

The Loss of a Service Dog Through Retirement: Experiences and Impact on Human Partners

Jennifer Currin-McCulloch¹, Cori Bussolari²,
Wendy Packman³, Lori Kogan⁴, & Phyllis Erdman⁵

¹Colorado State University, School of Social Work, Fort Collins, Colorado, United States

²University of San Francisco, Department of Clinical Psychology, San Francisco, California, United States

³Professor Emerita, Palo Alto University, Department of Psychology, Palo Alto, California, United States

⁴Colorado State University, College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, Department of Clinical Sciences, Fort Collins, Colorado, United States

⁵Washington State University, College of Education, Pullman, Washington, United States

This study describes the experiences of service dog partners (N=22) whose service dog had retired within the previous five years. The participants were service dog partners who participated in a larger quantitative study (N=56) and agreed to a follow up interview. Guided by bereavement and human-animal bond theories and prior research, researchers coded the interviews using directed content analysis to identify prevalent themes. Findings underscore that the retirement of a service dog is poorly understood by others, and often results in disenfranchised grief about this ambiguous loss. The retirement process is difficult and often partners struggled with the need to quickly acquire another service dog and the subsequent impact this had on their ability to grieve. These results suggest that, given the unique nature of service dogs and the relationship between dog and partner, it is important that service dog organizations, mental health counselors and veterinarians are aware of the challenges and losses associated with the retirement of a service dog and offer appropriate tools and support to their clients during this challenging time.

Keywords: service dog partners, retirement, ambiguous loss, continuing bonds

Approximately 25% of adults in the United States live with some form of disability (Bureau, n.d.) and over 80 million of these individuals have a service dog (American Kennel Club, 2022). Service dogs offer a myriad of benefits including social support and an increased sense of independence and well-being (Ng & Fine, 2019; Walther et al., 2017; Winkle et al., 2012). The loss of a service dog through death or retirement, therefore, places the partner in a physically, vocationally, and socially vulnerable position (Herlache-Pretzer et al., 2017; Kogan et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2020a) that often leads to unique physical and psychological stressors (Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). Yet, despite the expanded use of service dogs, there remains a paucity of research about the impact of the loss of these partnerships.

Relationship Between Service Dogs and Their Partners

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Bureau, n.d.) describes service dogs as dogs individually trained to perform specific tasks for a person with a physical, psychiatric, intellectual, sensory, or mental disability (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). This status offers service animals legal access to almost all public places (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). Service animals include guide dogs for the visually or hearing impaired, as well as psychiatric or medical alert animals such as seizure detection dogs. Each service animal receives individualized training to perform complex tasks to support their partner's independence and well-being. For example, a service dog might receive training to alert their partner to a phone call or an emerging medical emergency such as a seizure or insulin response. These dogs can also support their partners in psychiatric crises and interrupt self-injurious behaviors (Rodriguez et al., 2020b; Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). Service dogs also can be trained to retrieve objects, open doors, or pull wheelchairs. Due to the unique support each partner requires, each service dog's training period takes about two years and includes a substantial financial investment by the service dog training organization (Gravrok et al., 2020).

The bond between a service dog and partner is a unique, supportive, and independence-enhancing relationship (Stewart, 2006). Studies have identified numerous ways in which service dogs positively impact people with disabilities, including the ability to foster opportunities for socialization and community participation (Rodriguez et al., 2020a). Service dogs can increase people's locus of control, confidence, and self-concept; provide emotional support and security; contribute to an increased sense of independence and mobility; and can help soften feelings of stigmatization (Fairman & Huebner, 2021; Rintala et al., 2008; Sanders, 2000; Walther et al., 2017; Wiggett-Barnard & Steel, 2008).

Transition into Retirement

Decision-Making Process

While the decision-making process related to retirement may occasionally happen in an acute or traumatic manner, most assistance partners spend significant time pondering when and how to transition their service dog into retirement. In her personal narrative describing her own transitions with three guide dogs, Schneider (2005) portrayed the grueling decision-making process surrounding the "the three good-byes:" the initial decision to say goodbye, the end of the working relationship, and the final goodbye at death. Transitions commonly begin when the dog approaches old age or when the partner notices changes in the dog's ability to carry out physical activities or respond to behavioral requests (Caron-Lormier et al., 2016).

Retirement decision-making processes are often fraught with emotional distress, guilt, and remorse – in addition to the profound grief caused from losing a canine partner with whom they could trust to meet their physical and emotional needs (Ng & Fine, 2019; Schneider, 2005;

Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). Instrumental in the decision-making process is the partner's desire to provide a conducive environment in which their dog can smoothly transition into the role of pet (Ng & Fine, 2019). Once a service partner enters the decision-making process around their dog's retirement, they face multiple options for how and where their dog can retire. Each option comes with logistical and emotional consequences.

