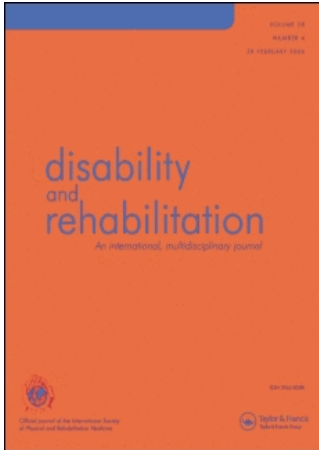


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RESEARCH PAPER

The experience of owning a guide dog

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Abstract

Purpose. This study explored the dynamics of guide dog ownership in a South African sample. Six participants (five male and one female) from diverse socio-economic backgrounds were interviewed in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The study was performed to provide a clearer understanding of the guide dog and owner relationship, as well as the influence of the dog on the life of a person with blindness. The study also explored the current state of guide dog ownership in the uniquely South African context.

Method. A qualitative methodology was employed to investigate the research question. All six participants were involved in structured interviewing in order to obtain the data for this study.

Results. Eight common themes on guide dog ownership emerged by employing a phenomenological methodology of data analysis.

Conclusions. Guide dog ownership seems to be a life-changing experience, with both negative and positive consequences for the owner. Recommendations to service providers in and for the community of persons with disabilities are made in conclusion of the article, as well as suggestions given for future research on a topic of this nature.

Keywords: *Guide dog ownership, blindness, psychology, human-animal interaction, qualitative study*

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of obtaining and owning a guide dog for persons with blindness, using a qualitative design. As McGrath and Johnson [1] pointed out, qualitative and quantitative research need not be approached as opposing perspectives, but rather as complementary. They may explore different aspects of a phenomenon, but as McGrath and Johnson [1, p. 32] so aptly put it, 'methodologically, we [as researchers] need all the help we can get'. With explorative research such as this, particularly when participants are limited, a qualitative design can yield invaluable information.

The context of the study

It is estimated that 5–12% of the South African population has some type of disability, according to the Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) [2]. The South African Revenue Service (SARS) [3]

reported that at least 2.2 million people in South Africa have a physical disability, and that the largest sub-group is people with blindness. These statistics confirm that persons with disabilities represent a significant proportion of the population of South Africa.

Ways in which to enhance the lives of persons with disabilities and minimize the social/environmental barriers that influence their lives need to be identified. The South African government has changed its policies regarding persons with disabilities. The previously deficits-based approach was criticized and a strengths and cooperational orientation was adapted. The South African minister of finance, Trevor Manuel [3] said that government and the private sector should support and create opportunities for persons with disabilities. If persons with disabilities, and more specifically persons with blindness, face a myriad of social and physical challenges, there is a need to identify tools or aids to help them function in mostly inaccessible

environments. One form of aid to persons with blindness that have been employed in South Africa since 1953 is dog guides [4]. There is a void in scientific knowledge regarding guide dog ownership. No known scientific literature exists on the psychology of guide dog ownership in South Africa, and only limited studies have been conducted internationally on this subject.

The following study used qualitative analysis to investigate the experience of adjusting to life with a guide dog among persons who are blind. In doing this, this study first explored the following themes: physical experiences; experience of being different; social interaction and social stigma; independence versus dependence; family life and problems in the work setting. Then will follow a discussion of the possible consequences of the human-animal interaction.

Characteristics unique to persons with blindness

Environmental barriers prevent persons with disabilities from freedom of movement and access to information. According to the INDS [2], the barriers in the social environment that specifically influence persons with blindness in South Africa are the following:

- A lack of accessible and safe public transport;
- Inaccessible public services to particularly the visually impaired and persons who are deaf (places such as museums, libraries, clinics and media post particular barriers);
- Buildings, nature trails, urban and rural infrastructures not designed to support persons with disabilities and planning professionals not incorporating accessible environment planning in their designs;
- Expensive supportive technology, such as Braille and specific computer programmes, who are also limited to computer/Braille literate consumers and are thus inaccessible to most.

Wright [5] commented that a person with a disability often experiences a feeling of being different. She said that a person's self-regard, the situational context and the wish to be/appear well-adjusted all converge to form the reaction of a person with a disability. It is impossible to predict any one person's reaction, and care should be taken not to view persons with a disability as a homogeneous group. However, what is central in Wright's discussion is that the wish of many persons with disabilities is to appear well-adjusted.

The experience of being physically different also has implications for body image and self-evaluation.

King, Schultz, Steel and Gilpin [6] conducted a study on general physical disability and its influence on self-concept and self-evaluation. Females with physical disabilities had lower perceived social acceptance, athletic competence and romantic appeal compared to able-bodied peers. Males with physical disabilities had lower perceived scholastic competence, athletic competence and romantic appeal. The adolescents with disabilities, both male and female, were significantly less independent and less persistent than their able-bodied peers. Davies [7] also emphasized that residential, segregated care of persons with disabilities compounded their psychological problems of being 'different'.

