trust.

Nora and Finn survived their ordeal because of a bond we might call love, trust, kin, or camaraderie. Nora was originally planning on fostering Finn before he would be placed with another veteran, but when the organization saw the bond they formed, they decided that Nora

should keep Finn. In this way, their bond started on day one of pairing, leading into bonding through training. Trainers and veterans alike think of bonding as relations of love and trust. Because that bond exists, we can imagine that the service dogs feel motivated to work for their veteran as a medical equipment and veterans can learn to read and trust their dogs.

Chapter 4:

Obedient Disobedience: Agency, Improvisation, and Service Dog Training

Jack was a 28-year-old veteran of Afghanistan who joined Liberty Hounds of Wisconsin to train his black lab named Charlie. Jack went straight into the army after high school and did not go to college. Four days after his 18th birthday, Jack went into basic training before being deployed to Afghanistan for nine months. He liked doing his job there because he had the chance to socialize with a people from a variety of backgrounds. Transition to civilian life was hard. He was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) after being blown up by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED).

Jack inherited Charlie from an older couple that found Charlie had too much energy for them. In the early days, Charlie was rambunctious, but once he learned the basics, he started to calm down. Jack described Charlie as happy and outgoing. His energy rubs off on whomever he is with. Since obtaining Charlie, Jack reported feeling more socially confident as well as getting help with his anxiety and depression.

During one day of public access, the trainers, veteran/dog teams, and I went to the Grand Theater located downtown. They let us in and we explored the historic part of the building, weaving in and out of aisles and seats. Some dog teams practiced having their dog sit under the chairs. Early into this Jack and Charlie started having trouble. Charlie was worked up and wanted Liam, the head trainer, to pet him. Rather than checking in with his mental state, as Liam suggested, Jack aggressively corrected Charlie by pulling on his leash and scolding him.

Things deteriorated as the day went on. We walked to the library, doing our best to avoid the swarms of yellow jackets that the dogs snapped at; Jack even got stung once on the neck. Once inside the library it became clear that Jack was struggling with Charlie. Lani tried to

intervene by holding the leash, and Charlie worked well for him. Jack became more and more fatigued and frustrated. Liam explained that Jack had some stress at work, working 60 not 20 hours. So he came into the day quite vulnerable and was taking it out on Charlie by correcting her too many times. Jack left early and we decided to push back the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test because of all the wasps.

How was it different when Liam worked Charlie compared to Jack? Liam was calm and collected and Jack was full of anxiety. Charlie was trying to alert Jack to his anxiety by misbehaving. Jack did not pick up on this cue and instead corrected Charlie for doing his job.

After finishing training Charlie and graduating with Liberty Hounds, Jack announced that he decided to go fight with the Ukrainian Foreign Legion for two months. During that time, his mother would take care of Charlie and keep up with his training. Liam wished him the best and told him: “don’t be a hero.” Two months had turned into four months, when we finally heard news that he had died in combat. His father spoke to a local newspaper that Jack “had a strong sense of what was right and wrong” and that he “felt the need to use his prior military combat skills to help the Ukrainian people fight and liberate their country.” I suspect that Jack never quite adjusted to civilian life, leading him back to the field of combat. Charlie stays with Jack’s mom as her own service dog and they continue training.

* * *

So far, I have discussed how dogs are service dogs because they are allowed public access. I also examined how the bond between dog and veteran allows the dog to be defined as medical equipment. However, the foundation of all these tasks is obedience. Dogs begin obedience training as young as one day old and continue throughout their lives. In this chapter, I will review how young service dogs in training learn the basic obedience skills needed before they can learn

service dog tasks. I will also touch on some of the essential service dog tasks made possible by obedience skills. Finally, I will consider the initiative dogs take in breaking obedience commands to respond to their veteran's anxiety or physical ailment. Studying obedience is important because it explores the details of how dogs get to the point at which they can decide to break a command if their handler is in distress. Service dogs can only decide to break obedience commands if they are already highly obedient; otherwise, they are just misbehaving pets. Veterans can trust their dogs to obey when needed and alert to their anxiety when needed.

A thread that runs throughout the chapter is that dogs have agency even though they are taught obedience commands and advanced service dog tasks using operant conditioning. Dogs respond to the coherent authority of a handler that has earned the right to give commands, which I believe is a kind of agency. Further, agency does not just mean engaging in subversive actions; instead, service dogs who are attuned to their veteran through obedience and submission express another kind of agency. When the service dog misbehaves, their disobedience is an agentive choice the dog makes based on an understanding of its handler's mental and physical state; this "initiative," as I explained in the introduction, is an essential component of trust. What do we need to assume about dog cognition to believe that the dog is making decisions about the boundaries at which they will step in and disobey to alert their veteran to danger, oncoming anxiety, or physical malady?

Animal Agency

What does service dog agency look like if the foundation of their actions depends on obedience training? To approach this question, I start with Shelly R. Scott's (2009) paper on racehorses, which draws attention to the ways in which highly trained thoroughbreds subvert commands and

thus show themselves to be independent agents. Scott defines agency “as an intentional exertion of power, involving more than merely action or reaction. With agency comes choice and responsibility because it is rooted in free will” (Scott 2009, 47).¹ Scott queries: can animals make these independent choices? Do animals “respond to cues automatically” or are they “thoughtful and willful” in their actions? (Scott 2009, 48). Scott indicates that seeing “animal performance” as “merely automated” falsely assumes consistency in human performance (Scott 2009, 51). “Alterations in human performance, which cannot be avoided, require a certain amount of flexibility and capacity for improvisation from the animal responding to the human” (Scott 2009, 51). In the case of service dogs, the handler might not always express anxiety in the same way, or they might not react to the dog’s alert in the same way, but it is the service dog’s job to notice anxiety and respond as a medical intervention.

Scott describes the thoroughbred as having “independent thinking and exertion of agency” when it refuses to respond to the jockey who is using a whip to try to curb the animal’s behavior (Scott 2009, 56). But she also ascribes agency to human/horse teams for which “the perspective of the human partner to the horse, and the person’s reception could be considered as instinctive as the horse’s response in these cases” (Scott 2009, 57). To make this point, Scott relies on a quote from Vicki Hearne that through “the wonderful obedience and supple submission of the horse [...] [it] is as though the horse thinks and the rider creates, or becomes, a space and direction for the execution of the horse’s thoughts” (Hearne’s *Adam’s Task* p. 163 in

¹ If we assume agency as “intentional action” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/agency/>) is a valid phenomenon in the social world, it is not always true that agency is recognized as a desirable mode of acting in the world. In her book *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood pushes back against the feminist tendency to look for subversion in a male dominated world and to call this agency. She asks: “does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power—a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?” (Mahmood 2005, 9). In this chapter I discuss agency as a kind of intentional action by service dogs, but I do not limit myself to a “teleology of progressive politics” in the sense that I find agency in submission. Mahmood points out non-liberal forms of desire, “including desire for submission to recognized authority” (Mahmood 2005, 15).

Scott 2009, 56). Much like service dogs, the “symbiosis” (Scott 2009, 57) – or perhaps the bond – described here depends on a foundation of “obedience” and “submission,” which I will describe at greater length later.

In Vinciane Despret’s text *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* she talks about Konrad Lorenz’s work in which “animals are limited to ‘reactions’ rather than seeing them as ‘feeling and thinking,’” thus making interaction with animals “predictable” (Lorenz in Despret 2016, 39). “Causes are substituted for reasons for action, whether they are reasonable or fanciful, and the term *initiative* disappears in favor of *reaction*” (Despret 2016, 39). Despret pushes against this “arid” and “mechanical” (Despret 2016, 39) rendering of animals. In her essay on “A for Artists,” Despret expresses that “animals are suspected, much more rapidly than are humans, of lacking autonomy” (Despret 2016, 5). Talking about works of art produced at least in part by animals, Despret suggests we think of “complicated *agencements*” where an action is not limited to either human or animal agency (Despret 2016, 5). Agency is shared between humans and animals, making them more than the sum of their parts, much like the horse/rider teams that Hearne describes.

Scott also talks about “improvisation,” the response of which can “create something new” (Scott 2009, 58). Some of the service dog professionals who I talked with use a similar term – initiative – to describe a comparable process, although improvisation differs in the sense that it can be “reflexive” (Scott 2009, 59).² While “initiative” is an emic term in the service dog industry, it also relates to social theory on agency and trust. Another way of thinking about “initiative” is as “action,” and therefore an aspect of agency – although not the whole story – according to Scott. Following Sally, an ADI representative speaking on her own behalf and not

² Another example of improvisation is music. Musicians are supposed to be so well immersed in the genre that they can be reflexive and make intuitive choices while remaining aware of what they are doing.

ADI, different kinds of working dogs take distinct kinds of initiative. Hearing dogs are “wild” and take pure initiative to let their person know, for example, that there is someone at the door or a fire alarm is going off. Guide dogs are somewhere in the middle: they take direction from their handler but also take initiative, so their handler does not step out into traffic. Mobility service dogs are on the other end of the spectrum, taking direction from their handler. Sally believes a physically disabled person could not care for a high initiative dog. Instead, they give the dog direction, such as to pick things up.

