

Travelling together: exploring the impact of support and service animals on travel experiences

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ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of multi-species families is increasingly linked to the growing awareness of the benefits of emotional support and service animals. As more people adopt various animals into their homes, it becomes crucial to understand how these family arrangements influence travel experiences. The presence of these animals during travel directly impacts the well-being and safety of travellers, contributing to the emotional and behavioural dynamics of multi-species families in transit. Consequently, the hospitality, tourism, and transportation industries must adapt to accommodate the growing number of tourists travelling with their animals, whether for work or leisure. The United States is the focus of this research due to its significant role in regulating emotional support and service animals, allowing for comparisons with the diverse regulations across European countries. This study aims to: (1) investigate current U.S. legislation regarding emotional support and service animals; (2) explore the challenges faced by owners of these animals during travel; and (3) highlight the practical experiences of owners travelling with emotional support and service animals. The methodology used is an exploratory qualitative review. The research highlights the experiences of Em and Jennifer, Brazilian students who travelled to the USA with their animals, illustrating the variations in travel experiences with emotional support and service animals. In conclusion, while acceptance and accommodation of these animals are evolving, particularly in the US hospitality industry and tourist attractions, challenges and a lack of understanding still exist in some establishments. This underscores the importance of studies like this to raise awareness and educate about the needs of families that rely on their animals. The increasing prevalence of multi-species families positively influences the availability of pet-friendly services, which can significantly impact travellers' choice of accommodation when accompanied by their pets.

KEYWORDS: disability, legal protection, legislation, multi-species family, tourism

Introduction

Humans and animals are close and have developed relationships of mutual affection, leading to moral, ethical and legal responsibilities towards animals. Benz-Schwarzburg et al. (2020) argue that these responsibilities stem from close proximity, especially with dogs, which have been partners to humans since ancient times, assisting them in hunting and other activities. While other animals are also part of this centuries-old interspecies approach, dogs play a particularly significant role. Koyasu et al. (2020) assert that domestic animals should be part of a mixed community and enjoy all the privileges that come with it. It is important to note that common domestic animals besides dogs and cats include rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs, although they are also used in scientific experiments, indicating that not all animals are yet fully included in the moral community (Bueno, 2020).

The concept of humanity has evolved over time, with philosophy, biological and behavioural knowledge, and awareness of animal sentience contributing to more informed moral judgments about animals (Leite & Fischer, 2018). Overcoming selfishness is prompted by encounters with "the

other" and realising the vulnerability of beings, activating responsibility towards other species (Jardat & Lansade, 2022).

The term "multi-species family" has emerged recently to emphasise the closeness between humans and animals (Dolby, 2023). According to Albuquerque and Resende (2023), this term describes a family structure that includes not only humans, but also different animal species. The multi-species family seeks to foster a broader understanding of family dynamics, beyond the traditional form, thus recognising the diversity and strength of emotional bonds that already went beyond blood ties, but now also go beyond the species barrier (de Oliviera & Oliviera, 2022).

Speciesism is a form of discrimination, which, like other "isms", attributes a moral value or different consideration to a certain group, in this case, the prejudice is based on the species (Amiot & Santerre-Bélec, 2022). Including animals as family members promotes moral considerations towards domestic animals, viewing them not as possessions, but as integral parts of the family (García-Rosell & Tallberg, 2021).

Approximately 70% of households in the United States have domestic animals, with this number increasing notably after the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their significant role in human relationships (Applebaum et al., 2023). As demonstrated

by Lanning et al. (2022), animals contribute to improving people's quality of life, offering physical health benefits such as improvements in heart disease symptoms and blood pressure, as well as psychological well-being. Thus, the concept of emotional support animals has emerged.

This study aims to investigate policies and practices related to emotional support animals and service animals, with the goal of understanding the challenges faced by owners. With that said, the research has specific objectives: 1) to investigate current United States legislation regarding emotional support animals and service animals; 2) to examine the challenges faced by emotional support and service animal owners when travelling; and 3) to highlight the practical experiences of emotional support and service animal owners during their travels.

Additionally, this article presents an analysis of key areas related to emotional support animals and service animals in the United States. Initially, relevant policies and legislations governing the presence of these animals in public and private spaces, including hotels, transportation, and workplaces, are discussed. Then, the fundamental distinction between emotional support animals and service animals is addressed, highlighting their functions and legal requirements.