Persons with blindness are also subject to social stigma and discrimination. The INDS [2] stated that all persons with disabilities face discrimination. In a South African sample, Davies [7] found that persons with disabilities experienced more anxiety and was more socially withdrawn/isolated than their able-bodied controls. The speculation was also that the negative social consequences of disablement places strain on the person's adjustment to disability.

Lindemann [8] identified another conflict created by blindness, namely the desire for independence together with a realistic need for assistance/dependence in certain situations. A qualitative study by Steffens and Bergler [9] also revealed that dependence on others, nervous strain, social problems and communication difficulties are the primary stress factors of persons with visual impairment. It is clear that persons with visual impairments face a myriad of challenges in able-bodied orientated environments.

Family life of the person with visual impairment is often put under great strain. Rusalem [10, p. 48] describes the family unit as a 'delicate balance of interpersonal relationships', and cites family insecurity as a possible consequence of blindness. Feelings of insecurity and tension between the members of the family may result in the self-blame amongst the members, especially the blind person. This may negatively affect healthy social development and support within the family unit.

Other findings also support the notion that the blindness of a member can adversely affect family life. Beaty [11] found that children with blindness have more interpersonal problems with family members compared to able-bodied peers. The presence of a disability can also lead to an abnormal family environment. Carver and Rodda [12] cited that denial of disability, over-protection, guilt and rejection of the disabled child are characteristic parental responses to disability.

Much research has focused on the way a person with a disability can negatively influence aspects of family life, but family life can also provide great support to the individual. In a healthy functioning

family unit, the following resources are available in support of the person with blindness [13]: siblings that provide support and an opportunity for the person with blindness to confide in them; and parents that can provide emotional and financial support. As with any child, a strong family unit can provide a springboard for healthy social development and provide emotional encouragement. The family unit has enormous potential to positively influence the person with blindness.

Persons with visual impairment and people who are able-bodied view work as equally important [14]. Persons with blindness were, however, less satisfied with their career development opportunities and the training they received, compared to their non-disabled peers. Gillies et al. [14] also emphasized the high rates of unemployment of persons with disabilities. This was also found in South African research [2], which showed that 99% of people with disabilities were not employed in the formal sector. Gillies et al. [14] concluded that inadequate career development and limited training opportunities seem to limit persons with disabilities, in that service provision improvements are needed to establish positive change of attitude towards persons with disabilities in the workplace.

The benefits of the human-animal interaction

The field of human-animal interaction incorporates a broad spectrum of disciplines, and includes all interactions between humans and animals [15]. Van Heerden [16] defines human-animal interaction as a dynamic process, where there is a reciprocal relationship between humans and animals that can result in need fulfilment in both human and animal.

The psychological advantages that may be achieved through the human-animal interaction, and specifically the interaction between humans and service dogs, will be discussed with reference to self-esteem, experience of companionship, socializing and community integration and reduced behavioural problems.

Service dogs have been associated with improved self-esteem in their owners. Service dog owners differ significantly from non-owners (who are also disabled), and that the service dog owners have better self-esteem [17]. Valentine, Kiddoo and LaFleur [18] found that persons reported higher self-esteem, trust, tolerance and independence after service dog acquisition. The same positive results of increased self-esteem were found in another study, especially within six months after the participants received a service dog [19].

There is evidence that service dogs facilitate a shift to internal locus of control in persons with

disabilities. Owners of service dogs differ from non-owners in that they have a more internal locus of control [17]. Allen and Blascovich [19] found significant increases in internal locus of control after service dog acquisition. Valentine et al. [18] reported that their sample of persons with disabilities felt more assertive, confident and in better control of anxiety when they had a service dog. An early study in 1944 [20] proposed that pets could enhance children's self-esteem, empathy and communication skills. Camp [21] identified personal skill development as one result of service dog ownership. Mastery over commands to service dog and incorporating praise into routine spilled over into human social relationships and improved self-concept.

Service dogs provide companionship that is 'closer than family' [21]. It was found that there is a very strong emotional bond between owner and dog. A study as early as 1903 analysed 1200 children's essays about their pet dogs [20]. They observed that children valued the affection that dogs give to them, especially when they were feeling lonely or ill. Service dogs are also emotionally important to their owners. Emotional importance was defined by Valentine et al. [18, p. 120] as 'the ability of the dog to provide companionship and comfort to the owner'. Persons with mobility impairments rated the emotional aspects of service dog ownership as very important, which means that they felt the ability of their dogs to give them companionship and comfort was significantly important in their lives. They also experienced dog ownership as very satisfying. A survey of 57 recipients of service dogs found that owners described their relationship with the dogs as affectionate and supportive [22]. This satisfaction with the dog and the quality of their relationship with it was mediated by the initial motivation for acquiring the dog. Persons who chose a service dog out of a personal need had a higher quality relationship with their dogs. Persons who were under social pressure to obtain a dog reported less quality in their relationship with it. This survey highlights the importance of proper education of prospective guide dog owners in order for them to make an informed decision on guide dog ownership.