Sally believes that PTSD dogs take a lot of initiative. “They take cues from the veteran regarding anxiety or whatever.” For example, if the veteran has “crazy leg syndrome,” the dog might come and put its head in the veteran’s lap. Referring to the increase of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, Sally says that PTSD dogs are being handled by younger, stronger people, so they can handle a dog with more initiative. For a “dual dog” (what Sally calls PTSD and physical disability, but the industry does not call it such), they tend to be more like a guide dog, because they take direction, but they also take initiative.

What does improvisation or initiative say about animal consciousness, or the ways in which human perspectives anthropomorphize animal cognition? Scott talks about the ways that spectators imagine the racehorses as “self-aware” (Scott 2009, 60). “What must not be overlooked is the complexity of these animals, and the convoluted perspective produced when we attempt to simplify them by either dismissing them as machine-like or assuming they respond like humans. Significant differences in consciousness surely exist between species, but this does not preclude animal agency” (Scott 2009, 63). I imagine Scott would say that service dogs have cognition capable of agency but different from that of humans; we tend to anthropomorphize dog consciousness, and this “does not empower animals” but rather it “undermines their differences”

(Scott 2009, 46). “As hazy as the matter of animal consciousness is, what is ‘undeniable,’ I do argue, is that *we* simply cannot know with certainty what *they* know” (Scott 2009, 64).³ What we can analyze, however, is how humans conceptualize service dog consciousness, such as their ability to take initiative. For example, if we think service dogs can take initiative, then they can enter into relations of trust with their veterans.

The Right to Obedience

Building on Scott’s attribution of agency to horses when “the person’s reception could be considered as instinctive as the horse’s response in these cases” (Scott 2009, 57), I consider at greater length how Vicki Hearne’s (2007) text *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* deals with a similar situation with dogs. Hearne draws on classic dog trainer William Koehler to ask what gives us the right to command dogs. “What sense does it mean to speak of a dog’s having a right?” (Hearne 2007, 44). Koehler uses the term “right” here to indicate that a dog has “the right to the consequences of his actions” (Koehler in Hearne 2007, 44). For Koehler getting “absolute obedience from a dog [...] confers nobility, character and dignity on the dog” (Hearne 2007, 43). Corrections, according to the Koehler, “are administered out of a deep respect for the dog’s moral and intellectual capacities” (Hearne 2007, 45). Correcting is different from punishment in the sense that “kindness” differs from “cruelty” (Hearne 2007, 45). A correction is a sharp upward pull on the leash, where “irritable, nagging, coaxing tugs and jerks” or beatings would be considered punishment (Hearne 2007, 45).

To fail in obedience has to do with “incoherent authority” (Hearne 2007, 45). “Training, in this story, can, through its taut catharses, cleanse our authority” and without these catharses

³ This viewpoint pushes back against Eduardo Kohn’s (2007) idea that the Runa literally know what it means when dogs dream.

“dogs very properly withhold full obedience” (Hearne 2007, 48). Hearne gives the example of a man who tries to recall a highly trained dog with a piece of liver; the dog walks away, disobeying both his command and his handler’s “stay” (Hearne 2007, 46). She also talks of a dog who when playing fetch only brings the stick half of the way back. “The gap the dog insists on between us and the stick represents the gap between our ability to command, give advice and so forth and our ability to acknowledge the being of other” (Hearne 2007, 48). We cannot have proper authority without the “full acknowledgement of language,” in the sense that a dog in a household is constantly being given commands “whether or not [members in the household] earned the right to do so” (Hearne 2007, 49). “A refusal to give commands or to notice that commands are being given is often a refusal to acknowledge a relationship, just as is a refusal to obey” (Hearne 2007, 49). Indeed, a human must “earn the right” to give a dog a command. Following Scott, we might think of this as subversive agency.⁴

Hearne offers an example of how her dog Salty earned the “right to a certain attentiveness or responsiveness” (Hearne 2007, 57). They were working on the sit verbal command when suddenly one day Salty offered up this behavior unprompted. “This time it is Salty who has enlarged the context, the arena of its use, by means of what we might as well go ahead and call the trope of projection” (Hearne 2007, 56). What is going on here is that obedience training has “enlarged” the understanding of “sit” for both Hearne and Salty. Salty’s initiative is an expansion of obedience that relies on “the power of individual imagination” (Hearne 2007, 56). Now Hearne goes on make Salty sit “in as many situations as ingenuity and luck will provide” (Hearne 2007, 58). This tells us something about how we might envisage animal consciousness, that we imagine the dog as having inventiveness.

⁴ Going back to my discussion of Mahmood, we might see this here as part of a liberal project of freedom, where agency focuses on looking at moments of subversion.

What happens when Salty blatantly ignores a retrieve command? Hearne gives the example of Salty being “dishonest” by ignoring the dumbbell she is supposed to fetch (Koehler in Hearne 2007, 72). When she does this, Hearne corrects her sharply and Salty “remembers” where the dumbbell is (Hearne 2007, 72). Hearne must correct the dog out of respect of their joint effort: what they are doing is worth doing right. This elevates the dog/handler practices to a moral project that exercises the virtues of dignity and honesty for both participants. “[I]n failing to correct I’m going back on my word, just as I would be doing if I corrected angrily, righteously or pettishly, as if I were personally offended” (Hearne 2007, 72). Another form of dishonesty is when Salty retrieves the wrong object. “A curious thing about dogs is that the more talent they have for retrieving, the more they tend to think of inventive variations of this maneuver” (Hearne 2007, 73). However, the dog that does not understand the command cannot lie or be dishonest about it, because it does not yet know what the language of the directive means (Hearne 2007, 73).

After a certain amount of time of retrieval training, Salty finally gets it. New forms of language can be used; Hearne can name things and have Salty retrieve them. “I can, that is, use ‘Fetch’ to name things, in somewhat the way we use ‘this’ and ‘that’ to name things” (Hearne 2007, 74). “The investigation of animal consciousness, like the investigation of human consciousness, is centrally an investigation of language, and this ought to remind us of what an investigation of language is” (Hearne 2007, 74). There is a connection now between the language of the command “Fetch!” and the behavior, and if the command giver has authority and has earned the right to give commands, the dog should retrieve; this is a mechanistic understanding of language: command and behavior. There is also an imagined relation of authority that Salty and Hearne are jointly constructing on unequal terms (Hearne has authority, and Salty is

submissive). Just as Salty enlarged the meaning of the command “sit,” she offers Hearne retrievals that have not been called for (Hearne 2007, 75). Hearne understands accepting the retrieval as “acknowledging the possibility of her saying something I haven’t yet taught her to say” (Hearne 2007, 75). In this way, Salty is exercising agency by imagining an expansion of language where unpredictable things can happen.

Raising Service Dogs:

Most service dogs in training do not have the opportunity to live with an experienced trainer like Hearne. Service dogs in general take up their job after 1.5 to two years of training, but the period before this is obedience training at varying levels of intensity and socialization that will set the foundation for the service dog. During this time the dog and handler learn what Hearne would call coherent authority.

There are three different options for the puppies younger than nine months to a year. The first option is to pair puppies with their veterans quite young. This is the least common option. Liam experimented with this with Harley and Flash and he was not impressed by the results. He wants to phase out the puppy program and transition into a full-time prison program. One program pairs up veterans with their puppies after their second shot. They temperament test the litter and choose the puppy they think will be the best and then the puppy is handed over to the veteran. The temperament test entails handling the puppy, touching its ears and feet, petting it all over, and holding it upside down. The organization checks to see if the dog will fetch or respond to treats. They drop a metal bowl and take note of how long it takes for the puppy to recover. They are looking for a “calm, confident” puppy.

The other more common option is a prison program. Liam has a couple of good puppy raisers that he sends dogs to, but they are transitioning to a prison program because it is more reliable. “Those dogs are always with somebody doing something.” They are being trained and are constantly being observed by guards. In addition to training dogs, Liam reported that there has been a 30% decrease in prison incidents since the puppies arrived.

Another organization has been placing dogs in prisons since 2010; since then, all puppies go through the prison program. The head trainer went to a local women’s prison and asked if they could start a program. They said yes, and thus began the program. She knew there were other groups out there and she felt the prison was an untapped resource. The puppies go into prison at eight weeks old straight from the breeder. “The inmates train the basic commands” and after that the dogs start going out of the prison for a few weeks at a time. They have a program called “Summer School” where the dogs go out for the summer; the dogs stayed with teachers who have the summer off. “Most of the training of commands is done in prison, and then we bring them out to reinforce the commands in the regular world.” While in prison, the dogs learn basic commands – sit, stay, down, etc. – but they also learn tasks such as turning on lights or taking off socks.

Like the previous organization, another group I talked to placed dogs in prisons at eight weeks old. They pick up dogs – in this case, Labrador retrievers – from breeders and place them in prison, where they are trained by experienced incarcerated handlers. They spend Monday through Friday there being trained, and they go home on the weekends to volunteer puppy raisers. Training the dogs so young builds a “foundation of learning.” The representative I spoke with told me the goal is “capturing a lot of behaviors,” moments such as sit or other basic commands. The dogs learn to eliminate on command. The dogs’ minds are so “malleable” and

easily pick up obedience skills. “The skills part of training doesn’t take as long. It’s the manners part of training that takes two years.” Manners might include loose leash walking in public, compared to the skill “sit.” Manners are also built into the CGC test, where dogs must ignore other dogs and food on the floor. Skills can be easily taught through operant conditioning, but training manners is more difficult; treating loose leash walking, for example, is harder for the dog to understand. The difference between manners and skills is important in the context of my later discussion of obedient disobedience, because when the dog is trying to alert the veteran to a physical or mental issue, they start to act out and lose their manners.