Subsequently, practical experiences of emotional support and service animal owners during their travels are presented. This includes detailed accounts of the challenges faced by these individuals when travelling with their animals, as well as interactions with airlines, hotels and other stakeholders. Accessibility, community acceptance and service providers' acceptance are discussed, along with potential improvements in the process of accompanying these animals.

Finally, the article highlights areas that still require attention and potential improvements in policies and practices related to emotional support and service animals in the United States. Recommendations are suggested to strengthen existing legislation and ensure a better experience for owners and their animals when travelling.

Emotional support animals versus service animals

In a globalised, digital and increasingly fast-paced world, loneliness, phobias and illnesses such as depression, anxiety and mental disorders are becoming more common. Animals often provide support to individuals facing these challenges (Danby, 2018; Hernandez-Silk, 2018; Dashper, 2021). Alongside the companionship of these animals, the ability to travel and stay with them in various locations becomes a crucial issue for people. Hotels and accommodation are beginning to adjust their policies to comply with current legislation in the United States. To better understand this evolving landscape, it is essential to differentiate between emotional support animals and service animals (Narayanan et al., 2023).

Emotional support animals can include dogs, cats and rabbits. In all cases, these animals contribute to the owner's well-being simply through their physical presence. How does an ordinary pet become an emotional support animal? The human owner is diagnosed with a specific mental disorder and/or illness by a mental health professional, and the professional observes improvements in their condition through the companionship of the animal (McMichael & Singletary, 2021). Therefore, through an emotional-support animal letter from a qualified health professional, on a letterhead, signed and bearing the doctor's credentials, the animal is designated as the patient's emotional

support, detailing the animal's name, species, breed, colour, size and sex (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019).

Another category is the service animal, which, unlike the emotional support animal, is trained to perform specific tasks to assist the owner (Wu & Chang, 2023). For example, if the owner has a disorder such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or epilepsy, the service animal is not only a comforting presence but is also trained to perform specific tasks during critical moments. In the case of PTSD, the animal might sense an oncoming anxiety attack and respond by nudging the owner, providing deep pressure therapy, or guiding them to a safe space. For epilepsy, a service dog might be trained to alert the owner before a seizure occurs and stay with them during the episode to prevent injury (McMichael & Singletary, 2021).

One of the most recognised types of service animals is the guide dog, trained to assist visually impaired individuals in daily tasks (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Additionally, police dogs are widely recognised for receiving specific training for different types of tasks, such as locating people in disaster rubble, detecting drugs in concealed locations, finding missing individuals and supporting police personnel in their duties (Bray et al., 2021).

The protection of legislation

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a law enacted in 1990 in the USA, prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities broadly. This entails that discrimination is not permitted in public settings such as workplaces, schools and universities, as well as on modes of transportation and in public establishments, including hotel chains. As a result of the legislation, the US Department of Transportation is mandated to ensure accessibility of transportation for individuals with disabilities (Keenan et al., 2019; Powell, 2019).

The ADA stipulates that government entities, businesses and non-profit organisations serving the public must allow service animals to accompany owners with disabilities wherever the general public is allowed to go (Branck, 2023). Consequently, as emphasised by Murphy (2020), individuals with disabilities are permitted to enter restaurants, government buildings, hotels, museums, shopping centres, universities, parks and other places where animals are typically prohibited. This is because such animals are not considered mere pets; rather, they are integral to the individual's life and have undergone specific training to aid their disabled owner in carrying out tasks.

Furthermore, there is the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which extends protection not only to service animals, but also emotional support animals in housing matters. This act safeguards individuals requiring the presence of these animals from discrimination and the imposition of fees by landlords. The owner of the animal must present a signed emotional-support animal letter from a certified health professional attesting to the animal's necessity for support (Schwartz, 2021).

Travelling with a service/support animal

In 1986, airlines were legally obligated to accommodate passengers with disabilities who travel with their animals. Service animals are permitted to travel in the cabin without incurring an additional fee (Ratschen et al., 2020). This means that the service animal accompanies its guardian on the aircraft, without the need for a carrier or specific area within the aircraft. The guardian and animal go to the same seat, with the animal typically positioned on the floor (Bray et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2021).