Pets provide a 'social lubricant' [23, p. 181], encouraging people to interact. Animals also help people to find their connection with nature and to become aware of their inner qualities and roles [20]. Hart [24, p. 91] also remarks on the socializing effect of dogs, being 'social magnets' and encouraging interaction and conversation between people. Another study identified guide dogs as catalysts for communication, by establishing human contact [18]. It was found that 99% of the respondents in a study (24 participants) reported that they were less lonely after acquiring their service dog [18]. Most also

experienced more friendliness from strangers. The presence of service dogs helps also promotes social facilitation for people with disabilities [25]. Mader, Hart and Bergen [25] studied children with disabilities, and found that the presence of a service dog increases social acknowledgements (for example friendly glances, smiles and conversations) of passers-by in both shopping malls and on school playgrounds. In a similar, earlier study, it was also found that people smiled more often at persons in wheelchairs with a dog present, and conversed with them more often than with persons without a dog [26]. Another study found that service dogs increased their owner's sense of social integration [22]. Service dog owners in the US reported increased community participation, social contact and independence after acquiring the dog [21].

Soutar-Freeman [27] developed an Animal-assisted Therapy (AAT) programme for children with behavioural problems. They proposed that children would learn kindness, caring and nurturance through caring for an animal. Their programme goals are based on the assumption that AAT has positive behavioural consequences, as was found in numerous studies, such as the one by Katcher [28]. Katcher found that exposure to animals decreased symptoms of hyperactivity and increased children's learning capabilities. The study was conducted in the USA, on 50 boys who had consistent school failures, behavioural problems or psychiatric conditions. The experimental group was exposed to a variety of small zoo animals, and their behaviour improved significantly more than the children who engaged in sport activities (control group). Heimlich [29] also found positive changes in her sample of severely disabled children after an AAT intervention. Three independent observers rated the children's improvements on attention span, physical movement, communication and compliance.

Research design

Participants

The sample for the study had to meet the following requirements:

- All participants had to be legally blind;
- All participants had to be older than 18 (as this is the minimum age at which a person can receive a guide dog);
- Participants had to be living in the Western Cape.

Ad hoc sampling was used to identify the participants in the study. Two organizations, namely the Institute for the Blind in Worcester and SA

Guide Dogs in Cape Town, were the main source of information for the contact details of persons in the Western Cape who could be contacted for participation in the current study. Six participants took part in the study. When the individuals and dates were announced for training and guide dog placement, SA Guide Dogs informed the current researcher of the prospective guide dog owners from the Western Cape. Training with a new guide dog takes place at the Gladys Evans Centre in Johannesburg. Before the prospective owners left for Johannesburg, the first interviews were conducted. The interviews took place across the Western Cape at the participants' residences.

All the individuals who would receive training in 2005 and about whom the researcher was informed were contacted by the researcher and all agreed to the study. It has to be noted that very few persons are trained with guide dogs in South Africa every year. In 2004 only about 13 people from the Western Cape received new guide dogs. From the six participants who participated in the qualitative part of the study, four received their first guide dog and only two received their second guide dog.

Participant one is 25 years old and a Caucasian male from foreign descent, but has been a South African citizen from a young age. He recently completed his studies and was in a transitional period from being a student to searching for full-time employment. He used a long cane as his main mobility aid before receiving his guide dog. He is congenitally blind after his mother contracted rubella during her pregnancy.

Participant two is a full-time undergraduate student. He is a coloured male and is 22 years of age. Paul lives in a university residence and his main mobility aid before acquisition of a guide dog was a long cane. He has been totally blind from age eight, caused by retinal detachment.

Participant three has a full-time career in a sheltered employment organization for persons with blindness. He is a coloured male and is 21 years of age and lives in an apartment building adjacent to his place of employment. He is only partially sighted and did not use any mobility aid before guide dog acquisition. The cause of his sight loss is unknown to him, but the first signs of sight loss occurred at seven years of age.

Participant four is a full-time, self-employed sound engineer. He is a Caucasian male and is 25 years old. He lives in an apartment with a roommate and used a long cane as main mobility aid before guide dog acquisition. He is partially sighted and the cause of his sight loss is a condition known as retinus pigmentosa. The participant still has the ability to distinguish the outlines of objects and people, but is unable to detect much detail.

Participant five is a full-time student and lives with his wife and children in a house. He is a coloured male and is 37 years old. He was previously employed as a switchboard operator, before deciding to study full-time. He became blind in two stages. Firstly, when he was eight years old, his one eye came in contact with a poisonous plant and due to a lack of medical care, he became blind in that eye. The remaining eye also gradually lost sight acuity. At 23 years of age, his remaining sight was lost, when his healthy eye was injured in a soccer game and retinal detachment caused total blindness. He is a previous guide dog owner, with about a one-year period between the new guide dog and the previous dog. John used a long cane as his main mobility aid when he did not own a guide dog.

Participant six is employed full-time as Braille proof-reader. She is a Caucasian female and is 29 years old. Michelle is single and lives in her own apartment. Michelle had recently relocated her retired guide dog to her parents' house (the apartment building where she lives does not allow pets, even if it is a retired guide dog). She gradually lost her sight to a condition called retinopathy of prematurity. The participant lost her sight in several stages. The most rapid loss of sight occurred when she was 15 years old and again at 19 years and she is now only able to distinguish light and dark outside.