Another organization explained some background details for prison programs. Inmates can apply for what this trainer calls – as a play on words – the CATS (Canine Assessment Training Staff), which is an exclusive group of currently ten inmates who are training dogs. They wear specific construction vests that indicate their position and allow them to handle the dogs. They are under careful scrutiny by prison staff at various levels of authority; in this sense, both dog and inmate are being trained in obedience. If an inmate is released, a spot opens. If the inmates do something “stupid” and get a “write up” they get put in “administrative segregation.” This will remove the inmate from the program, and a “helper” gets moved up. Inmates are trained in basic obedience for the young dogs, starting with “recall,” meaning the dog knows its name. After working on basic obedience, they take on service dog tasks.

The final option is to place puppies with foster parents. One organization starts with rescue dogs that are temperament tested, looking for red flags like resource guarding or aggression. But there are things that only come up in a home. For example, a trainer took a dog home and when she picked up a broom the dog went crazy; she did not know that the dog had been beaten by a broom. For this reason, before placing a veteran, the dog goes into a foster

family for at least two weeks. The foster parent reports back what they find; a no-go might be something such as separation anxiety.

Another organization that places puppies in foster situations has the fosters come to class once per week. “Our professional training staff teaches the fosters how to train the dogs.” The organization is well known in the community, and this is how they find fosters. They also utilize social media campaigns and a local radio show. The dogs spend their “teenage” five to six months in a local prison, but since they need to learn public access, they only spend a few months there. After the dog has passed their CGC, they work on service dog skills. During this time, the dogs are placed with fosters who are “under the tutelage” of professional trainers; the fosters are being trained to train dogs. Before finally placing the dog with a client, they stay with “very skilled, repeat fosters” and train together with the veteran. In the end the dog gets placed with five different fosters or inmates, which the organization claims helps the dog to adjust to new environments when they finally place with the veteran.

A long running organization that I interviewed takes the puppy raising route, but they start with a volunteer breeding program. The puppies spend the first seven weeks with their whelping brood. During this time the volunteer breeder undertakes an early socialization program, exposing the puppies to various experiences. The dogs are carefully watched during this period, with collars indicating their birth order. After seven weeks, they come to the center which quickly sends them out to volunteer puppy raisers. The organization holds classes but does not require them. The puppy raiser’s primary role is socialization.

For one organization, the foster parent is also the trainer. They get the dogs at 8-13 weeks old from an outside or internal breeder. They start working with the puppies right away on socialization, for example to react appropriately to loud sounds, and unfamiliar people or dogs.

The dogs graduate around 2-3 years old. The trainer takes on three dogs at a time, teaching the dogs potty training, kennel, manners, and basic commands.

Joliet Dogs, which is no longer operating as a service dog organization, exclusively utilized puppy raisers, and I had the opportunity to interview several of them. The puppies went into foster around nine to twelve weeks old and immediately began learning basic obedience during weekly classes. They played retrieving games and took them out to different public places. This obedience training and socialization took about a year.

Stories of Puppy Raisers

Hearne discusses training as the mastering of an “art” (Hearne 2007, 56) but in the service dog world, puppies spend most of their time with inexperienced puppy raisers. Here are three stories of puppy raisers who learned to train the hard way: by doing it themselves. They all had support from the organizations that gave them the dogs, attending weekly training classes led by experienced trainers. A common thread is that the dogs exercise agency by choosing when to listen to commands, suggesting that the puppy raisers struggle to earn the right to give commands.

Two of the Joliet Dogs puppy raisers were a semi-retired married pair named Ben and Beth. They work on rehabbing and flipping houses in their spare time. They heard about service dogs at a block birthday party in Barrington; the party theme was service dogs, and they were encouraged to donate to that cause. Ben and Beth wanted to get involved, and through word of mouth they got in contact with Jane. They met at a fundraiser and Jane gave Beth all sorts of information. They attended a class and Jane’s assistant Gabrielle asked if they were interested in fostering. The next step was inspecting the house to make sure it was safe for a puppy and that Ben and Beth were competent people. They were approved and received a large book of all the

commands the puppy needs to learn. Beth at first struggled to keep in mind that the puppy was “not their dog.” She was also impressed that the dog learned to eliminate on command, making it possible for the dog to go to an airport. Another obstacle was training dogs to use an escalator, but Jane made sure they knew what they were doing before attempting it. “Most of it is training the trainer,” Ben tells me. They started out with one dog, Honey, who struggles with over-excitement. But after having Honey for a year, Jane asked them to take on Poppy as well. His first impression was that Poppy was “untrainable.” Jane stepped in to suggest they feed Poppy her breakfast while training her. Soon after “it was like a switch went off” and Ben trained Poppy basic commands.

The stories Ben and Beth told me indicated how difficult it is to obedience train a dog. Ben told me a story of when they first got Honey. She was prevented from getting into the kitchen by a baby gate, but she kept jumping up. She would get off, then moments later up again. She would directly make eye contact with Ben and jump up again, even after being sprayed with vinegar water. Ben resigned himself to the notion that Honey was jumping up on the gate because she knew it would make Ben mad. “She was just doing it to tick me off!” As Hearne would suggest, Ben had not yet earned the right to command Honey, which resulted in disjointed authority (Hearne 2007). Now the dogs can do a number of tasks, like taking off shoes or helping Ben get off his snow suit. Honey can open the refrigerator; she can also remove clothing from the dryer. She can walk next to a wheelchair and turn lights on. Even so, she remains “stubborn.” She will perform for treats, but without them she sometimes does not listen. At the beginning, Beth worried that she was setting Honey up to fail because she was not following commands. She talked to the head trainer about feeling unqualified. Now months later, Ben and Beth expect

to feel sad when Honey and Poppy get placed, but they are happy to know they are going to help someone.

Luna is another puppy raiser that I interviewed with Joliet Dogs. She grew up in Chicago and worked with horses; she now runs a therapeutic riding center for special needs children and adults. In addition to horses, she has always had dogs, Golden Retrievers in particular. Before working with Joliet Dogs she fostered goldens, but ended up adopting two of them. When those dogs passed, she contacted Jane; one of her riding students got a dog from Jane and put them in touch. She went to a fundraiser to meet the dogs and fell for Zeus and Loki. At first she was planning on being a puppy sitter, but she took on Zeus and he never left her. She brings Zeus with her to the riding center and the children bond with the dog too. Zeus is eager to please and energetic about his work, sometimes too much so. When Luna was injured – ironically by trying to get control of Zeus when he escaped – Zeus would comfort her by putting his head in her lap. When she feels anxiety, he does the same thing; she thinks he is very “sensitive to your feelings.”

Obedience training for Zeus at home goes smoothly, but once he is in class with all his siblings, he starts to disobey due to distractions. Luna thinks he knows what he is doing because he is smart. Hearne might call this “dishonesty” (Koehler in Hearne 2007, 73). Once she asked Zeus to bring his vest and he refused, so she just walked away. A few moments later he came back to her with the vest, presumably not wanting to be left behind. He already knows a lot of tasks. For mobility, he can open drawers; he can turn on lights; he can push an exit button; and he can take off socks or help her get out of a hoodie. He brings sheets into the laundry room and takes clothes out of the dryer. He also does “lap,” where he comforts someone by putting his head on their lap. Jane taught the dogs to retrieve with a glasses case that has treats inside; Zeus will pick up anything, but other dogs will not even open their mouths. She also taught him to

pick up tissues. Luna showed me a video where he pulls tissues and gives them to her, until he finally gives up and hands her the whole box.

Luna told me that she learned a lot from training service dogs, for example: “the world is a kinder place when you have a service dog with you.” People do not look at your disability but rather your dog, and people love dogs. She loves how when she goes in public people stop and say “oh!” or smile. This stands in stark contrast to the veterans who want people to leave them and their dogs alone. For Luna, Zeus brings joy to people. “Having him with me, he makes me smile, he makes me laugh.” He is her “best friend.” Once she took Zeus to a wake and let people pet him. He brought comfort to people who were mourning. Luna told me that she decided to foster a dog because of how painful it is to put an older animal down.

In addition to the Joliet Dogs puppy raisers, I spoke with Lily, one of the remaining Liberty Hounds’ puppy raisers who has not yet been transferred to the prison program. She graduated from college at Duquesne and completed her PhD in Political Science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She does applied social science research and currently works for the University of Wisconsin system in a program for public policy and service. Her work is flexible and that is why she can be a puppy raiser. She grew up with dogs and horses, so when she had the chance, with her sons older, to spend time raising a dog, she went for it. Her son always wanted a dog and felt this was a great opportunity to experience raising a dog for an important cause. She found out about Liberty Hounds at a “lunch and learn” meeting where Evelyn from Liberty Hounds talked about what they do. Now she is on her third dog. Her first was a German Shepherd that was paired with a veteran, but the pairing did not work out. The dog is now a pet for one of the Liberty Hounds board members. The second dog was Ghost, who I

have discussed elsewhere as William's service dog. Now she is working with Daisy, who is a yellow lab from Project 2 Heal.

