

Service dogs and their impact on psychological well-being and anxiety

Sophie C. Finneron B.A., Zack W. Hower, Baine B. Craft, PhD, Jenny Lee Vaydich, PhD

Seattle Pacific University

Abstract

- The Americans with Disability Act was passed in 1990, which legalized the use of service dogs. Since then, there has been a growing demand for one to obtain a service dog for their disability. Though the popularity of owning a service dog has increased, there is limited research that supports the notion that psychological well-being improves and anxiety decreases as a result of having a service dog.

Background

- Service dogs are task-trained animals that are specifically trained to assist their disabled handler.
- What validates a service dog is (1) the handler must have a disability (2) the service dog must be task-trained.

Hypotheses:

- Psychological well-being will change as a result of having a service dog.
- A service dog will moderate the relationship between attachment and psychological well-being.
- Anxiety changes as a result of having a service dog.

Previous Research Findings:

- A literature review on the effects of service dogs found that positive outcomes included significant effects on psychological well-being, emotional functioning, self-esteem, and vitality (Rodriguez et al., 2020).
- People with disabilities often spend more time with their service dog than with other people and they reap substantial functional and psychological benefits from service dogs (Sachs-Ericsson, 2002).

Study Framework

Operationalizing Psychological Well-being:

- “Psychological well-being can be defined as the presence of positive feelings (e.g., good self-esteem) or the absence of negative feelings (e.g., symptoms of depression or anxiety)” (Stoll and Pollastri, 2021).

Attachment Theory

- Attachment is defined as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1969).

Proposed Study

Who:

- Disabled individuals between the ages of 18–32.
- Aiming for around 300 participants.
- Recruit individuals from both local and nationally recognized service dog organizations.



Figure 1. Recruitment Flyer

Method:

- Qualtrics Survey

Materials:

- Demographic questions.
- Monash Dog Owner Relationship Scale (Calvo et al., 2016; $\alpha = .60-.85$).
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (Dhira et al., 2021; $\alpha = .90$).
- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007; $\alpha = .91$).

Data Analysis

Simple Linear Regression

- Corresponding hypotheses:
- Psychological well-being will change as a result of having a service dog.
- Anxiety changes as a result of having a service dog.

Moderation Model

- Corresponding hypothesis:
- A service dog will moderate the relationship between attachment and psychological well-being.

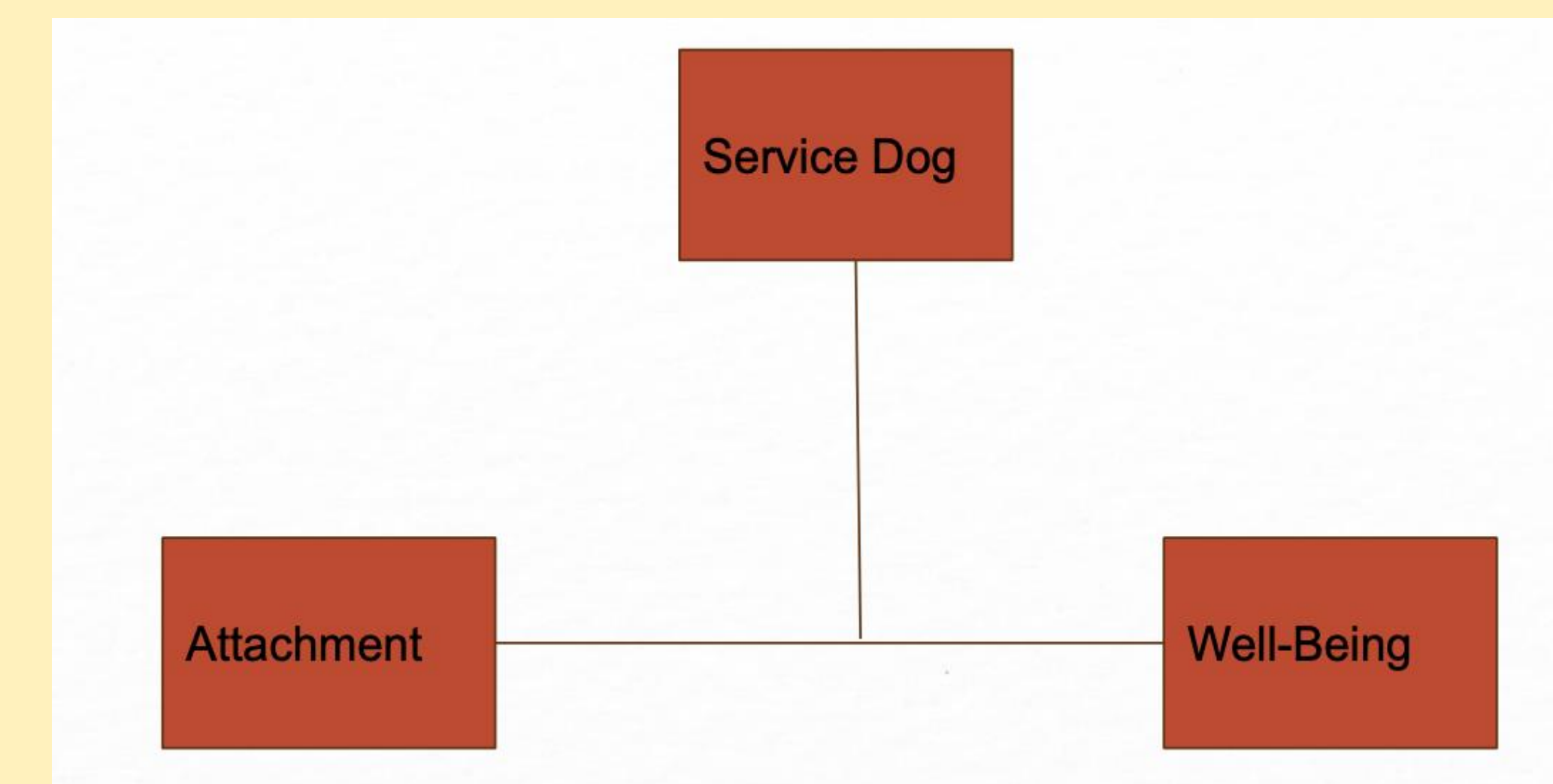


Figure 2. Moderation model showing potential relationship.

Discussion

- If we were to see an increase in psychological well-being, this would mean that service dogs do have a great impact on their handlers.
- We expect to see a decrease in anxiety; this could help alleviate negative feelings experienced by handlers.

References

