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## History, culture and practice of puppy play

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## History, Culture and Practice of Puppy Play

### Abstract

In this article we explore the history, culture and practice of the phenomenon known as 'puppy play'. Puppy play is a practice in which people take on the persona of a dog (or handler), with participants often wearing specialist gear to further enhance the experience of being a puppy. We argue that puppy play is best understood sociologically as a 'postmodern-subculture' (Greener and Hollands, 2006).

Additionally, we use Irwin (1973)'s model of scene evolution to explore the socio-history of the community. Whilst this practice appears to have its historical roots within the highly sexual gay Leatherman sub-culture, there is a division within this community between sexual and social play, with some participants eschewing the sexual entirely. We explore possible reasons for this split through an analysis using recent political theory concerning technologies of the self, sexual citizenship and BDSM. Through this analysis we contribute valuable empirical evidence to debates and discussion about the development of sexual sub-cultures and tensions therein concerning claims for rights and the 'politics of respectability' (Cruz, 2016ab).

### Introduction

Puppy play is a socio-sexual activity wherein one or more participants take on the mannerisms, behaviour, and attitudes of a dog – often facilitated by the wearing of specialist ‘gear’. Puppy play seemingly has its historical roots as a sociosexual practice in the wider and older BDSM<sup>1</sup>/leatherman scene but has only recently emerged in terms of its visibility to the wider public. Stories about puppy play have appeared in media around the world (e.g. the UKs Guardian and Metro newspapers, Closer magazine, New York Times, Huffington Post, South China Morning Post) and puppy ‘gear’ is now available in high street sex shops (Clonezone, Prowler etc.). Narratives of puppy play are, suddenly, everywhere and the recent growth of interest in the practice that has characterised the last four or five years has been remarkable (Wignall & McCormack, 2017).

Whilst there has clearly been growing public interest in this phenomenon there has been very little academic work focussed on this emerging sexual community (Wignall and McCormack (2017); Wignall 2017; Authors, forthcoming). Wignall and McCormack’s findings from their UK study identify the primary defining features of puppy play, the taking on of the mannerisms and persona of a dog – often a puppy, routes into the practice, and place the activities within Newmahr’s (2010) concept of sex as ‘serious leisure’, in particular emphasising the experience of ‘headspace’ (a state of mindful relaxation, not uncommonly encountered in various BDSM practices) as a component of the leisure aspects of puppy play. Drawing on the same dataset, Wignall (2017) extended this work to specifically call attention to the role of social media, specifically Twitter, in the formation of the puppy play community.

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<sup>1</sup> BDSM is a compound term that is now the preferred term for what used to be referred to as SM (Sadomasochism) and is an umbrella acronym to encompass Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism.

In this article we explore the history, culture and practice of 'puppy play' and chart its emergence as a new sexual story from within the wider BDSM culture, within the West at least. The work is therefore complementary to that of Wignall and McCormack (2017) and Wignall, (2017), and the wider ethnographic work on BDSM (e.g. Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011), with us seeking to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the development of this sexual minority community in recent years grounded in a substantial body of empirical data, mostly from the UK. As a theoretical framework, we follow Greener and Hollands (2006) in using aspects of subcultural and post-subcultural theories to examine puppy play as a cultural affiliation, and use Irwin (1973)'s concept of 'the scene' to offer a socio-historical overview of the scene's development. In addition, we critically examine tensions within the UK community regarding the sexual versus non-sexual nature of this practice that have recently emerged in the context of literature on BDSM, technologies of the self, transgression and citizenship (Cossman, 2012; Dymock, 2012; Langdridge, 2006; Langdridge & Parchev, 2018; Parchev & Langdridge, 2018; Weiss, 2011), as well as discussion about the dangers of a 'politics of respectability' (Cruz, 2016ab).

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Subcultures, post-subcultures and scenes*

The relative merits of adopting subcultural vs post-subcultural theoretical perspectives when investigating youth cultural affiliations have been well examined

(see Greener and Hollands, 2006; MacDonald and Shildrick 2006). While the former frame emphasises the existence of groups which tightly cohere around value systems, style, music, territory etc, and involves close considerations of class (Williams, 2011); the latter predicts the existence of cultural groups which are diffuse, individualistic, and non-localised – often internet-based (Greener and Hollands, 2006; Maffesoli, 1996). Notably, some post-subcultural approaches have suggested that ‘traditional’ social differentiations do not operate with the same force within post-subcultures, and that membership (which may be transitory) forms around a shared aesthetic, rather than around class, gender, race etc., for example Maffesoli’s neo-tribe (1996).

Greener and Hollands (2006) have suggested that the extremely productive debate between proponents of these two positions could be usefully informed by an empirically rather than theoretically driven approach. The authors suggest, and then demonstrate in their own analysis of the virtual psytrance community, that it may be possible and useful to take from each theoretical camp according to context – essentially arguing that one theoretical size may not, in this instance, fit all: “it may be incorrect to assume that one theory (whether subcultural or post-subcultural) can be used to explain all youth cultural affiliations, and that one might adopt a more cautious case by case approach.” (p. 394).