I asked Lily if she gets attached to the puppies, and she said that she does. You cannot be a puppy raiser without getting attached. "You have to go all in emotionally with the dog in order to be able to invest the time into that dog." In order to succeed, "you need to feel like this is my dog" in your heart, even if in your head you know it is Liberty Hounds' dog. When Lily sees the puppy with its veteran, her feelings of sadness go away. "It's like a no brainer [...] the dog is doing what they're trained to do." Going back to Chapter Three, the affective bond between service dog and veteran/handler is what allows the dog to work as medical equipment. In Silverman's book on autism, "love" is what allows parents to "choose wisely" about their children's care (Silverman 2012, 9). Hearne would likely push back against this at the early stages of training; giving dogs rights entails authority instead of love (Hearne 2007, 53). "Love will follow on shared commitments and collaboration, on a mutual autonomy that is not now possible" (Hearne 2007, 53). In this way for Hearne, love is possible, but not required for obedience training. Perhaps we can think of Lily's commitment as needing the emotional attachment in order to motivate the labor that is required of obedience training.

Lily trains Daisy multiple times every day. She learned to train by going to training sessions at Liberty Hounds once per week on Mondays. Before this, she had no experience training dogs. She incorporates obedience training throughout the day, such as when they come home from a walk the puppy must sit and have her paws cleaned. At the training session she works on heeling through the door by luring her with a treat. Her next task will be "place" on the karanda bed. They work on retrieval, which can translate into a service dog task further down the line. But for now, they are working on basic manners and commands: do not jump on furniture,

do not chase the cat, etc. At home she works with Daisy on loose leash walking. She also socializes Daisy by bringing her to pet friendly stores. They work on not getting distracted by other people, since Daisy is a Labrador and they are seen as naturally friendly. She believes labs are genetically predisposed to think: “just tell me what you want me to do. I’ll do it.” Genetics are part of the reason that so many organizations rely on purebred working dogs. Most of the trainers I spoke with told me there is only so much that can be done depending on the genetics of the dog. At Project 2 Heal, an organization that breeds service dogs for veterans, they claim that Labradors’ “confident-yet-forgiving temperament and physical build as adults make them ideal for the unique situations involved in service work” (Project 2 Heal “Labradors”, n.d.). Breeding apparently predisposes genetically selected dogs to submit to human authority and enter affective/obedient bonds.

Lily does what she does despite the difficulties because she knows how much animals can impact a person’s mental health. She thinks it is even more important for veterans “who have made such enormous personal sacrifices for us.” If she can make an impact on veterans’ lives, that is why she works as a puppy raiser. “I want to see that dog change someone’s life.”

Obedience Training: The Basics

The puppies generally spend the first several months of their lives socializing and being introduced to new experiences that will help them down the line when they are in service dog training. For organizations that CGC test their dogs, the commands taught are focused on success in the exam. While each organization has its own program for obedience training, there are some common trends in terms of commands and how they are taught. Trainers and veterans assume about dog cognition that they are not robots that always respond to operant conditioning using

treats and praise, but rather that in the process of training the dogs decide when to obey and disobey. Once they are fully trained, they can be counted on to obey, and when they misbehave then, as I will explain later, they are using their behavior as an alert. In this way the dogs are being trained not only in obedience, but also in communication.

Liberty Hounds works with a specific reward timing while teaching dogs obedience. Liam learned this technique from a new training program that he has been working on. First he tells the dog “ready,” meaning it is time to go to work. Then he gives the dog a command. If the dog responds, say “yes” and “pay” the dog with a treat. The trainer should make sure not to bring out the treats until the dog has already completed the task and the handler has said “yes,” so the dog does not anticipate the treat. If the dog does not sit, for example if the dog is not fully comfortable with a new command, or the command is given without sufficient authority (Hearne 2007, 53), the handler can lure the dog into place with a treat. This can get tricky, because the dog might stand up again so it can be given a command to sit and thus receive a treat. This is similar to Hearne’s dog that brings the stick halfway: there is a breakdown of authority (Hearne 2007, 48). The dog is working the system, showing that even operant conditioning depends on the willingness of the dog to obey.

If a command like “sit” has been given, the expectation is that the dog will stay seated until told otherwise. To reinforce this, the handler can tell the dog “good,” which means duration. For important commands, such as responding to cortisol, the dog can receive a “jackpot” reward of either quantity or high value treats. Another kind of positive reinforcement that Liam encourages is to “love [the dog] up.” This looks like hugging and praise, giving the dog the reward of affection. In this way, the emotional bond between human and service dog is itself a reward for the dog. This contributes to the bond that I identified in the previous chapter. Mia

describes this as “captur[ing] the moment” with praise. If the dog refuses to do a command that they already know, then the handler can tell the dog “no” and withhold food and eye contact. When training is over the handler tells the dog “done” and they can go back to being a regular dog. Hearne calls this command “okay,” and she sees it as “the simultaneous granting and earning of some rudimentary rights” such as the “right to the freedom of the house,” while also respecting the right of the handler to, for example, not have the dog jump on the couch (Hearne 2007, 53). For Hearne, the “origin of our rights” comes from “the ties signaled by reciprocal possession,” for example “[i]f I have a daughter, she has a mother” (Hearne 1991, 62). Rights “[i]mply a possessiveness but also recognize an acknowledgement by each side of the other’s existence” (Hearne 1991, 62). “Only Drummer’s⁵ owner has the power to obey him – to obey who he is and what he is capable of – deeply enough to grant him his rights and open up the possibility of happiness” (Hearne 1991, 64). To illustrate this mutual granting of rights, Hearne uses the example of obeying the government by voting, and the government obeying her by counting her ballot (Hearne 1991, 62). Responding to Hearne’s essay that I quote from here, Haraway glosses that “dogs obtain ‘rights’ in specific humans” and “[i]n relationship, dog and humans construct ‘rights’ in each other, such as the right to demand respect, attention, and response” (Haraway 2003, 53). This “reciprocal” obedience (Hearne 1991, 63) creates the possibility of giving and receiving rights.

Independence Paws head trainer Anthony focuses rewards on food motivation. Food, for dogs, is a “strong known signal.” At the beginning, commands like “sit” and markers like a clicker are “unknown” signals and it takes practice for the dog to respond to them. For Hearne and Salty, the latter has “been talked at a lot” but not “with people who mean what they say,” so

⁵ The dog in her example is named Drummer.

to start out she does not say much (Hearne 2007, 51). For Anthony, who does mean what he says, eventually the dog learns the command “here” will result in positive reinforcement in the form of a clicker or verbal praise in 1.5 seconds. Then 1.5 seconds after the positive marker, the dog receives food. Anthony calls this “room service” or that the “restaurant is open.” Once the dog knows a command, he keeps the dog guessing: sometimes they will receive a “Las Vegas jackpot” and other times nothing. The intermittent reward keeps the dog coming back.

The basic commands that a dog or puppy should know before starting service dog training are “sit,” “down,” and recall. “Sit” and “down” come fairly quickly, but the struggle is duration. Most people think they need to say “stay” to their dog in order to build duration, but actually the dog should remain in position until told otherwise. It is best to set the dog up for success, so at first release the dog after only a short while and build up duration. “Sit” and “down” are harder commands than they seem, especially when it comes to duration. While working a very well-trained dog at Joliet Dogs, I told my dog to “down” and gave her a treat. After a few minutes she popped up again, looking me in the eye for direction. I again told her “down” and gave her food as reinforcement. Then after an even shorter amount of time she popped up again, and the cycle continued until she barely stayed in her down. In this case, following Hearne, I have not earned the right to give commands to this dog, such as the dog that turned away from the liver. I have seen this same game play out with veterans at the beginning of training and in the puppy classes. I have also witnessed Anthony at Independence Paws apply downward pressure to the leash of a stubborn dog for several minutes before the dog finally went down and he was immediately released.

This game is especially a problem for the recall command, which basically means that the dog responds and comes to their name or a command like “here.” If the dog runs in the road, it

must come back when called. The trainers I worked with told me that a dog should always be treated for recall, even if they did the wrong thing by running away in the first place, because the priority is safety.

All the organizations I worked with used the command “place” as well. “Place” is a designated location, such as a karanda bed or kennel or dog bed, that the dog should go to upon the command “place.” At Independence Paws, “place” referred to any of the karanda beds in the center. The dog was free to wander around on the bed but if they took one paw off, they were corrected and put back on the bed. Again corrections according to Hearne emphasize the seriousness of the activity at hand, and the dog has the right to the consequences of not behaving (Hearne 2007, 45). The trainer would sometimes make a game out of “place,” where two karanda beds were placed about six feet apart and put on a long leash. The handler pointed at one of the beds and told the dog “place.” Once the dog complied, they were told “place” and the handler pointed at the other bed. Some of the dogs pick up on what their handler is asking for and goes smoothly between the beds, but this is an advanced task for most dogs. Outside of training, “place” can be any designated spot. One veteran I met carried around a dish towel as a portable “place” when she took the dog into public, such as at a cafe.

