

## **Best in Show: Public Perceptions of Different Dog Breeds as Service Dogs**

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Recent research has shed light on the amount of discrimination faced by those who require service dogs (Mills, 2017). While most of the research thus far on discrimination against those who use service dogs has pertained to the appearance of the disabled individual, very little has assessed the appearance of the dog in the amount of discrimination an individual faces. The current study aimed to examine the ways in which the breed of dog impacts the way they are viewed as Service Animals. Participants each looked at one picture of a dog, either a Pomeranian, a Pit Bull type dog, or a Labrador Retriever. They then answered a series of five questions about the animals' legitimacy as a Service Animal. Pomeranians were rated significantly lower on perceived legitimacy than both Labrador Retrievers and Pit Bull type dogs. Additionally, participants rated themselves as the least comfortable around Pit Bull type dogs, regardless of their perceived legitimacy. These findings continue to shed light on the ways that individuals with service dogs are perceived and contributes to the larger body of research surrounding those who are discriminated against for their disability.

*Keywords:* Service Dogs, Animal-Assisted Intervention, Human-animal Interaction, Breed Discrimination

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When the Seeing Eye first opened its doors in 1929, an entire world opened up to blind individuals. More perceptive and interactive than a cane, and less dependent than another person, Seeing Eye Dogs were revolutionary (The Seeing Eye, n.d.). The country was quickly enamored with these incredible dogs, and guide dogs became the first Service Animal to have legal protections. The expansion of the definition of service dogs to include more than just those leading the blind occurred in 1990 with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; Access Press Staff, 2019).

Then and now, service dogs provide invaluable assistance to the disabled people who work alongside them. At the least, service dogs serve as a defining piece of medical equipment, and at best, they are loved and cared for as companions. Some research also demonstrates social benefits to owning a service dog. For instance, wheelchair users who had a service dog with them were more likely to be smiled at as well as become engaged in conversation with a member of the public than their counterparts without dogs (Eddy et al., 1988). Wheelchair users also report more social greetings from both adults and children while on shopping trips and outings with their service dog, leading many to increase their outings, in general, when the dog is present (Hart et al., 1987). Beyond exclusively wheelchair users, a majority of disabled service dog handlers report more people talking to and approaching them in public (Fairman & Huebner, 2001; Lane et al., 1998), and many even report making new friends since acquiring the service dog (Lane et al., 1998).

Despite the many benefits of owning service dogs, the use of Service Animals in public has evoked controversy. Unfortunately, as legitimate service dogs have become more prevalent, so too have *fake* service dogs and other illegitimate assistance animals. Awareness of this issue may also be exacerbated by the prevalence of dubious online services offering to provide credentials for Service Animals. Some websites even claim they can provide fast, convenient, and relatively inexpensive certifications to owners who feel as though their pets should be emotional support animals (ESA). Though the evidence is in favor of animals being an integral aspect of mental health for many (Barker & Wolen, 2008; Gilbey & Tani, 2020; Gravrok et al., 2020; McConnell et al., 2011, 2019; O’Haire, 2010) with some even being used in court proceedings as a way to assist witnesses having trouble testifying due to emotional distress (Dellinger, 2008), advertisements promising quick credentials may create confusion and skepticism about the ESA designation. Similarly, some websites offer inexpensive service dog vests without requiring any evidence of the dog’s status as a Service Animal. Currently, no legal body stands to limit the sale of these items, though some states seem to be trying to change these laws (Campbell, 2016; Ollove, 2017, p. 19). Services such as these can pose a danger to the public in the hands of someone who doesn’t care about their true purpose. At a time in history where pets are sometimes seen as much a part of the family as a child (Schaffer, 2009), many seem to feel justified in bringing their pet wherever they go, regardless of the consequences to those around them.

Beyond the actual use of fake Service Animals, public perceptions of Service Animals may also be affected by a lack of knowledge regarding what constitutes a legitimate Service Animal. Though people may understand that there are certain dogs and other animals that are allowed in stores or restaurants, few truly understand the differences between those animals and their own pet, with most not being clear on the difference between the different kinds of Assistance Animals (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). Service Animals are the only kind of assistance animal that is allowed in public, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a Service Animal as any dog (or, in some cases, mini-horse) who is trained to perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability (Brennan, 2014). Conversely, an Emotional Support Animal can be any

species and requires no training at all. ESAs are exclusively allowed in housing, and can't be turned away by a landlord who disallows pets (Brennan, 2014).