Data collection

Structured interviews were conducted and recorded with each participant at a time of their choosing at each participant's place of residence. Specific interview questions were developed from previous literature on this subject [21] and also through consultation between the two current authors and an experienced qualitative researcher (I. Combrinck). These questions were:

- (1) Tell me about owning a guide dog;
- (2) Is having a guide dog what you expected?
- (3) What, if any, influence does your guide dog have on your life, relationships with others, yourself and your environment?
- (4) Did your guide dog change you in any way?

Procedure

Initially, permission to contact possible participants was obtained from the South African Guide Dog Association. Participants were contacted via telephone and were informed of the study. Permission to participate was subsequently obtained from all six participants (this was the total number of new guide dog owners from the Western Cape). Prior to the commencement of the interview, the requirements for participation were repeated and participants had

the option to withdraw from the study without prejudice. All the participants confirmed their wish to take part in the study. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were conducted by CW-B, who is a trained interviewer. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim with all identifying information changed. Field notes were also taken during each interview.

Data analysis

The raw data in this study consisted of the interview transcriptions for each participant. The data was analysed within a phenomenological methodology, as described by Creswell [30]. This approach is strongly rooted in the philosophical perspectives of, amongst others, Husserl (1859–1938) [30]. Giorgi and Giorgi [31] described the process of phenomenological research as a search for the essence of a phenomenon, through the use of free imaginative variation. This results in a careful description of the essence of a given phenomenon. More specifically, the psychological approach to phenomenology focuses on individual experience, and assumes that there is an essential structure to the experience of guide dog ownership, and that a person has intentional behaviour and free will [30]. The psychological approach to phenomenology guided the current qualitative study.

The transcriptions were read and re-read numerous times in order for the researcher to immerse herself into the text and the experiences of every participant. Through the process of immersion and familiarization with the data, subsequent natural meaning units (NMUs) could be derived for each participant [32]. The data interpretation and themes were subjected to peer evaluation by an experienced qualitative researcher, who also employed phenomenological, qualitative research in her recent research [45]. This research was also scrutinized by three examiners for Master's degree purposes.

After the initial identification of the NMUs, the researcher contextualized each NMu with regard to the research question applicable to that section of the interview. This part of the analysis (also called reduction of the data) resulted in forming an essence of the experience for each participant. The NMUs were then compared and related essences of the experience were grouped together into themes. These themes (eight in total) will now be discussed under the results section.

Results and discussion

Theme 1: A guide dog improves mobility

The first theme on guide dog ownership was the ability of a guide dog to improve the participants'

mobility. Examples from the participants relating to this theme will be given throughout. The participants were all given pseudonyms. Translated text will be indicated with [...].

A guide dog is a safer and faster mobility aid than a long cane or residual sight:

[Everything, ag, I can now walk on routes that I never could before, with my cane, because I was, I was too scared to walk there. But with the dog, I'm not a scared anymore... I can do any route, just ask the guys how many crossings and things like that, because I know, with the dog, the chance that I will walk into obstacles is like, zero...] (Paul)

A guide dog gives more mobility confidence to the owner (also in unknown environments):

[Sometimes you don't know the route and when you tell her to find the route, she reacts positively and it gave you a lot of confidence to navigate the route without any worries.] (John)

According to the current participants, guide dogs as mobility aids are safer, faster and more dynamic than other mobility aids, which seemingly translated into more mobility confidence for the participants. In the first interview, the participants all had expectations regarding the facilitation of mobility by their prospective guide dogs. The participants expected guide dogs to provide better mobility aid than a long cane, to make their journeys safer, to make unknown environments more accessible and to be more timely than other mobility aids. Based on the participants' expectations regarding the influence of a guide dog on their mobility, it would seem that their expectations have been met and satisfied.

Increased mobility confidence may well translate into other advantages, such as increases in social contact (see Theme 5) and perceived independence (see Theme 3). Literature shows that mobility is a major area of concern for a person with blindness [33]. If mobility improved, as these findings may suggest, it could reduce the constant worry that persons with blindness have regarding their mobility. Rusalem [10] found that constant attention to non-visual stimuli could be exhaustive, and two participants specifically referred to the reduction in mental effort that their guide dogs have facilitated.

This theme lends support to the argument that guide dogs are successful and effective mobility aids, at least to those persons that prefer to obtain one. The finding of enhanced mobility concurs with findings by the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, Inc. [34].

Theme 2: A guide dog provides companionship

The second theme that emerged from the interviews is the experience of companionship between the

owner and the guide dog. Several quotes highlighted the variations on this theme.

The guide dog provides companionship and evokes affection:

well, it's, it's a companion, so in that sense it's, it's very nice to have this dog who is always with you and who really seems to care and love me. And, um, because I like dogs, it's always a treat having this little doggie, who responds and interacts and ja, so that's very nice... (Martin)

[There's a lot of commonalities in our temperaments, um, I can almost call it temperament, because she also enjoys sleeping late, um, she also enjoys alternative routes, not doing the same thing every day.] (Michelle)

This theme suggests that guide dogs can provide companionship, are a source of reciprocal affection and have perceived shared personality characteristics with their owners. This theme concurs with literature on the potential benefits of pet and service dog ownership, specifically regarding the experiences of companionship and affection/support between the owner and dog [18,21,22,34]. The perceived affection and acceptance by their guide dogs could also facilitate self-acceptance and the development of improved self-esteem [16].