While the dogs are picking up these basic commands, they are also learning how to walk on a leash. Loose leash walking is essential for a service dog that needs to have manners in public. A dog pulling on a leash can get a dog/handler team kicked out of a store. This is always the first thing that Independence Paws trainers work on with newly arrived dogs. One of the trainers will put the dog on a long leash and practice changing speeds and directions, teaching the dog to respond to pressure on the leash instead of verbal commands. Anthony claims that the dog responds to leash pressure, especially with a prong collar, and the dog wants to “turn off the

problem” by loosening the leash. The dog needs to think that the pressure is coming from what the dog is doing, not from the handler. Hearne would push back against this, saying that rather than a correction being “impersonal,” the trainer “become[s] the sort of animal who, as it were, helplessly give certain corrections in the face of certain crimes” (Hearne 2007, 68-69). According to Anthony, leash walking is a feeling, and you cannot teach feeling. “A dog can never know leash too well.”

Mia at Freedom Puppies teaches a similar philosophy on leash working. If the dog wants to reduce leash pressure, it can take a step back. With an e-collar, the dog learns that buzz goes away when they stop doing whatever they were doing. The leash is an extension of the handler’s body. To teach a basic heel – loose leash walking on the left side – Mia holds treats in her hand and lures the dog into position while they walk. Liam at Liberty Hounds also views the leash as a “direct conduit” to the handler and the goal is no tension on the leash. Pulling the leash too much confuses the dog and sets it up for failure. Hearne calls this a punishment, not a correction (Hearne 2007, 45). This is part of the problem that Jack in the opening vignette faced. He constantly pulled on Charlie’s leash, so the dog did not work for him. With Liam, a calm and confident leader behind the leash, the dog relaxed and worked just fine with minor corrections.

At this early level, trainers also working on confidence building for both dog and veteran. Anthony tells the veterans to walk with “intention,” like they “own this city,” in order to get a good loose leash. According to Mia, the energy of the trainer is important. The handler must have a clear state of mind while working the dog, which is difficult for veterans suffering from PTSD. If the handler gets excited, the dog will get excited too, and as I will explain later, this heightened state of energy can draw the handler’s attention to a mental or physical problem. For obedience training, the handler should walk with confidence. This tells us something about dog

consciousness: what the leash means to the dog is a window into its state of mind. We project confidence onto dog mentality, something that experienced trainers can read off a dog. One way that trainers imagine building confidence is to bring out toys and agility equipment. Sport activities help service dogs because they keep them engaged and develop confidence. An obstacle course, for example, is fun for dogs. They might struggle to get through the tunnel at first, but when they finally do it, they begin to feel confident.

Trainers are not just interested in teaching confidence on the leash, but they also have strong opinions about what kinds of collars to use. All the organizations I worked with use a prong collar for training, though they may switch out to a flat collar for down time. A prong collar is metal and when pressure is applied, the prongs dig into the dog's neck. A lot of trainers think this is cruel; one organization even took a prong collar apart and turned it into a wall hang to hold leashes. They saw this as turning something negative into a positive. An organization that uses prong collars once explained to me that the sensation of the prong is like a dog correcting another dog with its mouth. In a way we can think of this as projecting our understanding of dog cognition onto the collar. This same trainer also uses an e-collar, but on a buzz setting rather than electric. If the dog is barking in its kennel, for example, Mia might buzz the collar and the dog will cower and quiet down. Most of the other organizations I interviewed followed the LIMA principle: least intrusive minimally aversive. This means using a flat collar, a gentle leader (this looks like a muzzle but is not), or a martingale (this tightens with pressure but only to a certain degree, not as strong as a prong).

Another obedience command that most dogs learn is "leave it." This command might be used while approaching another dog or some kind of food or treat on the floor. The idea behind "leave it" is to prompt the dog so they know an obstacle or challenge is coming up. Liam

describes “leave it” as a command given before the dog has the chance to misbehave. If the dog is already sniffing something it is not supposed to, for example, it is too late for “leave it.” At that point it is appropriate to use “no” for negative reinforcement. The handler must say “no” to take seriously the activity they are engaged in (Hearne 2007, 72). One way to teach “leave it” is to put a treat under your shoe and tell the dog “leave it.” Then give the dog a higher value treat. The dog learns that if they avoid “leave it” foods, they will get an even better treat afterwards.

Obedience training is not all business all the time. The dogs need downtime to play and just be dogs. According to the trainers I met, rather than having long training sessions, it is best to have multiple short training sessions. Afterwards the dog can be returned to the kennel, or the team can engage in play. Even a service dog cannot work all the time. Some kinds of play even reinforce service dog tasks, such as retrieving a ball.

Anthony at Independence Paws often talks about value, in the sense that the handler needs to have more value than distractions, like other dogs walking by or dropped food. Humans are the main value because they give treats and food; other dogs are of “zero value.” If a dog is not food driven in this way, it will be difficult to train them into being a working dog. There is also a difference in value when it comes to treats. Dogs work harder for high value treats – hot dogs, chicken gizzards, etc. – and to reinforce an important command. Another source of value, which I focus on in Chapter Three, is the bond between handler and dog. Haraway, drawing on Hearne, explains that dogs and trainers “discover happiness” in the mutual act of training by bringing to the fore an animal’s “talent” (Haraway 2003, 52). The human/nonhuman bond is not irreducible to happiness or rights, but as Haraway indicates they are “emergent naturecultures” (Haraway 2003, 52). In this situation, the kind of relation that comes forth can be encouraged through a variety of practices but ultimately depends on the mystique of something like falling in

love. Paradoxically, it is the economy of giving of treats while training that grows the bond that will motivate the dog to work for praise or for “the full-blown love of the activity itself” (Hearne 2007, 71).

Advanced Service Dog Skills

Once a dog has mastered basic obedience, it can learn more advanced service dog skills.

Anthony at Independence Paws does not believe in teaching dogs to be service animals because “they’re animals and not smart animals at that.” He also believes that they “don’t carry human emotions.” He does his best to train basic obedience, and if the dog is well-behaved, they can go out in public, even though they might not task for their veteran as required by the ADA.

Most other organizations tend to teach the same advanced tasks. The first is an alert to anxiety. Liberty Hounds starts training this by having veterans put treats in their closed fists. The dog puts their nose on the fist and the handler says “nudge” and gives the dog the treat. Eventually the dog learns to “nudge” even without the treat. The next logical step for the dog is to nudge when the veteran is experiencing anxiety. Most people with PTSD have a tell; it might be that they bounce their legs or clench their fists. Sometimes the veteran needs to ask a family member what their tell is. The process is the same: say nudge and give a treat while mimicking their behavior. Eventually the dog learns that this behavior means the veteran wants it to intervene, and the “nudge” command gets dropped. This process is called free-shaping: the dog is lured into a position or behavior and then given a treat. Somehow the dog makes the jump from the command “nudge” to nudging when the veteran is presenting with anxiety, which seems like a kind of high-level cognition for a nonhuman animal. In a way, this is the first kind of step towards taking initiative. I would suggest considering this kind of agency *agencements*, in the

sense that the dog and handler work together as an assemblage to produce service dog behaviors (Despret 2016, 5).

“Retrieve” is another important command, especially for veterans who also have mobility issues. At Joliet Dogs this command was taught by putting treats in a glasses case and then stuffing the case into the dog’s mouth with the command “get it!” Wait a second, and then say “give it!” It is key in these kinds of tasks to make sure the trainer sets the dog up for success. So if the dog will only hold the case for two seconds, say the command after one second. Eventually the dog will start to realize it gets treats for holding onto an object. Somehow this trick is transferred into picking something up off the ground or off a shelf. Again, this is a kind of *agencement* (Despret 2016, 5), where the dog “improvises” (Scott 2009, 58) by expanding on what the language of “get it” and “give it” mean to different kinds of objects.

Hearne discusses the retrieve at length. For a week she places a dumbbell in her dog’s mouth saying a command, not because the dog has not figured out what the handler wants, but because “she has to know that I mean it” (Hearne 2007, 70). The dumbbell has become an “object in our language,” even though it is impossible to explain the command in words (Hearne 2007, 70). Salty can sit to please her handler, but she cannot retrieve to please (Hearne 2007, 70). The activity is a success when the dog finally gets what the trainer wants and responds with gusto, a kind of human/dog team that is attuned to each other’s consciousnesses.

A common task that organizations train their dogs for is to wake up veterans from their nightmares. This often comes along with the “nudge” command, because the dog is learning to interrupt their veteran who is experiencing distress, but I have also witnessed training dogs for this specific purpose. At Freedom Puppies there is a bed and veterans can get on and mimic a nightmare. When the dog responds, the veteran showers it with praise. I have also anecdotally

heard of dogs figuring out this on their own. The dog here is learning part of the picture of alerting to nightmares. During a real nightmare, the veteran will emit cortisol, but during practice, cortisol is likely present at lower levels.