Options for retirement include (a) keeping the dog in the home, (b) rehoming the dog to a trusted person (e.g., family member, friend, puppy raiser), or (c) rehoming the dog to a stranger (the least common option). If the need to retire stems from a service dog's progressive illness, partners may also face the challenge of physically caring for an ailing dog, tasks which may not be possible due to their own physical or financial limitations (Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). Even without these additional challenges, partners must still help their service dogs transition into their new role as a pet. Given service dogs' training and mentality, most will continue to try and meet their partner's needs, regardless of their capabilities. This can be especially challenging for all involved when a successor dog enters the home and assumes the retired dog's former role (Miller, 2019).

Service Dog Partners' Grief Response to Ambiguous Loss

Inevitably, through death or retirement, the time will come when a service dog's working role ends. In the case of retirement, there is a major loss as the relationship shifts from service dog to pet dog. Given the overall disenfranchised nature of companion animal loss (Doka, 2008), partners experiencing the retirement of their service dog may also lack the benefit of an understanding and supportive community. Findings from our larger quantitative study found that the death of a service dog can have a profound impact, with partners' grief scores comparable to those reported by pet guardians (Kogan et al., 2021). For those suffering a loss due to retirement, the added ambiguity of this type of loss can exacerbate feelings of disenfranchised grief and decrease the likelihood that they will have an adequate social support system with whom to share their grief. While the service dog community may recognize the meaning of this type of loss, partners may still encounter challenges in talking about the loss with family members, colleagues, and friends (Chur-Hansen, 2010).

The term 'ambiguous loss,' first coined by Pauline Boss (1977), is defined as a situation in which a person does not know if their loved one is alive or dead, present or absent. There are two categories of ambiguous loss: family members who are psychologically absent but remain physically present, and members who are physically absent but remain psychologically present (Boss & Yeats, 2014). Examples of the former may be a parent dealing with a substance use disorder who, although can be literally present at family gatherings, is figuratively absent in terms of their limited ability to reprise the family roles they once assumed (Boss, 2006; Brumett, 2022). In most cases of a retired service dog, there is a loss of relational roles - the dog is still living, but he/she is not there in the same way.

The grief process in ambiguous loss is often forestalled, remaining in a "frozen" state when one can never be certain of what has been lost (Boss, 2006). According to Boss, the paradox inherent in ambiguous loss produces the most stressful, immobilizing form of grief (Boss, 2006). An ambiguous loss challenges a person's existing coping strategies and the bereaved may not be able to participate in rituals that typically surround a death. The lack of traditions, communication, and social support around ambiguous losses are coupled with the inherent perceptual and emotional dissonance created by uncertainty (Brumett, 2022). Because of these conditions, those experiencing ambiguous loss are more likely to develop complicated grief symptoms (Boss, 2006).

In the case of a retired service dog, support is needed to understand the nuances of this kind of loss.

While many factors that impact companion animal grief have been studied, to our knowledge, there is little research that has explored grief in relation to service dogs. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how service dog partners experience the decline and subsequent retirement of their service dog in order to make clinically meaningful suggestions for service dog partners, service dog organizations, and veterinarians.

Method

Study Sample

The research team partnered with Canine Companions (CC) (<https://canine.org/>), a national service dog training organization founded in 1975, to recruit current and former service dog partners via CC's internal emails and newsletters. Interested partners were invited to visit an online Qualtrics study information page to learn about the study. Following informed consent, the participants could choose to complete an anonymous survey (Kogan et al., 2021). At the end of the survey, participants could elect to be contacted for an optional individual interview. Twenty-two individuals volunteered to participate in an individual interview, the sample evenly split between males and females. The 22 interviews are the focus of this manuscript. The research was approved by [redacted name's] Institutional Review Board. Participants received a \$50 gift card for participation in the interview. Funding for these incentives was made possible through a grant from Human Animal Bond in Colorado.

Data Collection

Participants who indicated interest in an individual interview as part of a larger quantitative study (Kogan, et. al., 2021) were contacted by the research team to discover whether their loss was due to their service dog's death or retirement. Those who experienced a retirement loss completed an individual semi-structured interview between October -November 2021. Interviews, conducted by counseling graduate students who received interview training, lasted between 30-90 minutes, and took place by Zoom or telephone. The interviews centered around the events leading up to the service dogs' retirement, the impact of these associated losses, the partners' potential transition to a successor dog, and their grief process. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the research team to verify accuracy of data. The transcribed Microsoft Word documents were uploaded into MAXQDA, a software program that supports the systematic organization of qualitative data such as coding, and the analysis of qualitative data. Of note, MAXQDA supports the organization of qualitative data but does not perform data analysis.