Theme 3: A guide dog necessitates personal change

A guide dog seems to necessitate personal change in their owners' perceptions and has the ability to enhance a person's independence.

A guide dog can enhance a person's independence (mentioned by all the participants except one):

[Definitely independence! I really don't have to ask someone, I say 'I have to go there', because I can basically just get directions from someone... Then I don't have to worry, then I just have to walk there and keep track of the directions.] (Paul)

[She gives me independence again. I can go out again, I can go to the shops, I can walk to where I want to be.] (Christine)

The relationship with the dog can also cause diverse, but positive personal changes:

um, one interesting change which I noticed from, um, the word, uh, go nearly of getting the dog was that, um, suddenly I've had to learn to be very firm with another being. Which was with me, sort of, a conscious decision of something that I... I sort of saw myself of one to be, sort of, more gentle, um, more non-directive kind of person. Um, but I mean, that doesn't work with a dog. And I think it's actually been very good for me to, to explore that part of myself as well... of having to be firm, of having to assert my will very firmly on another

being. Um, so, I think that's been a very good thing, um... assertive would be a good word. (Martin)

[...planning...but I think it's good also, it's an advantage. I'm a guy that never planned. I got up and lived, so... I think it helps.] (Paul, describing the way his guide dog forced him to become more organized)

[It definitely gives you self-confidence. You can almost, can I say, you can almost compete with what sighted people can do. You can operate in your own right.] (Michelle)

Initial mental adjustments are also needed by the owner in order to accommodate and form a partnership with the guide dog:

I mean people will come up to me and play with the dog and I've actually experienced somebody doing that for a good two minutes, just play with the dog and not necessarily talking to me... I think it's learning how to deal with the situations. Deciding whether I actually want to bother to introduce myself and say hello and um, or whether to just sort of continue with the conversation I'm having on the other side. (Martin)

[Yes, you see, at the beginning you're not used to a dog. you're used to being on your own. Then at the beginning it's a challenge, somewhat difficult.] (Arnold)

Guide dog ownership, according to the participants, enhanced independence and personal growth. The participants needed to make personal changes when they obtained their guide dogs.

Several authors emphasized the desire for independence by persons with blindness [8,9]. What is very pleasing is the fact that all but one of the participants has experienced an increase in perceived independence due to guide dog ownership. The theme of perceived increments in independence after guide dog acquisition was also supported by the literature [9,18,21].

Theme 4: Lifestyle changes resulting from guide dog ownership

A common theme for most of the participants is the life altering effect that a guide dog has on its owner.

A guide dog is a major responsibility and requires consistency:

I mean it's not like a cane which you can fold up and put and put in your bag and it's gone. It's, it's a big living creature with needs and with hair that it sheds and it causes quite a bit of 'schlep', um, which one needs to sort of cater for. (Martin)

[Firstly, it's a major responsibility to have a guide dog... I mean, your whole life is uprooted, your whole routine.] (Paul)

Time is invested in ensuring the guide dog's well-being and ensuring that the dog is clean and healthy:

[... and I think also one of the problems is that the dogs require a lot of one's attention and time. You don't always realize, you can't just... a lot of the time I come here and then, I'm tired, man, then I think, 'jissou, nay', the dog has to eat, she has to go out, I can't just sleep like I always had. I have to, a lot of the time, I have to put her needs before my own.] (Paul)

Social behaviour and routines needed to be adjusted with the arrival of a guide dog.

[Obviously she has an influence on me in the sense that a lot of my friends prefer not to have her in their cars; and then there are friends that doesn't like dogs indoors at all. So, there have been many changes.] (John)

Changes in the participants' environments were necessitated by the dog:

Um, well, the dog sleeps with me in my room, so I've sort of needed to change a few things about my room, for example installing a little air freshening device because of doggie smells, so that also has cost implications... it's not big, but it's still a little bit. (Martin)

There are also financial implications to guide dog ownership:

[The long cane doesn't eat 80 kilograms of food in two weeks, which costs you R80 in two weeks.] (Cobus)

The participants invest effort into educating people and putting them at ease about the guide dog:

[So it's just, I think, the fact that they were ignorant, you just had to educate them. And I still do it with some member of the family that I haven't seen for a while, who were used to guiding me. Then I tell them, no, it's not necessary anymore, I have the dog and it's basically her job to guide me, then I just tell them.] (Paul)

Guide dog ownership seems to entail added responsibility, time investment, social and environmental changes, economic investment and a need to educate others on the functioning of guide dogs. This theme lends support to existing literature that has found that service dog ownership entails added responsibility [21], investment of time in the dog and caring for it, as well as financial expenses [18].