At Liberty Hounds, Deep Pressure Therapy (DPT) is part of the curriculum before public access. The theory behind DPT comes from thinkers such as Temple Grandin, who found that pressure machines helped stressed animals. Examples of this are thunder vests for dogs or cats or blankets for horses. They are also like weighted blankets. The DPT trained at Liberty Hounds explained that the pressure releases oxytocin, creating a bond between dog and handler. Often a dog will take it upon themselves to do DPT, as with Nora and Finn in Chapter Three, when their veteran is experiencing distress, but the dog can also be lured and eventually commanded to enter a certain position. They can even use different commands – like “love” or “lap” – for different positions. During a DPT class the veterans practiced different positions at the end. Chloe would lay on her stomach and Ace would lay down along her back. Henry encouraged Chase to sit between his legs. As I have mentioned before, the trainer instructed the class that twenty minutes of DPT can provide two hours’ worth of protection against severe anxiety. While none of the other organizations I worked with explicitly taught this command, I witnessed dogs performing DPT by leaning up against their handlers’ legs or sitting in a post (between the legs) position. DPT was also popular amongst many of the other service dogs for veterans’ organizations throughout the country.

As I have discussed elsewhere, some kind of command of space is taught at nearly every organization I worked with during fieldwork or heard about during interviews, so I will use this space to discuss how this task is taught at Liberty Hounds. Liam starts by luring the dog in heel to the front, blocking the person from whomever is in front of the veteran. The next step is to lure

to a rear body block and reverse sit on the opposite side of heel (usually the right). Then complete the turn with a back body block and then finally back to heel. Another possible step is “post,” where the dog, either front or reverse, sits between the handler’s legs. Eventually, for Liberty Hounds, the dogs learn to block naturally, and they will do this in public. This is an example of a dog taking initiative by deciding when to place its body in between the veteran and passersby. Liberty Hounds is taking the first steps in the process of accreditation for ADI, so I wonder if Liam will have to reconfigure “crowd control” after they make their visit.

The final advanced task is interesting because a lot of dogs do it naturally. In fact, as I mentioned elsewhere, for some organizations, if the dog does not do this task naturally, it is washed-out. This is scenting cortisol. Liam teaches this to the veterans by asking them to wear an undershirt. When they have a panic attack, they should place the cortisol-soaked undershirt in a plastic bag. The veteran then presents the undershirt to the dog and gives it “jackpot” rewards. Liam turns this into a game, putting the bag underneath his shirt and seeing if the dog will find it. Eventually the dog realizes that cortisol means it is time to alert. Since cortisol starts being released before a panic attack sets in, this allows the dog to intervene before a full-blown panic attack. Recall the story of the man driving in Chapter Three: the dog smelled his cortisol and that is why it nudged his neck as an alert. As Scott argues, recognizing animal cognitive difference in agency (Scott 2009, 46) allows us, for example, to take advantage of the dog’s genetic ability to scent cortisol and thus intervene in the veteran’s anxiety.

Obedient Disobedience

In my experience, PTSD service dogs do take a great deal of what Sally called initiative; we might understand her as suggesting that dogs decide to break a command when their handler is in

trouble. Turning back to Scott, if a dog has agency, then the dog exerts power, makes choices, and has responsibility (Scott 2009). Dogs are thus a kind of entity that can enter relations of trust. The lengthy section on obedience is meant to illustrate that even when dogs are engaged in operant conditioning, they are still agents that can choose to withhold obedience if the authority of the handler is not coherent, or they have not earned the right to give commands. But if the dog and its handler are attuned to each other, then they communicate on a level of language where commands are not limited to “sit” or “stay,” but there is an expansion of language where the dog says something that it has not yet learned (Hearne 2007, 75). Obedient disobedience might be considered an expression of dog agency. What must we assume about dog cognition – especially its capacity for agency – to believe the dog can make the decision to break a command or misbehave in public in order to alert their handler to a mental or physical problem?

Camila believes that obedient disobedience is “not something you can teach.” She says she can put her dog in a stay command surrounded with other dogs and she will not move. Camila can even walk out of the building and her dog will not move. But if Camila gets hurt, her dog will immediately go to her and help her because this is its “job,” something like having one’s own private first responder or battle-buddy. The agency that the dog exerts depends on the foundation of obedience. Her organization practices having a dog decide to disobey commands at a mock doctor’s office at the center, because they get pushback from doctors, especially at the VA, from bringing dogs into exam rooms. “We have them put their mat down, put a dog on a place command, and then explain to the doctors that this is my service dog, my dog will not move unless the dog sees that I’m in trouble.” They do basic doctor tasks, like using the stethoscope, and then they have the veteran yell. “And what we’re looking for is the dog’s reaction. Is the dog trying to come at us? Is the dog maintaining its command? Is it looking to the

vet for... do you want me to come?" What is going on here is an *agencement* (Despret 2016, 5): the dog is surveying its handler's physical expressions such as sounds, motions, and cortisol (though perhaps not in a practice setting) and, if we assume the dog has agency, it makes a conscious decision to act or not. With its veteran in trouble, the dog will break the command because they "have a need now." "Okay I'm maintaining, but now it's my job. Now I just got told by the veteran's body language, the adrenaline, I just got told that this is... I got to go to work. They're producing this; I've got to stop it." In this case, the dog needs to disobey her handler's "place" command to do its job as service dog.

How does the dog know that the boundary has been crossed and it is time to break the obedience command? Christopher at Tails for Patriots believes that dogs misbehave to alert when the dog does not know what else to do. He told me a story of a veteran in southern Arizona who had heart problems with atrial fibrillation. "One of the things he began to recognize is the dog was becoming super reactive. Barking out in public and he didn't know why all of a sudden. And the truth is we figured the dog didn't know what to do. Something was happening with his health, and dog picked up on it, and the dog didn't know what he was supposed to do about that. And so the dog began to do barking. Simply because he wasn't sure what to do." He told me another story of a veteran who took on a new job working forty hours per week and was stressed out and unable to keep up with the training. He failed the recertification test because the dog was "really super fearful." The dog was too busy throwing out behaviors, such as barking, and therefore failed the test. "And we were able to tell him afterwards, the reason why your dog responded in that way was because your dog didn't know what to do. Your dog knew that you were stressed, had high-anxiety, but the dog didn't know what he was supposed to do because he had been out of training for a month." These stories indicate that dogs act not even when, but

because they do not know what else to do. This is uncharted territory insofar as obedience training goes, so the dog, as Scott suggests, “improvise[s]” (Scott 2009, 58), much like a child learning to use their own judgement.

A lot of the trainers I talked to believed that when a highly trained, obedient dog starts to misbehave, especially in public, it is time for the handler to trust their dog and check in with their feelings and bodily sensations. The service dog thus acts as a kind of medical measuring device, telling the handler even before they realize it that something is physically or mentally wrong. In this way, the service dog’s unique capabilities to notice body language and scent cortisol make it so the dog can act faster than medication, because by the time the veteran is taking medication, they are already panicking. Consider the following exchange between me and a trainer:

Gianna: I tell them: when you go out somewhere, and your dog starts acting like a spazz, or when it’s embarrassing or whatever, don’t get angry. Check yourself. Check up and make sure... you’re... what am I feeling? What’s going on? What’s my heart doing? Like one of the younger people with just autism, her dog... he’s phenomenally trained. I spent extra time with him doing other tasks for her. And one day he was acting like a complete nut. And I said: are you all right? She’s like: yea I’m fine. I’m like: no really, are you all right? She’s like: no I’m fine. I mean five times and I finally went: I understand you’re telling me you’re all right, look at your watch. What does it say? She goes: oh my god! And I said: what? And she said her heartrate was 240 over one-something.”

Me: “Oh my gosh!”

Gianna: “I said: sit down! And so she sat down and I said: next time check yourself.”

The handler in this case assumed the dog was misbehaving on its own accord, even though she knows the dog is highly trained. However, the dog was doing its best to throw out behaviors that would draw its handler’s attention to her medical condition. Why act like a “spazz” instead of more polite nudging? It is likely because the dog has already attempted this route and the handler assumed it was nothing. Even though trainers like Liam tell veterans to trust their dogs, it takes a high degree of attunement between dog and handler to know when a dog is alerting instead of

“acting like a spazz.” In this way there is a breakdown of communication: the dog is smelling the cortisol and reading the veteran’s body language, but it does not know what to do and thus improvises by offering up behaviors. The dog has reached a circumstance beyond what they have been taught in obedience and advanced service dog skills, so the dog relies on its own agency to get its job done as a service dog.

When Mila knows that a dog understands a command, she assumes that if the dog is not doing what the veteran asks there must be something wrong with the veteran’s state of mind. She stops the veteran and asks: “how are you feeling right now? Tell me what’s bothering you. Is something bothering you? Because your dog is not behaving, and doing what you ask them to do, it’s doing something else.” Most of the time the veteran is then able to identify a trigger. Mila then instructs the veteran to “reach down,” “pet your dog,” “use your deep pressure therapy or your tactile stimulation” until they calm down. If the veteran then gives a command and the dog obeys, the veteran knows that they are back under control. This is only possible if the handler and trainer know the dog is highly obedience trained, which is why testing like the CGC is so important. The behavior in this case is a signal to the veteran about their own inner state that we assume dogs can read due to abilities unique to them as a species.