Data Analysis

The first three authors performed the data analysis. They each have had extensive experience as both clinicians and researchers in the fields of human grief and loss as they relate to the death of both humans and animals. We used directed content analysis, a qualitative method that is guided by theory or prior research (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) to analyze participants' responses to the interview. This method aims to validate or extend a theoretical framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and utilizes a more structured, rather than conventional, content analysis (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). We initially read through each transcript and identified key concepts as initial coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Next, formal theories from bereavement and continuing bonds frameworks supported operational definitions for

each coding category, including bereavement and continuing bonds theories (Doka, 2008; Field et al., 2009), as well as prior research on pet loss (Carmack, 2003; Habarth et al., 2017; Orsini, 2005; Packman et al., 2011). Data that could not be coded were identified and analyzed later to determine if they represented a salient theme or subcategory of an existing category.

Participants' responses were first independently coded and then reviewed together by the study's first three authors until consensus was reached. The creation of theoretical and analytic memos captured code definitions, themes, and patterns within the data. The team tracked progress towards code and meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017) and determined that code saturation was achieved at interview nine. The authors reviewed all interviews until they reached meaning saturation (interview 12) in which interview data no longer elucidated nuanced meanings.

The transcribed interviews were uploaded into Relative Insight, a comparative text analysis tool that provides a systematic approach to analysis of qualitative data (Relative Insight Ltd., 2021). Using Relative Insight, we compared the language of the responses between partners whose service dogs had retired and partners whose service dogs had died. This form of natural language processing detects the topics, words, phrases, grammar and emotion more likely to be seen in one set of words compared to another. It is important to point out that Relative Insight does not provide an actual analysis of data; rather, similar to MAXQDA, it is an organizational tool that assists with qualitative analysis.

Results

Liminal State - Complexities of Decision-Making

From the initial days that they meet their service dog at the training facility, partners who receive dogs through Canine Companions receive psychoeducation to prepare them for the inevitable retirement or death of their service dog. They are guided throughout their dog's aging process and instructed in how to talk with veterinarians about their dog's health status. In addition, as the dog ages, Canine Companions helps partners evaluate the service dog's continued ability to carry out their roles, and their physical and cognitive well-being. One partner described this incremental transitional process:

And they go over [retirement] very specifically in team training. They explain, you know, you're going to have this dog for a number of years. And at some point in the future, the dogs are gonna retire. And except for unusual circumstances, for illness or, or death, those instances are pre planned. And so, you have time emotionally, to get your mind around that concept. And it's not like a sudden thing (P01, male).

Partners shared how Canine Companions also initiates dialogue with them about how they would like to retire their dog. Options include the dog remaining in the partner's home transitioning the dog into a companion role, or rehoming the dog to someone else (e.g., family member, their dog's puppy raiser, a friend, or a vetted stranger). The complex decision-making process regarding where the dog would retire was based on numerous factors including available support at home to care for the aging dog's health needs; the existence of a strong attachment between the dog and other people living in the partner's home; and having close friends or their puppy raiser willing to care for their dog until his/her end of life. Another essential facet of the retirement plan includes a discussion of whether the partner would like to initiate the process for a successor dog. Once the partner sets their dog's retirement plan, they share this information with Canine Companions and the official retirement process begins. To denote the official day of retirement, the training

organization provides the partners an official retirement document. Upon the receipt of this document, the transition from working dog to pet dog begins, as does the process of rehoming, if this is the choice of the partner.

As service dogs entered old age, their partners became intimately aware of the magnitude of approaching retirement decisions. Partners began to watch for changes for physical or cognitive declines that signal the approaching end to their dog's working role. The partners who had lost dogs through death and other dogs through retirement shared that when dogs have health crises or life-limiting illnesses, as partners, they have less time to make decisions and often, the only option is for euthanasia. With retirement, partners frequently had time to perseverate on the instrumental and emotional aspects of a pending retirement plan. Those who relied on their dog to interact in society (e.g., shopping, work, volunteering, socializing, etc.), faced a difficult struggle. Their independence and identity, enabled and enhanced by their service dog, became blurred as they began to reframe their dog's role. As the service dogs' health declined, partners became more vulnerable to losing integral facets of their identity and connection to the world. An active partner shared:

So, you kind of worry about that, you know, and the things that he's done with me and the places we work together. I do a lot of volunteer work. And so, I was looking at eliminating that which, you know, wasn't an easy call (P02, male).

In addition to their own identity changes, partners also had to prepare their service dog for the transition from a working role into that of a companion animal. If they are planning on rehoming their dog, partners have the additional emotional and instrumental planning and challenges that surrounds letting their dog physically go to another person. As service dogs transitioned into pets, they also lost their ability to participate in activities that gave their life meaning and joy. Partners reported feeling that since their dog's identities were wrapped up in their working role, when this role is lost, their dogs struggled and appeared sad, perhaps projecting their own emotions onto their dogs. These feelings and observations became even more heightened if a new service dog entered the home.