Airlines typically require specific documentation confirming the animal's status as a service animal and its good health. Evidence of the animal's training, up-to-date vaccinations and an official letter from a certified mental health professional verifying the individual's disability and the necessity for the assistance animal are usually requested (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Unlike service animals, emotional support animals, as noted by Gee et al. (2021), may travel on aircraft, but airlines may levy a fee upon boarding. The boarding procedure may differ and is determined by the airline. This alteration was implemented by the Department of Transport in 2021. Consequently, the animal may not always be permitted to travel in the cabin with its owner, necessitating the use of a carrier that can be accommodated in the aircraft cabin or cargo hold depending on the animal's size. Therefore, it is advisable to contact each airline to ascertain their specific regulations and, in the event of any infringements of rights, to seek assistance from a complaint resolution officer, who is tasked with disability accommodation and is available at the airline (Tomassini, 2022; Lehtoranta, 2023).

Dogs are the most commonly used animals for emotional support and service due to their ease of training and the historical bond between humans and dogs (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). However, cats and rabbits can also serve as emotional support animals, as can miniature horses. Airbnb and Booking.com platforms provide significant information. When a guest plans to travel and stay at a property, the platform offers the option to "filter" properties that accept pets. This filtering ranks as the third most-used in searches, following only the pool and parking filter (Randle & Dolnicar, 2019).

Nevertheless, this filtering option clarifies that if a guest has a disability and possesses a service animal, there is no need to filter for pet-friendly places, as a service animal is not considered a pet. According to the law, no property can reject a service animal, and therefore, the user can freely select any available property without prior authorisation from the host for their service animal (Ying et al., 2021).

The Airbnb platform also states that emotional support animals may be subject to a fee for their stay, and some properties may refuse the presence of emotional support animals. "Pet" is the term encompassing all general pets that are neither emotional support nor service animals. Nowadays, there has been a significant increase in pet-friendly hotels in the hotel industry, meaning these hotels and inns accept not only emotional support and service animals, but also other domestic animals (Tomassini, 2022; Narayanan et al., 2023).

McMichael and Singletary (2021) underscore that animals must exhibit appropriate behaviour, not pose a risk to other people or animals, refrain from relieving themselves in inappropriate places, avoid unauthorised areas, and always remain under the control and supervision of their guardian.

Methodology

The exploratory qualitative approach is a research methodology aimed at understanding complex and under-explored phenomena by delving into the perspectives, experiences and perceptions of participants (Fernandes et al., 2018). In this approach, the emphasis is on understanding the context, and generating novel insights, rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017). It allows for flexible and

open-ended investigation, granting researchers the freedom to explore various facets of the phenomenon under scrutiny and to adapt the research process as new information emerges (Fernandes et al., 2018).

This study adopted a predominantly qualitative and exploratory approach to examine the travel experiences of owners who journeyed with their support and service animals. The qualitative nature of this study facilitated an understanding of the perspectives, experiences and challenges encountered by these owners during their travels.

Following the determination of the nature of this investigation, two participants were selected who provided representative accounts for the research. The methodology adopted for this study consisted of conducting interviews with individuals who travel with their animals on flights from countries with a high rabies incidence. This is because countries with a high rate of illness in animals have several bureaucratic rules to be met, and the US is an example of bureaucracy, but with significant advancements in legislation, which may be useful for other countries and continents. To ensure impartiality and avoid influencing respondents' answers, several measures were taken. First, the respondents were selected at random, without any prior direction based on specific characteristics. In addition, during the interviews, it was emphasised that participants' responses were confidential and there were no right or wrong answers. I interviewed the participants with open and neutral questions, allowing them to freely express their experiences, without any pressure to provide answers that meet my expectations. These precautions aimed to ensure the objectivity and validity of data collected, allowing an impartial analysis of the experiences of travellers with pets on flights from areas with high rabies incidence. The inclusion criteria considered for participant selection encompassed the following: firstly, participants needed to possess prior experience with travel accompanied by support or service animals; secondly, they needed to be willing to openly share their experiences and perceptions during the interviews. The questions focused on the experiences of pet owners who rely on their animals emotionally or for health reasons when travelling. They explored the bureaucratic aspects of the journey itself, as well as the experience upon arrival in a foreign country, including acceptance at tourist sights, hotels, malls and rented accommodation.