Another trainer, Eleanor, explained to me how important scent work is for a service dog to take initiative and intervene with their veteran. “Now when I feel myself getting agitated, angry, hyper, anxiety, depressed, whatever, I then call my dog over and I say: Spot, you know, give me some ‘lap.’ Give me some ‘kisses.’ Give me some whatever I put the word to, right? And then when the dog does that, the dog smells me, and he sees my behavior, where he says: oh, she likes it when I do this behavior when she smells like that, okay?” Eleanor also gave the example of someone who has a seizure dog. The dog can smell when a person is about to have a seizure

and the dog “starts acting erratically. They’ll jump around or push or shove or try to cut the person off. And the person learns over a couple of times: the last time my dog did this, I had a seizure. I need to sit down. I need to get in a safe place. That’s how they work out. That’s how they work out their magic.” By describing the situation as “magic,” Eleanor echoes Camila that obedient disobedience cannot be learned but is something a dog takes upon itself to perform. In the case of PTSD, if suddenly a dog is starting to offer behaviors it has been trained to do – such as “pushing against me” or “jumping on my lap” – it is time to do a “body scan. How am I feeling? Am I getting anxious, because I didn’t even really know it.” If the dog starts offering behaviors, they are enlarging (Hearne 2007, 56) the meaning of what used to be commands, as if it is hoping one of its performances will get the veteran’s attention. If the veteran realizes their anxiety is mounting, they can allow the dog to task for them (such as DPT). Eleanor believes that the handler needs to learn to trust their dog, which refers to the bond that veteran and service dog have for them to function as medical equipment. The DPT that the dog gives is a kind of medical intervention.

It is important for handlers to read their dog’s body language. As I have discussed previously, veterans with PTSD all have a “tell.” One of the organizations I interviewed called this “tattle-tailing” (spelt at “tail” instead of “tale”). “If the person sitting there saying: I’m perfectly fine to talk to you about this. And the dog is nosing them and getting up” something is going on and the veteran should trust their dog’s body language. Another trainer also talked about reading the dog’s body language. “We teach [...] the veteran to read the dog. To read what’s going on. You know, um, you want your dog to respond to you and you want your dog to, you know, to come up to you or whatever. And you to... you have to learn, figure out, does he want to go out? Or is he actually telling you that you are about to have an anxiety attack or

something of that sort.” This is another example of *agencement* (Despret 2016, 5), where dog and human come together to create a common understanding of the situation. It is also an opportunity to exercise trust in the dog to give accurate alerts.

Conclusion

As with Jack’s situation, the veteran who assumes the dog is misbehaving instead of alerting to anxiety, often responds to the dog with punishment instead of correction. They will yank the leash and tell the dog “no!” when actually the dog is doing its job. This is a problem faced by all organizations, but especially those that train veterans to train their own service dogs. There is a fine line between correction and punishment, and as William Koehler expresses, at stake is the “nobility, character and dignity [of] the dog” (Hearne 2007, 43).

In this chapter I have described what obedience training looks like under a variety of circumstances. I compare three examples of puppy raisers with a detailed description of how trainers teach obedience commands to their dogs. Alongside this story I rely on Hearne, Scott, and Despret to show how we can think of dogs as having agency even during operant conditioning, such as withholding obedience if the handler has not yet earned the right to command the dog. The dog also has agency when it comes to deciding when to disobey a command they know. When dogs have tried the commands that they have been taught and still do not get feedback from their handler – or even worse, they are punished – then they start to misbehave. Sometimes veterans need to be reminded that their dog is highly trained and if it is disobedient, there might be something going on in terms of their health. We therefore assume that dogs are a kind of animal that has consciousness able to make decisions on their own based on signs from their handler’s mental and physical state. Returning to Ingold, the dog is

simultaneously dominated by humans through obedience training and in relations of trust with them due to their capacity for “volition” (Ingold 2000, 70).

Conclusion

I recently met up a potential friend on a Bumble friend date. They have a small dog that they take everywhere. When they entered the bar, they were told the dog could not enter. My “friend” explained that this is a service dog and produced a card indicating precisely this. Satisfied, we sat at the bar with the dog in my companion’s lap. The establishment did not ask the two questions that public place are allowed to ask: “(1) is the dog a service animal required because of a disability, and (2) what work or task has the dog been trained to perform” (ADA 2020). Not wanting to pry, but curious about their situation, I asked a version of these questions. To my surprise, they told me they did not have a disability and thus the dog does not perform tasks for them. They simply wanted the freedom to bring the dog wherever they wanted. The dog was well mannered but took some snacks from off the table, a definite no-go for trained service dogs. This was an example of what the trainers, staff, and veterans I spoke with call a “fake” service dog.

“Fake” Service Dogs

An unfortunate outcome of the spread of service dog organizations for invisible disabilities is that anyone can easily purchase a vest and suit their dog up with it. They can then take the dog anywhere in public like any legitimate service dog. Trainers and veterans alike complain that fraudulent service dogs ruin service dogs for clients with well trained dogs. It is now illegal in 31 states to pass a regular pet as a service dog (Jimenez 2021), but since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require a specific kind of training or test to pass, it is difficult for business owners faced with an apparent service dog to tell if it is a “real” service dog or not. Many organizations will print out cards saying this dog was trained by that organization and

sometimes the ADA rules. These are not necessary or standardized, but the public is generally unaware of what their rights are according to the ADA with regard to service dogs.

One of the organizations I observed did not even come close to meeting the standards that organizations like Assistance Dogs International (ADI) or ASDP (Association of Service Dog Providers) set for their service dogs. Dogs need to perform at least one task, such as picking things up off the floor or nudging when the handler is starting to experience anxiety. The organization teaches obedience only and passes off their well-behaved dogs as service dogs. In my discussion with Bergin, I asked her what she thought about fake service dogs. Surprisingly she told me that as long as a dog is well-behaved, they should be allowed in public places, which is common in Europe. If a dog can pass as obedient, how can a business owner determine if a service dog is “real” or “fake”? And does it matter?

There is a new initiative to combat the problem of fake service dogs called Service Dog Pass (<https://www.servicedogpass.org/>). This will provide validation that a dog is trained by a legitimate organization, thus making it easier for veterans with service dogs to bring their dog on planes or in public. An issue with this is that Service Dog Pass is only available for certain accredited organizations – including ADI and ASDP – a step that many service dog organizations do not want to take.

One of the trainers I spoke with told me there is a huge debate in the service dog industry at the moment about fake service dogs. The heart of the issue is that the ADA is vague about dog training, allowing individuals to train their own dogs if they are capable. I asked trainers and staff about whether they believe the ADA should be stricter to tackle the problem of fake service dogs, and about half went each way. Talking to Mia, she explained that it is hard enough to get a service dog and a stricter ADA requirement would only hinder people’s attempts. What they need

to “crack down on is the fake service dogs, people who are abusing the system.” She suggested fines for people who clearly do not have real service dogs. These fake service dogs wear a vest but bark and “rush at other dogs,” which indicates that they do not have the obedience training that I describe in Chapter Four. Victoria, who has a long history with ADI, told me that fraudulent service dogs “give a bad name to a well-trained service dog,” which leaves a bad impression for businesses. She told me a story of a “bogus” service dog who went to a restaurant and ate off the table, which made the owner feel like they should not let in anyone claiming to have a service dog. A fake service dog also causes problems for trained service dogs: one organization explained that some of their dogs have been attacked by fake service dogs, which can be traumatizing for a legitimate service dog to a degree that they can no longer perform their service dog function. A “real” service dog should never attack another dog. Another organization told me that fake service dogs cause problems for everybody, especially in a climate where service dogs are more accepted as public beings. One suggestion I received was to crack down on making sure the dog is really tasking for its handler’s disability, but it is unclear how this would happen without pushing past the boundaries of the ADA to have the dog actually perform the task.

While businesses might not be able to distinguish between real and fake service dogs, trainers claim that they can. One of the trainers I spoke with told me that real service dogs “show themselves” as being such. It is “obvious” to a trainer. In a restaurant, for instance, they should be “invisible,” tucked underneath the seat, rather than eating off the table. She holds back from calling these dogs out because of the “legalities” behind doing so. This trainer believes the ADA is too vague and opens the door for fake service dogs, but at the same time she understands that for financial reasons self-training might be the only option. The idea that a trainer can spot a fake

service dog is a trend. Another trainer I spoke with told me that mishaps between dogs are bound to happen, but a “fake” service dog will always act like a “butthole” in public, such as snarling. Trainers see these kinds of dogs “all over the place,” making it difficult for those with a real “need.” ADI lobbied to get service dog vests and cards off the market in the hopes of preventing short cuts to getting a real service dog.

Part of my intention behind writing this dissertation is to deal with the tricky subject of what counts as a real service dog. Fake or “poorly trained” service dogs can give business owners a bad impression and make it hard for dogs who have gone through two years or more of training to enter public places without getting harassed. On the flip side, business owners do not know their rights and might tolerate a misbehaving “service dog” because they do not want to get into legal trouble. I hope this paper serves as a road map for service dog owners, business owners, and the general public to understand what goes into training a service dog and what to expect from one in public.

