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Service Dog Work and Tasks: A Cue-Based Analysis

by Bradley W. Morris, MA

Work vs. tasks

The crucial idea of this article is that the basis for separating service dog work and tasks is the thing the dog recognizes and responds to—the "cue".

In both service dog work and tasks, the dog must be trained to recognize and respond to cues. When the trained recognition and response mitigates an individual's disability, that pair of actions is a service dog "service"—a piece of service dog work or a task.

If the cue comes from the handler and is intentional, like a voice or hand command, the dog is completing a task when recognizing and responding to it. If the cue is not an intentional command from the handler, the dog's recognition and response would be service dog work.

Background and reasons for analysis

This is a simplification of the ideas in my earlier article, "[Toward Clarity and Utility in Work vs. Tasks Distinctions](#)". In that article, I described service dog work as "passively available" and tasks as "actively requested". I also gave a host of examples to show why this kind of distinction between service dog work and tasks is desirable.

Whether an assistance behavior is work or a task currently makes no legal difference. However, there are other kinds of differences in the world that can be useful.

I've extended this idea of a cue-based analysis beyond just work vs. tasks, in order to provide a theoretical background to gaining a deeper and clearer understanding of how to practically train service dog work and tasks. In extending this way of organizing our concepts, we can also carve work at a natural joint.

Dividing service dog work

We can divide service dog work into two flavors, based on the source of the initial cue the dog recognizes and responds to. The source of the cue can be (1) world-based or (2) handler-based. In either case, the handler does not intentionally provide a cue by consciously giving a command, as the handler does with tasks.

(1) World-based cue work

Examples of world-based cues include an oncoming car, which a guide dog may recognize and then respond to by stopping its handler, and the presence of another person around a corner, which a psychiatric service dog may recognize then respond to by nose-bumping its handler's leg.

When a dog's natural responses are reinforced through training, using the dog's reinforced natural responses to reality-test falls under world-based cue work. In reality-testing, even a dog's lack of response to a frightening hallucination can reassure a handler, mitigating their disability through these episodes. The handler can rely on this because they know their dog is trained to specifically and non-aggressively alert them to any clearly threatening situation in the world.

(2) Handler-based cue work

Even though cues can be handler-based in service dog work, they are still not commands that are intentionally given by the handler. There are many examples of handler-based cues.

One such example of a handler-based cue is a racing heartbeat, which a psychiatric service dog may recognize and then respond to in order to avert a panic attack. Another is a change in ketone-emission levels, which a diabetic alert dog may recognize and then respond to in order to help their handler avoid diabetic shock.

Other examples of handler-based cues involve a change in behavior, such as pacing, a lowered tone of voice, or tossing about while sleeping. A service dog can be trained to recognize and respond to a variety of such cues to short-circuit an episode of obsessive thinking, depression, or night terrors.

These kinds of responses to handler-based cues make us think of some service dogs as portable biofeedback machines! They signal the handler to changes in their body they wouldn't otherwise have adequate awareness of, in time to do something about it.

The handler can then use the alert to take control of the episode and try to prevent it from becoming full-blown. This may manifest in taking rescue medication or food before becoming too involved with the episode. It also may involve mind/body regulatory work, such as grounding exercises or controlled breathing. The handler may also apply cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques to assess and modify their thinking patterns.

Remember what's important

While dogs have amazing abilities, it's important to have realistic expectations about those abilities and about the dog's needs. Dogs are not robots, and training them is an ongoing process.

This analysis is intended to encourage a deeper understanding of that process, of the breadth of service dog work, and of the distinction between service dog work and tasks. Behaviors do not have to fit neatly into one category. What's important is that the dog is mitigating the person's disability!

Psychiatric Service Dogs Partners' purpose is to promote the mental health of people using service dogs for psychiatric disabilities by educating, advocating, providing expertise, facilitating peer support, and promoting responsible service dog training and handling.

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