In addition to the misunderstandings surrounding what a Service Animal can be, there is a consistent lack of information provided to business owners around what one is allowed to ask of a person with a service dog to ensure its legitimacy (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). As many business owners are unaware of the differences between these animals, they may give in to people parading fake Service Animals and therapy dogs into their establishments for fear of a lawsuit. On the other hand, those who decide to question the person involved often misunderstand the legal parameters of these questions. This misinformation around what can and can't be asked of service dog handlers can lead to some prying, invasive, and often misguided questioning of those who do have legitimate Service Animals (Mills, 2017).

A combination of misinformation about what service dogs are (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017), along with a newfound understanding by the public that fake service dogs are a real and seemingly ubiquitous risk, may contribute to the discrimination faced by many people who have service dogs (Mills, 2017). One study of service dog handlers found that nearly 70% of people with service dogs say they've experienced discrimination because of their dog, and almost half said they had neglected to take their dog out in public with them for fear of discrimination (Mills, 2017). Though the majority of people appear to believe that most service dogs are legitimate (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017), it clear the loud minority is making a point to have their voices heard.

Not only do fake service dogs hurt the reputation of the individuals with service dogs, they can also cause very real physical damage. As anyone in today's world can put a "Service Dog" vest on their dog, there's no assumption that the dog in question is mild-mannered enough to be in public. In one survey of graduates from Canine Companions for Independence, a service dog organization based in California, almost 80% of people said that they had encountered a fake or out of control service dog since partnering with their dog (Tilbury, 2018). The stories of legitimate service dogs being bothered or even attacked by fake service dogs are countless, and these encounters can mean years of rehabilitation or even early retirement for the injured dog who can no longer help its person in the world.

While there is evidence to show clear discrimination surrounding the use of service dogs in general, and though there is some evidence for which individuals face the most (i.e., young, female, those with invisible disabilities; Mills, 2017), there's little to no evidence surrounding the appearance of the dog and its impact on the discrimination its handler faces. Although someone might have no issues seeing a German Shepherd leading around a visually impaired individual, would they be similarly unperturbed to see a Pomeranian trotting by the side of young woman in a shopping mall? What if it was a Rottweiler, a Pit Bull type dog, or a Bernese Mountain Dog? According to the ADA, any dog can be a service dog, no matter the size or perceived intelligence, but what would the public's response be to seeing these different breeds in the role of service dog?

There is some evidence that people have clear biases towards certain dogs based on how they look. In a study of the perceptions of dogs with Floppy Ears vs. Pointy Ears, floppy eared dogs were perceived to be less extraverted, more agreeable, and less neurotic than their pointy eared friends. In a similar study of perception of dogs with Black Coats vs. Yellow Coats, dogs with yellow coats were seen as more conscientious, more agreeable, and less neurotic than their black coated peers (Fratkin & Baker, 2013). Though this research may have little bearing on a dog's ability to be a service dog, it makes a clear point that people do judge a dog simply based on

the way that it looks. All this begs the question, do certain dog breeds elicit more negative attention than others when they're acting as service dogs?

The present study aims to assess which dog breeds may be more likely to elicit a negative response from the public when seen in the role of a service dog. Participants were shown images of three breed or breed types, Labrador Retriever, Pomeranian, and Pit Bull type dog, and asked to answer questions related to perceived legitimacy and rights of the animal. We hypothesized that Labradors would be the most likely to be thought of as legitimate, given their prevalence in the world and understanding of them by the public as a "smart" dog. Additionally, we hypothesized that Pomeranians would be viewed as the least legitimate, as many believe smaller dogs to be less intelligent or worthy of training overall (Black, 2010).

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

A total of 149 (27 male, 118 female, 3 non-binary, 1 undisclosed) undergraduate students from SUNY New Paltz participated in the study for course credit. Ages ranged from 18-36 ( $M = 20.64$ ,  $SD = 2.84$ ). One participant reported currently using a service dog, eleven reported knowing someone who used a service dog, the majority of those being friends ( $n = 9$ ), followed by one with a family member who uses a service dog, and one with an acquaintance who did.

#### **Materials and Procedure**

The study protocol received Human Research Ethics Board approval. Participants completed an online Qualtrics survey, which was disseminated to the university's psychology subject pool via Sona Systems Software.

After consenting to participate, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, which differed based on the images that were displayed; participants saw either a Labrador Retriever, a Pomeranian, or a Pit Bull type dog. In order to maintain consistency between the images in terms of background and dogs' positioning, all three dogs in the pictures were standing alone in a field without any collars or humans present. Accompanying the images was a vignette reading, "Imagine that you are shopping in a clothing store when you suddenly see the dog pictured below walking by the side of a person. When you entered the clothing store, however, you noticed a sign that strictly forbade pets from entering. This dog has a neon vest that says, 'SERVICE DOG -- DO NOT PET --' on it."