The initial account is presented by Em, who moved from Brazil to California, and recounts her experience with her service dog, Bel, trained to assist her during episodes of anxiety and panic attacks. Jennifer was the second participant, and she owns three cats and two dogs, with the latter serving as emotional support animals and the cats as family pets. The selection of these participants was grounded in the relevance of their experiences and the hope that they could significantly contribute to the understanding of travel accompanied by support and service animals.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with the participants, allowing them to freely share their experiences, opinions and insights about travelling with their animals. In addition to interviews, content analysis techniques were employed to scrutinise and interpret the collected data. It is imperative to underscore that this study endeavoured to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, adhering to ethical guidelines and data protection regulations.

Findings and discussion

Table 1 summarises the experiences of Em and Jennifer on their travels accompanied by support and service animals. The table highlights various relevant aspects, from trip preparation to leisure activities during the stay.

Below are two interviews with the owners who travelled with their animals to better visualise the experience in practice. The first report is from Em, who moved from Brazil to California:

The first moment I received the invitation to move to the country was one of the happiest moments of my life, but the first thing I did was try to understand how to take Bel, my service dog who received training to calm me down in moments of anxiety and panic attacks.

Knowing that Brazil presents a high risk for contracting rabies, the USA requires serology that proves that the dog has the necessary antibodies to protect itself from the disease, in addition to approval from the Center for Disease and Control to travel with the animal and enter the country (Pieracci, et al., 2019). There are some specific requirements that vary depending on the country of origin of the animal entering America. Bel is not a defined breed, weighs about 15 kg and is greyish in colour. She is spayed and vaccinated.

After all the necessary procedures to enter the country, I was extremely anxious about the radical change in my life. In addition, I was leaving all my family and friends in Brazil, and the presence of Bel throughout the trip until arriving in California was essential for me not to give up on the study programme into which I had been accepted. Bel has flown with me to at least six states in the USA and on every flight, she behaved in an exemplary manner. Because she is a service dog, she does not go in a carrier. She just wears the collar and identification that she is a service animal.

There is no specific seat for the dog on the plane, it must remain on the floor of the aircraft without disturbing the space of other passengers, or on its owner's lap. A blanket or bed for the animal's comfort is allowed, in addition to its bowl of food and water (Narayanan et al., 2023).

Bel's first plane trip was perfect. The flight attendants said they didn't even realise there was a dog inside the aircraft because the whole trip was very calm and peaceful, and comfortable with my disability. In addition, the hotels I stayed in also welcomed Bel with great compliance with the country's regulations.

Bel and her owner stayed in two hotels in New York, and both were fully prepared to meet the needs of the owner and their

animal. At the same time, they requested identification that Bel was a service dog, and the certificate was presented, and there were no further questions on the matter. The only bad experience the owner reported was:

In Boston, I stayed in an Airbnb listing for five days and after my stay ended, the host told the platform that I took a dog without authorisation and tried to charge me a fine for it as her property did not accept pets. The platform contacted me, and I immediately explained that it was not a pet but a service dog and they immediately contacted the host to say that she could not demand a fine as I had not broken any rules. The host even tried to make a negative review on my profile, but as soon as the platform saw that it was discrimination against people with disabilities, it deleted the comment and apologised for what happened.

Currently, Bel and Em live in California, and Em pays absolutely no extra fees for the property, and has not suffered any impediment to renting the property. Bel accompanies the owner to classes and university work every day, helping her to perform despite her disability.

Em also mentions that on most trips, they visited tourist attractions and all of them allowed Bel to enter without questions or difficulties. Bel and Em went to Disney in California, Central Park, the Wax Museum in Los Angeles, Griffith Observatory, Universal Studios, Harvard, restaurants and many other places.

The study conducted by Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. (2017) sheds light on public perceptions regarding service dogs, emotional support dogs and therapy dogs in the USA. With the increasing prevalence of these animals comes a concurrent rise in controversy surrounding their legitimacy. However, there is a dearth of objective data concerning the public's understanding of the roles played by each type of assistance animal and their perceptions regarding their integration.

Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. (2017) reveal widespread misconceptions about the definitions, rules, regulations and rights associated with each category of assistance dog. Service dogs were generally perceived as aiding individuals with legitimate needs, and their access to public spaces was viewed favourably. Despite media attention highlighting abuses and false representation of these animals, the majority of participants expressed the belief that most individuals are not exploiting the system. This study underscores the importance of addressing public misconceptions and ensuring clarity regarding the roles and rights of different types of assistance animals.

Jennifer Pires, who has three cats (pets) and two dogs (emotional support animals), relocated from Brazil to California

TABLE 1: Summary of survey results

Aspect	Em's experience	Jennifer's experience
Travel preparation	Em underwent specific procedures for Bel's entry into the USA, ensuring compliance with legal regulations.	Jennifer found the paperwork for her cats' travel simpler compared to that for dogs.
Flight experience	Bel travelled calmly on flights, receiving no complaints from flight attendants.	Jennifer is preparing to bring her emotional support dogs to California after travelling smoothly with her cats.
Accommodation experience	Hotels in New York accommodated Bel without issues, except for an Airbnb host who attempted to charge a fine.	Jennifer faced no discrimination when renting a property in California, even with her family of five animals.
Daily life in California	Bel accompanies Em to classes daily and helps her maintain a high academic performance.	Jennifer relies on her emotional support animals and feels anxious about being temporarily separated from them.
Leisure activities	Bel accompanies Em to various tourist attractions without encountering any difficulties.	Jennifer values the companionship of her animals and finds travelling without them distressing.

in December 2023 when her husband, Marwin, was accepted into a doctorate program in psychology in California. Jennifer shared that her cats travelled in carriers and that the paperwork for bringing a cat into the US was simpler than for dogs. She stated that travelling without the animals would be extremely distressing for her and her husband because "they play a very important role in my life, and it would be a shame to have to travel without them".

Jennifer's journey was also smooth, and upon arrival in California, she was able to rent a property without facing any type of discrimination, even after disclosing that her family comprised five different animals, two of which were emotional support animals. It is worth noting that an individual may have more than one emotional support animal, with this being determined by the mental health professional who assesses the necessity for multiple animals in the treatment.

In Jennifer's case, she travelled with her three cats and is now awaiting her return to Brazil to bring her emotional support dogs, as airlines limit the number of animals allowed on board aircraft. Therefore, the dogs will join the family shortly so they can all be reunited. Despite feeling anxious about being separated from their emotional support dogs for this brief period, Jennifer and her husband draw comfort from their previous experience of travelling with the three cats and can already anticipate the positive outcome of the reunion of this multi-species family.

The relationship between humans and animals, particularly dogs, has been the subject of study and contemplation over the years. Santos's research (2022) significantly contributes to this understanding by examining the supportive functions performed by dogs in their owners' lives. Santos (2022) reveals that dogs play crucial roles in their owners' overall well-being, offering not only companionship, but also emotional support.

It is evident that this relationship transcends mere physical presence, involving a deep and affectionate interaction that impacts various aspects of human life. By exploring the evolution of this relationship over time, Santos (2022) underscores the significance of dogs in the human social network and underscores their fundamental role as providers of companionship and emotional support. These findings reinforce the increasing acceptance and value of emotional support animals, particularly in contexts such as travel, where their presence can provide comfort and assurance to their owners.

Conclusion

In the USA, hotel chains and tourist attractions are improving on accommodating guests with service animals. As evident from the interviews and legislation itself, there remains a lack of understanding regarding the reception of animals and their guardians in some establishments. This research is essential for individuals with disabilities, their guardians, airlines and hotel chains to become increasingly attentive not only to regulations, but also to the needs of families who rely on their animals.

Pets in general, excluding emotional support or service animals, also find their place in hotel networks such as Airbnb, Booking.com and others, as well as transportation services. However, the regulations vary depending on each company, as the presence of the animal is not deemed necessary in some cases. Nonetheless, pet-friendly establishments are becoming more prevalent, partly due to the rising prevalence of multi-species families, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Pet-friendly services at hotels

can serve as a distinguishing factor in welcoming guests who, if accompanied by pets, will undoubtedly prefer establishments where their furry companions are embraced.

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