In the following paper we adopt the same perspective as Greener and Hollands (2006), and present the community of pups and handlers as a “postmodern-subculture” (p. 394) – that is as a global, internet based community, which nevertheless coheres around shared space, and by strong attachment to a common

set of practices and values. Additionally, in order to place our findings as they relate to the history of puppy-play within the same broad theoretical position, we make use of the concept of the scene. According to Irwin (1973), scenes are cultural affiliative groups, primarily differentiated from subcultures because they are recognised as distinct lifestyle groups by their own members, rather than by sociologists or other social scientists. That is, that ‘the scene’ is an emic rather than etic concept. In addition to this, Irwin describes four other defining aspects (“dimensions”) of a scene: that membership is voluntary; that members are grouped together by a shared set of meanings, understandings and interest rather than by a drive to attain any particular goal (scenes are “non-instrumental”); that commitment to the scene is highly variable – a permanent way of life for some, but a “passing fad” (p. 133) for others; and finally that the scene provides an identity for its members.

### *BDSM and ‘the struggle for self-determination’*

Given the roots of puppy play in the wider BDSM/leatherman sub-culture, we also draw on empirical and theoretical work on BDSM to help frame and inform this study (including Langdridge, 2006; Langdridge & Parchev, 2018; Newmahr, 2011; Parchev & Langdridge, 2018; Simula, 2017; Weinberg, 2016; Weiss, 2011). Of particular significance to the present work is the ethnographic work of Weiss (2011), who studied the Janus community in San Francisco and sought to locate her analysis broadly within a Foucauldian framework, the recent work of Cruz (2016ab) on black women, BDSM and kink, and the theoretical arguments of Langdridge and Parchev (2018) concerning the political struggle for self-determination within BDSM communities. All three pieces of work explore the way that minority communities

must forge their identities, communities and practices within a socio-political framework that serves to discipline selfhood through ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1977-78). Further, they explore the ways that individuals within communities act to police the boundaries of acceptability and permissibility through a neo-liberal politics in which citizenship is contingent upon an abstract individualist ethics. This ‘struggle for self-determination’ (Langdrige & Parchev, 2018), between transgression and citizenship, is also at the heart of some recent tensions within the puppy play community, albeit in a somewhat different form than that discussed in the extant BDSM literature.

## **Methodology**

### *Design*

Data were collected through an internet based survey, semi-structured interviews (see below for more detail on both), and also informal ethnographic fieldwork both in person at community events and fetish fairs, or online on community forums and webpages (e.g. Puppy Pride, FetLife). Wignall (2017) has stated that twitter is a particularly important feature of contemporary pup life, as such we focussed on twitter (and Facebook) as a key recruitment mechanism, using a project-specific twitter account, run by the first author, to disseminate information about the project, alongside calls for participants. The author was subsequently invited to join community pages on Facebook, or Telegram chat groups, and these were also used to recruit further participants. Whilst we recruited people to components of the study from throughout the world (notably the online survey), the majority of our sample,

particularly within the interview component that forms the primary basis for this article, is UK based and our detailed discussion and claims about the puppy play community below must therefore be acknowledged as primarily limited to this territory.

### *Ethics*

Whether recruited for the online survey, the interviews, or both, informants were briefed on the aims and scope of the project, on data storage and use, and gave informed consent to proceed. The survey and interviews were designed and conducted by the first author in accordance with the Association of Social Anthropologists' code of ethics. All data are anonymised: While pups routinely take on new names for their pup persona, these are often well known within the community. Accordingly, in the text that follows, informant names or pup-names have been replaced with pseudonyms taken from a list of popular names for pet dogs.

### *Internet survey*

An internet based survey was launched, comprising a series of standard demographic questions (age, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, etc.), and questions indicative of experience with puppy play. In a qualitative section, participants were asked to provide a concrete description of their last experience of puppy play, focussing on emotions and feelings they recalled experiencing, that is reported elsewhere. 87 people completed the survey, of which 68 also produced



written descriptions of a scene. The majority (n=52) were European (of which 43 were British), with 29 North Americans (26 from the USA, 3 from Canada). The remaining 5 participants were African, or from Australia and New Zealand. The skew in the sample towards British community members may reflect the UK-base of the study (and the fact that the survey was written in English), although the British and American pup scenes are particularly well established. All but 12 individuals in the sample described their ethnicity as 'White'. Five participants identify as women, eight as genderfluid or genderqueer, with the remaining 55 identifying as men. Five participants indicated that their current gender differed from that assigned to them at birth. Participants use a variety of LGBTQ terms to describe their sexual orientation including bisexual (n = 12), pansexual (n=8), and asexual (n=2). A single participant identified as straight. A full 70% of the sample (n = 61), then, identified as gay men.

The survey participants had an average age of 31 years, ranging from 18 (the minimum age required to participate in the survey) to 62 – a fairly wide age range, consistent with a well established group that has recently attracted a new membership. While the younger members of the sample tend to have become involved in the pup community in the last few years (after it became more visible to the general public), older members have been engaged in puppy play for a considerably longer time. This is reflected in an 'Old Guard'/'New Guard' division in the community (see below). The majority of the sample (58%) are university educated, having either undergraduate (n=28) or masters (n=22) degrees.