Participants then answered a series of questions assessing their attitudes toward the service dog in the image. These questions were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) and the five questions were as follows:

1. I wouldn't mind if this dog was in the store. (comfort level)
2. I feel that this dog has a right to be in the store. (rights)
3. I think that this is a legitimate service dog. (legitimacy)
4. I think the store manager should be told about this dog being in the store. (punishment by authority)
5. I think someone should confront the person about their dog being in the store. (punishment by peer)

We created this set of items to tap different aspects of individuals' attitudes toward service dogs in this specific public setting. There are several different components to these attitudes, which we believed were important to examine independently as well as in relation to each other. The first statement, "comfort level," aimed to assess the individual's overall comfort level with the animal being in the store with them. The second statement, "rights," aimed to assess participants' beliefs about the rights of different service dogs. This statement was added based on the fact that many

people seem to have misguided understandings of what the rights of service dogs actually are (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). The third statement, “legitimacy,” is intended to get at the core of our research question: how breed impacts perceived legitimacy of the service dog. Finally, the fourth and fifth statements, “punishment by authority” and “punishment by peer,” were intended to assess the extent to which participants viewed what the individual with a service dog was doing as a punishable act (and that someone should, in fact, punish them for it).

### Results

Researchers ran a one-way between-subjects MANOVA to assess the effect of breed on attitudes toward service dogs in public. Using Wilks’ Lambda, we observed a significant effect of breed on attitudes toward the service dogs,  $\Lambda = .785$ ,  $F(10, 284) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . Univariate analyses revealed an effect of breed on comfort level,  $F(2, 146) = 3.55$ ,  $p = .031$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .046$ ; and perceived legitimacy,  $F(2, 146) = 9.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .110$ . Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc analyses revealed a lower comfort level for Pit Bull type dogs ( $M = 6.45$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) compared to Labrador Retrievers ( $M = 6.88$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ),  $p = .026$ ,  $d = .49$ . However, there was no difference in comfort level between Pit Bull type dogs and Pomeranians ( $M = 6.66$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ),  $p = .583$ . In line with our predictions regarding perceived legitimacy, Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc analyses revealed that Pomeranians ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) were perceived as less legitimate than both Labrador Retriever ( $M = 6.38$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ),  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .70$ ; and Pit Bull type dogs ( $M = 6.37$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .67$ . Univariate analyses did not reveal significant effects of breed on rights ( $p = .82$ ), punishment by authority ( $p = .90$ ), or punishment by peer ( $p = .88$ ).

We also ran a between-subjects MANOVA to assess the effect of gender on attitudes toward the service dogs. Using Wilks’ Lambda, we observed a significant effect of gender on attitudes toward the service dogs,  $\Lambda = .869$ ,  $F(5, 139) = 4.17$ ,  $p = .001$ . Univariate analyses revealed a significant effect of gender on the rights ascribed to the service dog, with men attributing greater rights ( $M = 6.56$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) than women ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $F(1, 143) = 15.68$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .099$ . This effect of gender on rights, however, did not interact with breed type ( $p = .644$ ). We did not observe significant univariate effects of gender on comfort level ( $p = .076$ ), legitimacy ( $p = .185$ ), punishment by authority ( $p = .663$ ), or punishment by peer ( $p = .796$ ). See Table 1 for means and confidence intervals for each of the items, and Table 2 for correlations between each of the items.

**Table 1**

*Means and confidence intervals of responses given by participants*

| Question   | Labrador Retriever | Pit Bull Type Dog | Pomeranian        |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>I wouldn't mind if this dog was in the store</i>                                  | 6.88 [6.74, 7.02]  | 6.45 [6.12, 6.78] | 6.66 [6.47, 6.85] |
| <i>I feel that this dog has a right to be in the store</i>                           | 6.46 [6.16, 6.76]  | 6.45 [6.13, 6.77] | 6.34 [6.06, 6.62] |
| <i>I think that this is a legitimate service dog</i>                                 | 6.38 [6.11, 6.65]  | 6.37 [6.06, 6.68] | 5.46 [5.01, 5.91] |
| <i>I think the store manager should be told about this dog being in the store</i>    | 3.38 [2.88, 3.88]  | 3.31 [2.83, 3.78] | 3.22 [2.74, 3.70] |
| <i>I think someone should confront the person about their dog being in the store</i> | 1.84 [1.53, 2.15]  | 1.78 [1.49, 2.06] | 1.88 [1.58, 2.18] |