My other hope for this collection of thoughts is to make an impact in anthropological and critical theory on several fronts. In the introduction I offer a brief picture of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from the viewpoint of psychological diagnosis and socio-cultural history. I then explain my interventions into disability studies. I suggest that we question the medical model as ableist, in the sense that it seeks a cure instead of focusing on living in the everyday present. Service dogs might not cure post-traumatic stress, but they do allow veterans to live well and feel safe in the present as ordinary Americans who engage in public access, which I argue is the moral project of assemblages of the service dog industry, trainers, doctors, veterans, and their dogs. My first intervention into human/nonhuman theory is to point out that service dogs and their handlers form emergent relationships from which comes the possibility of bonds of love

and trust that make it possible for the dog to act as medical equipment. My second intervention draws on the concept of agency for human and nonhuman animals. In dog training the goal is to get to the point where the dog understands commands to the degree that allows expansion upon the common language between dog and handler (Hearne 2007). Service dogs are so well trained in obedience that they can make the choice to improvise when their handler is in trouble (Scott 2009).

In the first chapter, I focus on how the crisis of legitimacy in the service dog industry led to projects aimed at standardizing service dog training and formalizing how non-for-profits run their affairs. Expertise in the case of service dogs refers to actors who have skills in training that are codified in standards of excellence set by accreditation groups like ADI, ADSP, and the International Association of Canine Professionals (IACP) (Boyer 2008; Carr 2010; Rosen 2023). These actors operate at a register of expertise, producing standards for accreditation that often for candidates includes the submission of comprehensive paperwork and a several days site visit. With the ADA vague about service dog standards, and even before the ADA weighed in on service animals, there was a vacuum of legitimacy in the service dog industry. While the accreditation organizations I mentioned do attempt to fill this void, most organizations that work with service dogs either have no interest in outside intervention or do not want to pay membership fees. An intervention I make in the discussion of legitimacy and expertise is that trainers learned to be experts in their field “processually” (Boyer 2008, 44) due to a growing need – in response to veteran suicide as a public health epidemic – for organizations that produce legitimate PTSD service dogs. Not only was there an issue of lack of standards for service dogs, but there was, and is, a dearth of organizations trying to keep up with demand. In order to solidify the expertise of trainers and staff of the organizations I interviewed, there is growing

literature that suggests beyond anecdote that service dogs are an effective adjunctive treatment. There are also ongoing projects that are attempting to measure the efficacy of PTSD service dogs. Expert knowledge about service dogs has the power to educate government agencies who are experts in their own right: of lawmaking and the desires of their constituents, including veterans.

Expertise plays a role in the rest of the dissertation because of the influence of ADI, and the growing prominence of ASDP. Several of the organizations I interviewed were candidates just starting the process of accreditation for ADI, ASDP, or both. I also talked to many organizations already accredited by these groups. Especially for ADI, as I have mentioned in previous discussions, there is controversy over one of the most important public access commands – creating space – which can be perceived as guarding behavior and thus not appropriate for service dogs.

In the second chapter I introduce the idea of public access as the core of what makes a service dog different from an emotional support animal or pet. By focusing on going out into public, the service dog industry illustrates their conception of what an ordinary American should be like: someone who feels safe shopping or eating outside the house. Drawing on this insight, I make a key intervention into ordinary ethics through the work of Zoe Wool (2015) and Veena Das (2007, 2010). Following Das, I ask what we might gain by thinking of service dog training and labor as a process of achieving new possibilities in the everyday (Das 2010), especially an emergent sociality for which veterans live ordinary, safe American lives in the public. Wool expands upon the idea of the ordinary to include the “extra/ordinary,” which in the case of service dogs means “ordinary” in the sense of performing American civility and “extraordinary” as being unable to pass as not disabled with a dog (Wool 2015). I suggest that service dog

training in public access is a kind of “moral striving” (Das 2010, 398) for veterans and families, along with their trainers, doctors, and dogs, all of whom are working on how to live with the new circumstances of PTSD or other traumas. Unlike Das and Wool, however, one of the members of this assemblage is canine. I also draw on Alasdair MacIntyre’s conceptualization of the good life as participating in a moral tradition of debate over what counts as a good life – in this case, an ordinary American consumerist life – and virtues are precisely the qualities that further along this discussion (MacIntyre 1981, 219).

Looking back to Chapter One, the ADA outlines the rules and guidelines of service dogs, but is vague about how they are trained and does not include any kind certification for legitimate service dogs. This leads to the question of what kind of influence on a disability are service dogs supposed to have. The ADA explains that service dogs do tasks for a disabled person, such as “guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, reminding a person with mental illness to take prescribed medications, calming a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during an anxiety attack, or performing other duties” (ADA 2020). These are important tasks that allow a disabled person to live a better life in the present; they push back against the VA’s focus on curing PTSD through evidence-based treatments. Following Eli Clare (2017) and Sunaura Taylor (2017), I suggest that focusing on the cure of a disability draws attention away from living a fulfilling life in the present, or, referring back to Das (2007, 2010), in the everyday. This life takes shape around assemblages of humans and dogs that produce a kind of diversity in our world which is meaningful and important, even without curing PTSD.

People with disabilities often need devices or prosthetics, such as wheelchairs or ventilators. For veterans with PTSD, the medical equipment that they would benefit from is a

service dog. Trainers often talk about service dogs as medical tools, and this is why they are allowed public access. In the third chapter I explain how the bond between dog and human, which is similar to the way we think of falling in love or courtship, is necessary for the dog to function as medical equipment. We can think of this bond as emergent in the sense that, as Radhika Govindrajan calls “relatedness,” our lives and worlds with animals grow into one another and produce something more than the sum of its participants (Govindrajan 2018, 3). Eduardo Kohn describes something similar as “becomings,” which blurs ontological boundaries (Kohn 7, 2007). The bond between dog and handler grows into intimacies – such as imagined kinship or battle buddies – that make possible the motivation for serving as what most people would consider to be an inanimate object: medical equipment. It is critical that the handler grow to trust their dog when it is alerting to a mental or physical change in the handler’s body, because that is the task that makes it a psychiatric/PTSD service dog. I argue that the role of medical equipment relies on the bond between veteran and dog because the assemblages including the service dog industry and veterans with their dogs imagine that love and trust motivate the dog to serve even a handler who is not highly trained in working with dogs. I also contend that dogs are an animated kind of medical equipment that – by nature of their species – can predict mental or physical issues before material medical tools can.

The bond follows through to my final chapter, where I focus on obedience training and dog agency. Another way to think of the bond is as Vicki Hearne’s notion of authority, obedience, and submission (Hearne 2007). The bond may be based on love and trust, but it is also hierarchical: dogs must be highly obedient to work as a service dog for their handler. Even though the dog is obedient, though, does not mean it lacks agency. On the contrary, I argue that the relationship of obedience depends on a conceptualization of dog cognition that allows dogs to

decide what to do when all their alerts have failed, and their handler is in trouble. Shelly R. Scott (2009) ascribes agency to racehorses not only because they occasionally disobey direction from their jockeys, but also because they can work together as a kind of collaboration, minds attuned to one another and, if not an expression of love, certainly an articulation of trust. For dogs to respond to commands, they must accept the authority of the handler and trust the handler has earned the right to give commands (Hearne 2007). To accept this argument, we need to assume that dogs play a role in making decisions about who or when they will obey commands, making operant conditioning more than just the basic command/acknowledgement/reward.

Once a dog is highly obedience trained, it learns tasks that respond to its veteran's disability, which again is what makes it a service dog and not just a pet. Sometimes, however, dogs find themselves in a situation where their attempts to alert their veteran are not working, and so they take initiative and, as Scott suggests, "improvise" (Scott 2009, 58): not listening to commands, throwing out random tasks they know, and/or generally misbehaving. When this obedient disobedience happens, trainers encourage the veterans to trust their dogs and check in with themselves to see if there is something physically or mentally amiss. I suggest using the term *agencement* from Vinciane Despret to point out the mutual agency that assemblages of dog and human (and leashes, collars, and other equipment) produce (Despret 2016, 5), similar to the diversity of relationships that we gain by rejecting ableism and the need for a cure.

* * *

When I chose the title "Trust Your Dog," I was thinking about Liam's constant reminder to the veterans he was training to train their own dogs. As the chapters started to take shape, I found the

issue of trust come up repeatedly. With the first chapter focusing on expertise and the crisis of legitimacy, veterans trust their dogs to be trained to a high standard set by experts in their field or by trainers willing to give PTSD dog training a try for veterans in need. In the second chapter, veterans trust their dogs to watch their backs and create space in public. In the third chapter, the veterans begin to trust their dogs and through this function learn to trust others. Finally in the fourth chapter the veteran and trainer trust that the dog is highly obedience trained, and therefore that misbehaving is a last resort form of alert when the dog's handler is in trouble.

In the process of writing this dissertation, I hope for several things to have come through. I hope to have painted a picture of the service dog industry in a situation where there is no legal precedent for dog training. I hope to have intervened in the question of disability and cure as it relates to ableism and living a good life in the everyday present. I wish that my discussion of bonding and medical equipment will create a new way of imagining the dog as both subject and object in emergent relationships with its veteran. I hope I broaden the idea of animal agency to include not only refusing to respond to commands but also as emerging in assemblages of partnership, and thus expanding on what it means for dog cognition when a highly trained dog misbehaves as an alert. Finally I hope to contribute to a conversation in the tradition of the service dog industry about what counts as a service dog and when a dog might be considered fraudulent.

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