The adjustments that were needed mostly centred around the constant consideration of the guide dog's care when the participants went out to socialise or on business. Camp [21] refers to the responsibilities and adjustments needed to care for a guide dog as the

'drawbacks of service dog ownership' (p. 8). Prospective guide dog owners and advocates of the benefits of guide dog ownership need to consider and understand that guide dog ownership has some negative aspects and consequences that may limit and influence some aspects of the owner's life.

The final sub-section under this theme is the need to educate people on the functioning of guide dogs. There is a need to inform people and to do your part for the guide dog cause, in order to assist other persons in need of a guide dog.

Theme 5: Guide dogs are absolute social magnets

This was a very dominant theme among all the participants. Interestingly, guide dogs seem to both attract some people and repel others, acting almost as a true magnet. Martin provided the most descriptive dialogue to illustrate this point:

I made a joke to someone the other day and said the dog is an absolute magnet...some people will gravitate towards the dog and other people will be polarized away from the dog.

Guide dogs provide social facilitation through inducing public greetings, contact and conversation:

[It's astounding how people stop you when you're out walking, just for a chat, ask about the dog and, wow, I've met a lot of people in class, usually, I now deal with people that I don't believe I would have dealt with had I still used my long cane. Because the dog is there, they will always rather come and talk about the dog. And then they will introduce themselves and say what they do. So I have, recently, met a lot of guys... through the dog.] (Paul)

[It, it also makes it easier for sighted people to approach you and it's easier for them to converse with you when the dog is with you. It's, it's kind of a conversation starter...] (Michelle)

On the other hand, guide dogs may cause people to avoid the owner, mostly because they fear dogs in general:

[I don't know, they're very scared... we saw it during the class as well – people are much more afraid, doesn't matter which colour. We saw there in the Mall. When we worked in the Mall: white people, black people, it doesn't matter, when they see the black dog, then they're gone.] (Cobus)

Probably the majority of research on the effects of service dogs has focused on the ability of dogs to provide social facilitation. Research has proven that dogs/animals can provide a socializing effect between

humans [23,24,35] and that service dogs help their owners with social facilitation [18,19,25,26]. Others also found that guide/assistance dogs increase self-perceived social integration, community participation and social contact [21,22]. The current theme thus reaffirms previous literature which found that dogs provide social facilitation.

Based on the numerous findings on the socializing effects of service dogs, it is tempting to conclude that guide dogs always provide social facilitation and attract people. There is, however, evidence that warns against this assumption. The current findings suggest that guide dogs can be a social repellent as well. Although some authors [20,36] have addressed the possibility of the negative social consequences of guide dog ownership, the overwhelming amount of literature does not mention this negative aspect at all.

There could be two explanations for this seemingly unique finding. Firstly, it could be that in our unique South African culture and political background (where the oppressed majority was often threatened with dogs), more people fear dogs and are ignorant about guide dogs than in Western societies (where most of the previous research has been based). Secondly, other authors may not have deemed it necessary or neglected to explore the possible negative social consequences of dogs due to the overwhelming evidence of their positive social effects. Whatever the reason for the lack of evidence that people also avoid guide dogs, the current theme definitely suggests that guide dogs have a dualistic social influence in South Africa: it attracts people who like dogs and it repels people who fear dogs.

Theme 6: Distractions inhibit the guide dog's ability to guide

Guide dogs are well trained, but they remain living beings prone to distractions, whether it is in the form of other people and animals, or any other object. This has a negative impact on their ability to guide their owner successfully:

The only thing is we walk quite close to the gardens, so he gets very distracted by the squirrels. So I don't know... for me I'm still making up my mind whether the usefulness balances out with the distraction from the squirrels, because my cane doesn't get distracted by squirrels. (Martin)

The participants talked about instances where their dogs did not do what they were supposed to; where they acted contrary to their training. Camp [21] also found this in her qualitative study and discussed it under the heading of 'challenges' (p. 9) of service dog ownership. De Jager [37] also mentions that faulty handling of service dogs might

disadvantage the dog or cause it physical harm. When a guide dog becomes distracted, the owner may be tempted to handle the dog with force, which could put the dog at risk. Although this could be a risk factor to a successful partnership between the dog and owner (and the health of the dog), all the participants reported that their dogs become distracted once in a while and that they find alternative routes or pay attention to environmental cues. None described punishment of the dog.

The dog's distraction could also have negative consequences to the human partner, something of which prospective owners should be aware. Most of the participants did, however, describe in the interviews that after a while they were able to detect when their dogs became distracted. None of the participants were very much disadvantaged by their dog's momentary distractions and accepted it as part of having a dog.

Theme 7: Ignorance regarding guide dogs

There is a general ignorance of the public towards persons with disabilities. This ignorance seems to persist regarding the rights and functioning of guide dogs as well. There is also seemingly insufficient education of security guards and personnel on the rights of guide dogs to public access.