**Table 2**

*Correlation table depicting all questions assessing attitudes toward the service dogs*

| Question  | 1       | 2       | 3       | 4      |
|---|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| <i>1. I wouldn't mind if this dog was in the store</i>                                  | -       |         |         |        |
| <i>2. I feel that this dog has a right to be in the store</i>                           | 0.63**  | -       |         |        |
| <i>3. I think that this is a legitimate service dog</i>                                 | 0.38**  | 0.51**  | -       |        |
| <i>4. I think the store manager should be told about this dog being in the store</i>    | -0.27** | -0.31** | -0.32** | -      |
| <i>5. I think someone should confront the person about their dog being in the store</i> | -0.32** | -0.51** | -0.38** | 0.41** |

\*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine how people perceive service dogs based on their appearance and breed. Previous research has found that there are distinctions in the personalities attributed to dogs based on their appearance (Fratkin & Baker, 2013). Research also suggests that owning a service dog can increase the amount of discrimination that individuals with disabilities experience (Mills, 2017). We therefore hypothesized that different breeds of service dogs may be perceived differently by the public, and further, some breeds may experience more discrimination than others when out with their person. Our hypothesis that Pomeranians were the least likely to be thought of as legitimate service dogs when compared to both Labrador Retrievers and Pit Bull type dogs, was supported. This finding may in part be due to the misunderstandings surrounding service dogs in general (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017), as well as a possible misconception of the intelligence of smaller breeds of dogs. Though Pomeranians often have success as medical alert dogs (Phillips, 2017), their deviation from what is considered “standard” in the service dog world may lead many to exhibit skepticism towards their legitimacy.

Interestingly, this same deviation from standard did not seem to apply to Pit Bull type dogs, who scored no differently from Labrador Retrievers on the question of legitimacy. Perhaps more notable than the question of legitimacy for Pit Bull type dogs, was that of “comfort level” with these dogs being in the store. Whereas participants seemed not to doubt that Pit Bulls were legitimate service dogs, they did have the most concerns around having those dogs in the store with them. This decrease in “comfort level” for Pit Bull type dogs is striking, especially given that the Pomeranian (who’s legitimacy was most likely to be doubted) did not elicit a similar response to this same question.

This difference in comfort level could in part be due to the perceived aggression of Pit Bull type dogs by the public, which largely results in breed bans and mass culling’s of the breed around the world (Hoffman et al., 2014). Despite these beliefs of increased aggression or danger of Pit Bull type dogs being largely unfounded, a general fear around the breed by an uninformed public persists (Hopper, 2016). Perhaps, in the case of this study, any bias against the intelligence of smaller dogs was more pervasive in relation to the question of legitimacy of a dog as a Service

Animal. However, when participants were asked about their comfort being near the dog, they oriented more towards their general fear or anxiety towards Pit Bull type dogs. Future research could explore the perceived intelligence of different dog breeds, and perhaps how those perceptions shape people's attitudes towards those dogs.

While we believe that these findings provide support for the idea that certain dog breeds are perceived as less legitimate than others as service dogs, some limitations of the study should be addressed. First, our sample was limited in that it relied solely upon college students. Though we have no specific reason to believe that a student sample is unique regarding views of service animals, it is possible that other populations could differ in these attitudes. Additionally, this study was limited in terms of the types of dogs that were presented to participants, with only three types represented. There may be other meaningful distinctions between dog types and breeds in terms of their perceptions as service dogs beyond those explored in the current study.

Future research could do more to explore how different breeds experience discrimination, or perhaps look at the discriminatory experiences of individuals with Service Animals in relation to the breed of their dog. Similarly, future research could attempt to discern the best way to decrease discrimination towards individuals with service dogs based on appearance alone. It is important that individuals looking to acquire or train Service Animals know the factors that may put them at risk of increased discrimination, including their choice of dog to work with. Further, better educating the public regarding the different jobs that service dogs can have would likely minimize some of the discriminatory factors disabled individuals face.

Ultimately, the thing that will lead to the most lasting decrease in discrimination towards service dog handlers is an increase in regulation and control of the issue of fake service dogs. Whereas there was a time when people seemed to revere and be mesmerized by these incredibly intelligent dogs, the threat of fake service dogs has made many wary of the real ones. Though there will always be those who doubt dogs' abilities as service dogs, decreasing the threat of fake service dogs will, hopefully, decrease the anger that many seem to feel towards those with invisible disabilities and dogs that don't conform to what they believe a service dog is "supposed to" look like.

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