This period of retirement transition forced partners into a liminal state, characterized by living between two worlds – that of having the dog still alive and working, while also bracing for transition into retired life. This ambiguous emotional space left partners feeling immense grief for what was currently happening and what was going to happen; thus, setting the stage for emotional distress. Compounding the grief associated with these ambiguous losses was the lack of support many partners felt since so few people understand the complexity and magnitude of their unique grief.

To better understand the specific semantics of retirement loss, we used Relative Insight to compare responses between partners whose dogs had died (Bussolari et al., under review) and partners whose dogs had been retired. The partners whose service dogs had retired expressed more anxiety, worry, and grief, suggesting a “stressful, immobilizing form of grief” consistent with ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006).

Waiting for the Shoe to Drop: Partner's Vigilance of Their Dog's Behavioral Decline

Either personally driven, or through the impetus of Canine Companions or their veterinarians, partners faced the ultimate decision about when and how their dog would retire. As shared by one partner, this control and planning offered comfort: “I appreciated being able to have

the choices of what was going on and feeling like I had control rather than kind of being told what to do and dictated on stuff” (P05, female). Yet, the multiple options for retirement and their desire to provide the best possible final days for their dog magnified the partner's decision-making stress.

Commonly, partners shared that the most distressing decision centered on the timing of when to relinquish their dog's working role. As their dog's behaviors started to change, feelings of dread began to arise: “So when I call him to wake up, I don't know if he has, you know, hearing issues, but he doesn't respond right away. And I'm thinking, ‘Oh, boy, you know, is this the day?’” (P03, female). For many, the decision was a long, gradual process with a sequence of grief reactions that led up to the final day of retirement:

I always tell people, I don't know which is worse. Is it completing the application? Is it the phone call when it comes in? Because now you know that you have a finite amount of time with your dog? Or is it the day you hand over the leash the final time and take off the vest? It's all horrible. And it's heartbreaking. And it feels like death (P12, male).

From the timing of the initial thought about retirement to the official day of signing their dog's retirement papers, partners encountered a plethora of losses. Unlike the concrete losses associated with death, retirement brought gradual and ambiguous losses. Most striking about the ambiguity was the fact that their dog was still alive and often still present in the home, yet not there in its service dog role. A partner shared the complexities of their loss:

And yes, I mean, there was an awful lot of loss other than the loss of them. Being able to do things with me and not being able to take him, and you can see in his face that he wants to go on. So, I mean, that's the hardest thing is that, like, I take him for short walks and several long walks, because he still has the drive stuff, but he can't physically do things for me (P05, female).

These nebulous transitions resulted in partners feeling challenged as they attempted to psychologically separate from their dog. With time and multiple transitions between service dogs, the concrete tasks around the retirement plan became easier; however, the grief always appeared. The retirement of each dog brought different types of losses, most commonly based on the ability of each dog to perform tasks to promote their partner's independence and ease in carrying out activities of daily living. Echoing throughout partners' responses was a stronger grief response surrounding the retirement of their first service dog, as well as dogs who had an ability to anticipate and support their partner's unique needs.

Amidst their grief, partners reported finding some meaning in being able to reciprocate the caregiving role for their dogs. Whether it was providing in-home nurturing, or creating a loving rehoming environment, partners found comfort in knowing that their dog would have the highest quality end of life possible. Many verbalized the “promises” that they made to their dogs to keep them safe and comfortable. A partner who retained their service dog and cared for him in his declining health explained:

I was able to give to him the emotional support. Because like when he had the surgery, I mean, I was sitting there. I kept him on a leash at night. And I had him right beside me so that if he was moving around, I could feel him and see if he needed anything. So, I kind of fell into this [caregiving] role for a bit so I didn't have some of those [relationship] lines [that I did when he was in a working dog

role]. And it did make a difference for me when not being able to have him go out and to do things for me (P05, female).

Partners commonly shared how the ability to care for their dog's physical needs provided them an opportunity to repay the love and kindness that their dogs unconditionally shared with them. When partners lacked resources or the physical ability to keep their dogs at home with them, rehoming to puppy raisers appeared to be a viable option. Placement with puppy raisers offered mutual benefit for the dog, the partner, and the raiser as it provided a full circle of healing and options for continuing bonds. A partner who was no longer physically able to care for her dog shared about their continued connection to her retired dog that their puppy raiser was able to offer:

She's been very proactive and kept me involved in [her life] and we started a habit of bringing [my service dog] to visit me about once a month... She came to visit often and we would go for a walk to a restaurant and then there's a park that's nearby and we would let the girls off leash and let them play for a while (P11, female).