[People don't really understand {how and what guide dogs are} and I don't really blame them... there are people who read the paper a lot, people who watch TV, people who pay attention to, who are interested in the lives of people with disabilities. and as long as you're not interested in the lives of the disabled, you won't know what type of tools there are available to them and, obviously, you won't know what a guide dog is either.] (John)

There is a lack of education of security guards and personnel regarding the rights of the guide dog to enter public places:

[I was denied entrance at a computer internet shop... I wanted to send an email and the guy told me that he could not accommodate me, because there was no space inside the shop and the dog would scare the other customers away. I tried to talk to him... it's disturbing in the sense that one tries to talk with them, you explain the whole process to them, and still they deny you, and they can't really give a valid reason why they won't allow you entrance.] (John)

All the participants talked about instances where people were ignorant regarding guide dogs. Members of the public seem ignorant about the functioning and abilities of guide dogs, while some security

staff and other personnel seemed uninformed about the rights of the guide dog to enter public places. This does not seem to be a uniquely South African problem, however, for similar problems for service dog owners were reported in two US samples [18,21]. This again confirms the conclusion of the INDS [38], namely that there is a prevailing need to educate the public on matters concerning people with disabilities, including their mobility aids.

Theme 8: Guide dogs can be a source of pride to the owner

There seems to be a great appreciation for the guide dog and a sense of pride regarding the guide dog's training and performance:

I'm impressed with how clever he is, with how quickly he learns routes. (Martin)

[it's just, I'm astounded each time when I'm with a dog, how well they're trained man. It amazes me each time.] (Paul)

[...one cannot really put a price tag on how much the dog means to you] (John)

The participants all seem to appreciate their dogs' capacity for learning and adapting to them. Although this is not an explicit theme with any of the other literature that was consulted, this theme could be explained by reflecting on the long history that each of the participants had with previous pets (as was ascertained on a pre-interview enquiry). It would be understandable that if one grew up with a pet dog and then received a well-trained, very capable guide dog, its training would impress one.

The confidence that the participants have in their guide dog's ability may also have contributed to their feelings of increased independence and confidence. Having something to be proud of can also give the participants a unique opportunity for favourable social comparisons with other able-bodied peers. Having something desirable to others may indeed create a positive mood, which in turn raises a person's self-esteem and confidence, as explained by Esses [39]. This feeling of having something special was described by one participant in particular: 'he's stayed over with a few people, who told me that they don't want to give him back'.

Conclusions

Eight themes emerged from the phenomenological investigation of guide dog ownership. The following may be concluded regarding the lived experience of owning a guide dog.

Guide dog ownership influenced different aspects of the participants' functioning. The owner of a

guide dog experience changes in his/her physical functioning (mobility), personal functioning, lifestyle and social environments and interactions. The guide dogs improved the mobility of the participants and enhanced their physical functioning.

A guide dog influences more than just a person's mobility. In an article on working dogs, Honsch [40] claims that 'guide dogs provide the blind with vision, independence, and love'. Although this is a non-academic article, the current results would suggest that, for the most part, Honsch's statement rings true. A guide dog provides vision through mobility enhancement (Theme 1), a sense of independence (Theme 3) and love/companionship (Theme 2).

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews suggests that guide dog ownership imply certain lifestyle changes and added responsibility for the owner. The care of a guide dog (financially and physically) can be costly and require time and careful planning. The sixth theme also warns that guide dog ownership has negative aspects. A dog, unlike a long cane, can become distracted. The guide dog owner needs to adjust and to be aware of the possibility that his/her guide dog will sometimes cause discomfort and annoyance. The fifth theme provided insight into the guide dog's social influences. This theme concurs in part with numerous other findings that service dogs act as social facilitators and attract people. It does, however, also highlight the influence of culture on the perceptions of a guide dog. In the South African context, guide dogs attract some people (thus facilitating social interaction) and repel others (thus inhibiting social interaction).

Theme seven confirmed that ignorance persists regarding the lives (and aids employed) of people with disabilities. Theme seven also identifies a need to educate security personnel and other staff on the rights of guide dogs.

The final theme, which applied to all the participants, was a sense of pride and wonder regarding the training and abilities of guide dogs. This is a very good indication of the quality of training that was provided by SA Guide Dogs and the success of their selection and placement programmes.

The findings of the interviews have implications for the service provision of the South African government to persons with blindness. The INDS [2] confirmed that urban and rural infrastructures were neither designed for nor very accessible to persons with disabilities. An improved means of mobility in those environments through the use of a guide dog, such as was reported by the participants, may increase the accessibility of previously inaccessible environments for persons with blindness.

The findings also have theoretical implications. Webster and Roe [41, p. 112] comment that

'mobility for many individuals with visual impairments is synonymous with personal independence', and thus emphasize the need to find ways to improve mobility and access for persons with blindness. Five out of the six participants experienced an increased sense of independence due to guide dog ownership. Guide dog ownership seems to be a viable solution for providing personal independence to those who prefer to acquire a guide dog.

For educational purposes, Philpott [38] argues that children with disabilities should be rehabilitated in order to function as independently as possible. If a guide dog can provide additional independence, as seems to be the case, it should be considered as a worthwhile intervention to promote the healthy functioning of people with blindness. Young [42] also argues that positive experiences with dogs must be incorporated into the curriculum for blind or visually impaired children. She provides several examples of successful dog-exposure curricula interventions in the United States. She concludes that any tool that may enhance independence and provide freedom of choice to children with disabilities should be incorporated into their educational curricula. The current authors concur strongly with this notion.