When they placed their dog with another person, they had limited control over their retired dog's care. When placing their dogs with a vested stranger, they had concerns about whether those caring for their dog would make the best decisions for their dog's well-being. On most accounts, partners reported having positive rehoming stories to share. However, one partner shared a traumatic experience surrounding their dog's end of life:

I would have let him go way earlier than she did, and I felt like he lost his dignity. Last time I saw him, because I am intuitive, I knew that he pleaded with me to please let him go. And I tried, and I could not get her to do it. So, he hung on for two more months before she finally said it's time. She never let me know until after [he died] so I could not be there with him (P10, male).

This partner shared immense emotional turmoil about this decision and was still grappling with the aftereffects years later.

Integration of Successor Dogs

Another key decision-making element around retirement centers on whether to pursue a successor service dog. Factors that can impact the decision to apply for a successor dog include concerns that new dogs would not be able to meet the partner's needs; they might not be a good personality fit for the partner; or the partner may have limited energy or desire to navigate the dynamics of integrating a new service dog with their retired dog. Due to service dogs' short lifespan and the physical demands of their work, partners frequently had several service dogs over their lifetime. They shared stories of how they integrated successor dogs in their home and frequently made comparisons between their different dogs' skills and personalities. Partners proclaimed that these comparisons often created challenges in bonding with the successor dog.

The notion of having a successor dog brought mixed emotions for many partners, including feelings of hope. For those who had to wait for a new dog, they often felt a sense of anticipation and excitement in having a new companion who could open opportunities for increased independence:

There is a degree of sadness because you've been so close to this dog for, you know, eight or nine years. But for me, at the same time, because I knew I was going to immediately get another dog, there's a sense of anticipation. You know, what's this

new dog going to be like? What's its personality? What are its quirks? What are the specific things that come out in their personality? And so, there's that level of anticipation, that kind of doesn't make the sadness aspect as bad (P01, male).

Many partners held hope for their future yet also worried that the new dog might not be able to live up to their expectations. Of note, not all partners desired to immediately pursue a successor dog. Some partners chose to take time to grieve the losses associated with their service dog's retirement or rehoming prior to seeking a successor dog.

When the time came to transition to a successor service dog, blurred boundaries and identities emerged as partners attempted to integrate a new service dog into the home. If their retired dog has been rehomed or died, partners often grieved and held closely memories of their dog. When their retired service dog still lived in the home, difficulties often emerged in integrating the successor dog with the retired dog. Due to their training, retired service dogs struggled to understand how to let go of their daily tasks and simply provide companionship. Thus, issues arose when the retired dog attempted to carry out their usual tasks while their successor was trying to learn their duties. A partner explained: "Having two dogs is difficult. It's a lot more work. I mean, I take [my successor dog] for a walk, and then [my former service dog] pushes into the door to get his walk" (P03, female). Balancing the needs of two dogs often left partners feeling sad that they could never quite meet the needs of either dog. A partner portrayed this struggle:

So, he goes to the back door because he knows that I'm leaving the home. And he's used to just going every place with me and it's sad for me to tell him that I'll be back soon. But you can go and I just have to keep leaving and not look back at his eyes. So that's very sad. He's my buddy and it's very difficult for me to leave him behind (P11, female).

With support from Canine Companions, fellow service dog partners, or their dog's puppy raiser, partners were able to gather insights into how to transition their retired dog more successfully into a companion role and move their successor dog into its new working role. An example of a smooth integration and win-win for both dogs appears as follows:

It's gotten better because I have another dog that does the actual things for me and helps me get dressed and things like that. And it doesn't put the demand on [my retired dog]. I actually think he's starting to enjoy it because I think he gets this little smirk and it's cute to see that (P03, female).

After partners successfully negotiated the process of integrating a new dog into the home, they described taking a deep breath, hoping that they would have several years to cultivate a bond with their new dog while also sharing love and gratitude for their retired dog.

Partners' Challenges in Accessing Social Support

As partners approached the retirement of their service dog, they reached out to people they trusted to talk through their decisions. Commonly, partners drew on Canine Companions, their family members, friends, and puppy raisers for emotional and practical support as their dogs' health declined. Yet, despite having supportive people in their lives, partners shared feeling alone in their grief and isolated in their decision making. Few partners had strong connections to their peers or someone who they felt truly understood the layers of ambiguous loss they encountered.

Therefore, many partners excluded family members or friends from their decision-making process because they weren't prepared for the possible responses. For example:

The last time I ever took his vest off of him, almost killed me. He was by far my heart [most loved] dog. I did not tell a soul I was [applying for another dog] because I knew people would try to talk me out of it. And I knew I was doing what was best for him. He was slowing down. He didn't really have any health issues. But I knew if I kept pushing him, there's no way [his health decline] wasn't going to start. My mom was living with me at the time and I didn't even tell her until she heard my voicemail. And I had it on speaker and my mom heard CC say we sent the application out to you. My mom was like, 'What are you doing'? I said, 'I'm putting in for my next dog'. And she said, 'But he's not ready' (P12, male).

Unlike humans' transitions into retirement, few rituals existed around service dogs' retirement to offer partners the ability to process their grief. This only seemed to exacerbate the partners' sense of isolation and created grief that frequently felt disenfranchised. A partner described their initial days after retiring their dog:

I felt extraordinarily lonely. Not only lonely, but alone. I told my caregiver that I was going to eat lunch out. And then I was meeting my friend who is a puppy raiser. She said, 'Don't go out to eat. Let me make you something here'. And I said, 'No, no. Really, I need to get out of the house. I don't think sitting here will be good for me'. And she said, 'If that's what you want, okay'. I went down to [a fast-food restaurant] by myself, ordered my food, got to the table and looked down to talk to [my retired dog] under the table and realized he's not there. And I lost it in the middle of [a fast-food restaurant]. It couldn't stop crying for 20 minutes (P12, male).

This quote highlights the social constraints partners encountered in coping with their retirement-associated losses. Even though many had support, they didn't feel that others could fully grasp their grief.

Discussion

This is one of the few qualitative research studies to address the experiences of service dog partners following the retirement of their dog (Ng & Fine, 2019; Schneider, 2005; Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). This study's results illuminate the ambiguous losses that partners have to navigate over the course of the anticipated and actual retirement of their service dog. This most prominently occurs when a new service dog is introduced and the older service dog is either still in the house (but not working) or has been rehomed. It seems clear from our interviews that the retirement of a service animal, while not a physical death, can be viewed as the death of their relationship, and as such, is fraught with transitional challenges and intense grief. Numerous studies have highlighted the strong attachments we have with our companion animals (Kurdek, 2008, 2009; Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011). This has been evidenced historically through humans' tendency to anthropomorphize their animals (Mithen, 1996). The current study also portrays the close connections human partners have with their service animals. In a companion qualitative study (Bussolari et al., 2021), we found that the death of a service dog has profound impacts on partners. The grief scores of partners whose service dog had died were comparable to previous companion animal loss studies (Kogan et al., 2021) and slightly higher than the grief scores for those whose

dog had been retired. Yet, consistent with ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2006), partners whose dog had retired expressed higher levels of on-going worry than partners whose dogs had died. The retirement of a service dog places individuals at increased risk for additionally experiencing disenfranchised grief – a loss that involves limited social recognition and a lack of ritualized support (Doka, 1999).

Partners whose service dogs had retired also experienced high levels of social constraints (Kogan, et al., 2021), indicating that they did not feel that they were able to share their experiences with their support system. Retirement is not a well-understood type of loss – partners encounter few people who fully understand the complexity of this ambiguous loss. Furthermore, when considering that service dog partners typically retire several dogs, the magnitude of this type of loss has the potential to grow exponentially over their lifetime (Wenthold & Savage, 2007; Yamamoto & Hart, 2019). Retirement transitions occur in rapid succession and leave service dog partners limited time to process the magnitude of their loss. Having to build a bond with and train a new service dog while a retired service dog is still alive is a source of distress and profoundly difficult to navigate.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

While many factors that impact companion animal grief have been studied, there is little research that has explored grief in relation to service dogs. Importantly, this is one of the only studies to assess the lived experiences of service dog partners' surrounding the retirement of their dog. Findings from this study provide practical clinical implications for service dog organizations to provide as examples, anticipatory grief psychoeducation, specific suggestions regarding the transitional process in getting a successor dog, and the disenfranchised nature of their ambiguous loss. A few limitations also bear mentioning. The study was conducted during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic when access to veterinary care, successor dogs, and psychosocial support services were limited; thus, these reported experiences may not reflect partners' experiences outside this moment in time. Understanding the retrospective nature of data collection, participants' memories of how events occurred may be skewed. From the sample of individuals who participated in the parent quantitative survey, those experiencing emotional distress may have been less likely to participate in the follow-up interview. The sample comes from one service dog organization in the United States; thus, the findings might not be generalizable to other organizations or in other countries. Lastly, the participants in this study specifically included mobility or hearing impairments only. Future research is needed to explore the experiences of service dog partners who receive dogs from other training organizations and for those who receive a service dog for other disabilities (visual, psychiatric, etc.). Based on findings from secondary analysis utilizing Relative Insights that analyzes participants' chosen phrasing, additional studies may want to investigate the role of partners' "anxiety" surrounding pivotal moments during their service dog's retirement transitions.