Promotional pamphlets by SA Guide Dogs also placed emphasis on the independence and self-respect a person can gain through guide dog ownership [43]. One such pamphlet makes reference to 'a vision beyond sight' [4], which implies that guide dog ownership has more benefits than merely providing mobility aid. In another pamphlet [44], guide dogs are highlighted as companions, friends, and agents who give mobility and life to a person with sight disability, painting an attractive picture of guide dog ownership.

Based on the results of this qualitative study, it may be concluded that guide dogs are, at least to the six participants that were involved in the study, indeed companions and friends. Guide dogs seem to provide more than just mobility aid.

What is not mentioned by promotional pamphlets, however, is that guide dogs are also a major responsibility. Guide dogs are not perfect beings capable of single-handedly giving a person 'life'. Guide dogs can be a source of concern, of anxiety, of trauma and of agitation. It can also inhibit certain social encounters and cause problems with public access. The experience of owning a guide dog seems to be both positive and negative, although all but one of the participants readily agree that they would rather have a guide dog than not. In that sense, guide dogs seem to enhance the lives of those people who willingly apply for one.

It may be that the well-being of a person seeking a guide dog increases with guide dog ownership. Nevertheless, guide dog ownership is not a solution

for all the challenges facing a person with blindness, nor is it a solution for all persons with blindness. A guide dog may benefit some, while others will not benefit from it. It seems that a guide dog forms a very integral part of the life of its owner, but that it is not the only factor that determines the well-being of a person with blindness.

Recommendations

Future qualitative studies on this topic will perhaps benefit from extending the adjustment period to a guide dog from three months to six months. The participants seemed to be in an adjustment period with their new guide dog after three months. All of the participants commented on still adjusting to the dog and finding ways in which to use the partnership optimally. A different picture may emerge once the participant has fully integrated the dog into his/her life. Practically, this will entail either extending the time between the two interviews with the same participant (from three to six months) or, preferably, adding a third interview with each participant (six months after guide dog acquisition). The second option may prove the most valuable.

Finally, the following recommendations are made to several groups and organizations that are involved in this topic:

- (1) Prospective guide dog owners need to understand the responsibilities that guide dog ownership entails. Guide dog ownership seems to be a life-changing experience;
- (2) SA Guide Dogs has the responsibility to inform prospective guide dog owners on the negative aspects of guide dog ownership as well. Their campaigns to inform the public of the uses and rights of guide dogs should also receive more attention. The organization can also provide guidelines and information to guide dog owners for dealing with the death or retirement of a guide dog;
- (3) Policy makers must become aware of the potential/help that guide dogs provide to those who wish to obtain them and of the phenomenon that people become dependent on their guide dogs. This implies a great need for the sustainability of the guide dog movement;
- (4) The South African government must provide more explicit environmental support for persons with disabilities. There is also a need for better education in schools regarding the ways in which to interact with persons with disabilities. The general public must be made aware of the aids that are available to persons with disabilities (including guide dogs for persons with blindness).

Limitations

Objectivity is the hallmark of quantitative research, which implies that the phenomena under investigation, procedures used to investigate the phenomena and the researcher doing the investigation must remain objective in order for the results to be objective [1]. Objectivity in itself means that the material world and experience under investigation is independent of the observer (or researcher). Qualitative research, however, proposes an alternative paradigm, by means of which the researcher is seen as an interdependent participant in research and always has a value-laden orientation to every phenomenon.

If qualitative research is considered from the dominant quantitative, positivistic orientation, then the use of the qualitative design limited the current study through a lack of:

- Objectivity;
- Standardized testing procedure;
- Repeatability (reliability);
- Quantitative data;
- Generalizability;
- Causality.

The current authors do not support a pure positivistic view of qualitative research. Qualitative and quantitative research should rather be approached as complementary in nature and not in direct conflict with each other. The current authors accept that, from a quantitative point of view, certain limitations apply to qualitative research (such as the lack of repeatability). The benefits, however, far outweigh the costs, given the in-depth and rich knowledge one can obtain through qualitative research.

Due to the nature of the data collection in this qualitative design, two main areas could, however, limit the results of the current study.

Data collection was based on interviews with six participants. The *skills* of the interviewer (in this instance, the main author) could have adverse effects on the participants and interview as a whole. A skilled interviewer will keep to the predetermined questions, be respectful and courteous and offer limited personal comments and advice [30], and probe the participant at suitable times. In essence, a good interviewer needs to be a good listener. Good interviewing is a skill that needs to be refined. As this was the first formal qualitative enquiry undertaken by the current researchers, their lack of experience may have limited an optimal interview protocol.

Qualitative research also relies on the *articulations* of the interviewee. The articulations of the interviewee directly translate into the study's data.

An interviewee who is new to the interview setting may exhibit fear or inhibitions, which negatively influence the fluency of the interview and candidness of participant. The in-depth nature of the interviews will be greatly limited by an inhibited interviewee; this was especially the case with one participant in the current study, who had difficulties articulating his feelings and who was reluctant to expand on his initial answers. Very limited conversation could be extracted from this participant, which adversely affects the volume of data that could be analysed for this participant.

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