Conclusions and Implications

Novel insights about service dog partners' ambiguous and disenfranchised losses experienced throughout the transition to retirement lead to several implications for counselors, veterinarians, and service dog training organizations. Given partners' nuanced experiences, having access to peers who have been through the retirement process may promote opportunities to talk through their decisions and receive validation of their grief responses. Some options partners suggested were one-on-one peer mentors and having virtual monthly retirement transition support

group meetings. Partners frequently felt that their dog's retirement snuck up on them emotionally and as such, requested having a concrete transitional plan that would guide them through steps to take each month. They shared that having ways to help the transition become more realistic would improve their grief response and potentially promote a smoother process for the dogs to relinquish their roles, especially for partners who bring a successor into the home. There may also be activities that partners could explore with their retired dogs that are less physically taxing such as nose work (i.e., the scent training of dogs is designed to tap into their sense of smell to explore the focus and fun activity of scent detection") or volunteering at schools where children can read to the dog.

Many partners shared the fact that there are few socially sanctioned rituals around key transitions in a service dog's retirement. Incorporating a ceremony at the time of retirement with close friends and families, their puppy raiser, or members of their training organization may provide a socially sanctioned opportunity to process and document the loss. Therapy could benefit partners throughout their transitional service dog retirement journey to help them create meaning through rituals/memorials and engage in comforting continuing bonds expressions (Neimeyer et al., 2006; Packman et al., 2011). Counselors can also help teach clients to directly communicate their needs to their support system and work through feelings of isolation. Overall, a team approach can be helpful in mitigating partners' negative feelings related to the transition. In summary, service dog partners who experience the retirement of their service dog undergo a unique, seldomly understood series of losses that must be better recognized, validated, and supported.

References

- American Kennel Club (2022). *Service dogs 101: Everything you need to know*.
<https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/service-dog-training-101/>
- Boss, P. (1977). A clarification of the concept of psychological father presence in families experiencing ambiguity of boundary. *Journal of Marriage & the Family* 39(1), 141–151.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/351070>
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience*. Norton.
- Boss, P., & Yeats, J. (2014) Ambiguous loss: A complicated type of grief when loved ones disappear. *Bereavement Care*, 33(2), 63-69.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02682621.2014.933573>
- Brumett, A. (2022) *When a pet goes missing: An exploratory study on ambiguous pet loss* [Doctoral dissertation, Palo Alto University].
- Bureau, U. C. (n. d.). *Americans with disabilities: 2014*. The United States Census Bureau.
<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/p70-152.html>
- Bussolari, C., Currin-McCulloch, J., Packman, W., Kogan, LR, & Erdman, P. (under review). The loss of a service dog through death: Experiences of partners. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*.
- Carmack, B. J. (2003). *Grieving the death of a pet*. Augsburg Books.
- Caron-Lormier, G., England, G. C., Green, M. J., & Asher, L. (2016). Using the incidence and impact of health conditions in guide dogs to investigate healthy ageing in working dogs. *The Veterinary Journal*, 207, 124-130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tvjl.2015.10.046>
- Chur-Hansen, A. (2010). Grief and bereavement issues and the loss of a companion animal: People living with a companion animal, owners of livestock, and animal support workers. *Clinical Psychologist*, 14(1), 14-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13284201003662800>
- Doka, K.J. (1999). Disenfranchised grief. *Bereavement Care*, 18(3), 37-39.

- Doka, K. J. (2008). Disenfranchised grief in historical and cultural perspective. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, & W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention* (pp. 223–240). American Psychological Association.
- Fairman, S. K., & Huebner, R. A. (2021). Service dogs: A compensatory resource to improve function. *Occupational Therapy Health Care, 12*(2), 41-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/j003v13n02_03
- Field, N. P., Orsini, L., Gavish, R., & Packman, W. (2009). Role of attachment in response to pet loss. *Death Studies, 33*, 332–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180802705783>
- Gravrok, J., Howell, T., Bendrups, D., & Bennett, P. (2020). Thriving through relationships: Assistance dogs' and companion dogs' perceived ability to contribute to thriving in individuals with and without a disability. *Disability and Rehabilitation: Assistive Technology, 15*(1), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17483107.2018.1513574>
- Habarth, J., Bussolari, C., Gomez, R., Carmack, B. J., Ronen, R., Field, N. P., & Packman, W. (2017). Continuing bonds and psychosocial functioning in a recently bereaved pet loss sample. *Anthrozoös, 30*(4), 651-670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2017.1370242>
- Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Marconi, V. C. (2017). Code saturation versus meaning saturation: How many interviews are enough? *Qualitative Health Research, 27*(4), 591-608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344>
- Herlache-Pretzer, E., Winkle, M. Y., Csatari, R., Kolanowski, A., Londry, A., & Dawson, R. (2017). The impact of service dogs on engagement in occupation among females with mobility impairments: A qualitative descriptive study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 14*(6), E649. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14060649>
- Hickey, G., & Kipping, C. (1996). A multi-stage approach to the coding of data from open-ended questions. *Nurse Researcher, 4*(1), 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.4.1.81.s9>
- Hsieh, H.F. & Shannon, S.E. (2005). Three approaches to content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research 15*(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Kogan, L., Packman, W., Currin-McCulloch, J., Bussolari, C., & Erdman, P. (2021). The loss of a service dog through death or retirement: Experiences and impact on partners. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F10541373211054168>
- Kurdek, L. A. (2008). Pet dogs as attachment figures. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 25*, 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0265407507087958>
- Kurdek, L. A. (2009). Pet dogs as attachment figures for adult owners. *Journal of Family Psychology, 23*, 409-446. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0014979>
- Kwong, M. J., & Bartholomew, K. (2011). “Not just a dog”: An attachment perspective on relationships with assistance dogs. *Attachment and Human Development, 13*, 421-436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2011.584410>
- Miller, C. A. (2019). Supporting bereaved clients after the death of an assistance dog. In L. Kogan, & P. Erdman (Eds.), *Pet loss, grief, and therapeutic interventions: Practitioners navigating the human- animal bond*. Routledge.
- Mithen, S. (1996). *The prehistory of the mind: The cognitive origins of art, religion and science*. Thames & Hudson.
- Neimeyer, R., Baldwin, S., & Gillies, J. (2006). Continuing bonds and reconstructing meaning: Mitigating complications in bereavement. *Death Studies, 30*, 715–738. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180600848322>.

- Ng, Z., & Fine, A. (2019). Paving the path toward retirement for assistance animals: Transitioning lives. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 6, 39. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2019.00039>
- Orsini, L. M. (2005). *Attachment styles and pet bereavement discussed in the context of attachment theory*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pacific Graduate School of Psychology]. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/0ecf941d302cdac77fa32bd511df58c2/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Packman, W., Field, N. P., Carmack, B. J., & Ronen, R. (2011). Continuing bonds and psychosocial adjustment in pet loss. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 16(4), 341-357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2011.572046>
- Potter, W. J., & Levine-Donnerstein, D. (1999). Rethinking validity and reliability in content analysis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 27(3), 258-284. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00909889909365539>
- Relative Insight Ltd. (2021). *Text analysis software*.
- Rintala, D. H., Matamoros, R., & Seitz, L. L. (2008). Effects of assistance dogs on persons with mobility or hearing impairments: A pilot study. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 45(4), 489-503. <https://doi.org/10.1682/jrrd.2007.06.0094>
- Rodriguez, K. E., Bibbo, J., & O'Haire, M. E. (2020a). The effects of service dogs on psychosocial health and wellbeing for individuals with physical disabilities or chronic conditions. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 42(10), 1350-1358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1524520>
- Rodriguez, K. E., LaFollette, M. R., Hediger, K., Ogata, N., & O'Haire, M. E. (2020b). Defining the PTSD service dog intervention: Perceived importance, usage, and symptom specificity of psychiatric service dogs for military veterans. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1638. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01638>
- Sanders, C. R. (2000). The impact of guide dogs on the identity of people with visual impairments. *Anthrozoös*, 13(3), 131-139. <https://doi.org/10.2752/089279300786999815>
- Schneider, K. S. (2005). Practice report: The winding valley of grief: When a dog guide retires or dies. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 99(6), 368-370. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ718713.pdf>
- Stewart, D. (2006). *Investigating the relationship between assistance dogs and their owners with physical disabilities: Complex affection or simple attachment?* [Thesis, Simon Fraser University]. <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/2305>
- U.S. Department of Justice (2021). *ADA 2010 revised requirements: Service animals*. U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division Disability Rights Section. https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm
- Walther, S., Yamamoto, M., Thigpen, A. P., Garcia, A., Willits, N. H., & Hart, L. A. (2017). Assistance dogs: Historic patterns and roles of dogs placed by ADI or IGDF accredited facilities and by non-accredited US facilities. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 4, 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2017.00001>
- Wenthold, N., & Savage, T. A. (2007). Ethical issues with service animals. *Topics in Stroke Rehabilitation*, 14(2), 68-74. <https://doi.org/10.1310/tsr1402-68>
- Wiggett-Barnard, C., & Steel, H. (2008). The experience of owning a guide dog. *Disability and Rehabilitation: An International, Multidisciplinary Journal*, 30(14), 1014-1026. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638280701466517>

- Winkle, M., Crowe, T. K., & Hendrix, I. (2012). Service dogs and people with physical disabilities partnerships: A systematic review. *Occupational Therapy International*, 19(1), 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oti.323>.
- Yamamoto, M., & Hart, L. A. (2019). Separation from assistance dogs. In L. Kogan, & P. Erdman (Eds.), *Pet loss, grief, and therapeutic interventions: Practitioners navigating the human-animal bond*. (pp. 108–208). Routledge.