### *Interviews*

Survey participants were invited to indicate whether they would be subsequently available for interview. Additional participants were recruited through online calls for participation, or by word of mouth as news of the project spread through the community. A series of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting 72 mins on average and ranging in length from 37 mins to 121 mins. The interview schedule included questions on: (1) history, knowledge and experience with puppy play; (2) exploration of a puppy play 'scene'; (3) experience of embodiment, the passing of time (temporality), and relationships with others; (4) the experience of puppy 'headspace'; (5) sexual nature of practice; (6) naming conventions; (7) thoughts about the puppy community. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Skype by the first author; a queer identified, White man.

The interview sample is smaller and somewhat less diverse than the internet survey, despite attempts by the first author to target under-represented identities. This may, of course, be a consequence of the first author's own gay, white, male identity which may have to some extent influenced recruitment, although we note that the interview sample is broadly representative of at least the majority of the group's members as indicated both by Wignall and McCormack (2017) and also our own survey. Our 25 interview participants ranged in age from 19 to 62, around an average of 34 years. Twenty-three identify as male, with one identifying as a women, and one more identifying as a non-binary woman. The sample is exclusively non-heterosexual (3 identified as bi, one as pan, and the remaining 21 as gay). Interview participants are all white, and all British and based in the UK, barring two Australian, two North American (Canada and USA), and one Swiss participant.

## *Analysis*

Data analysis was grounded in phenomenology, with our focus primarily on the lived experience of the participants as it relates to their practice of puppy play (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008; Finlay, 2011; Langdrige, 2007; van Manen, 2014, 2016). That is, we sought to understand the world of puppy play from the perspective of our participants first and foremost, with our theoretical analysis applied in a second stage of analysis. The initial analysis entailed a close reading of the text provided by participants, primarily from the interviews but also from their descriptions of puppy play scenes provided in the online survey, in order to discern the thematic structure of their experience. Key to the analysis was a fusion of horizons between participant and researcher as the researcher sought to hold their pre-understanding within reflective awareness (van Manen, 2016), with the analyst moving analytically between part and whole (detailed and holistic reading) within a hermeneutic circle. We followed this experience-close analysis with critical reflection drawing on extant empirical and theoretical work on BDSM and sub-cultural theory more generally. The findings presented below derive from this thematic analysis but are presented within the context of the theoretical framework of Irwin (1973) concerning the stages of development of a sub-cultural scene that was applied to the data in a second distinct stage of analysis.

## **Findings**

### *Sociohistorical development of the scene*

Again acknowledging Greener and Holland (2006)'s position that different theoretical approaches to cultural affiliations should be adopted according to context, we return in the following section to Irwin's concept of the scene, since it provides a particularly useful framework for approaching socio-history. Puppy play meets Irwin's requirements for classification as a scene: i) membership is voluntary: pups and handlers self-identify as such in order to join; ii) the group is non-instrumental: the group en masse has no particular set of aims or goals and is, rather, grouped together around a shared set of meanings and understandings; iii) commitment is variable: membership is a transitory experience for some, but a permanent aspect of a lifestyle for others; iv) the scene provides identity for its members: our informants were uniform in their expression of a clear sense of identity as part of a community. Irwin charts the socio-history of the Surfing Scene of 1960-70s America, in order to present a "model of scene evolution", running through four distinct stages: articulation, expansion, corruption, and decline. We present our findings through this theoretical lens below, with additional analysis grounded in extant debates in the literature on BDSM. This is not to suggest that we are advocating any simple linear notion of cultural development, but rather that this model provides a useful theoretical lens through which to view key moments in the development of this sexual community. We note that a similar pattern of coherence, fragmentation and schism has been reported by other researchers working with a variety of cultural groups (for example Anderson, 2009; Fox, 1987; Wood, 2010; and see Chalmers Thomas and Price (2012)).

## Articulation

Despite the historically recent emergence of the practice argued for by Wignall and McCormack (2017), and by us in the current paper, the pup community itself has a tendency to assert a longer historical pedigree for itself. Pup community websites and manuals often romanticise a quasi-mythological past for the practice, and make various attempts to connect puppy play to other ethnographic or historical contexts (see, for instance, St. Clair, 2015). There is, however, very little evidence to connect puppy play to the ancient and non-Western practices identified by practitioners. There is, furthermore, no mention of anything similar to puppy play in von Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), or in the work of de Sade. We can find no evidence that suggests puppy play is anything other than a peculiarly Western, modern practice, albeit one that may contain echoes of practices that occur today in other ethnographic contexts, and have long disappeared within the West (White, 1991; see Authors, forthcoming).

The first stage of scene development occurs, Irwin (1973: 134) explains, when a “group of actors piece together a new lifestyle”, often as a consequence of increased leisure time. This process does not involve actors creating a set of practices *de novo*, but rather, Irwin explains, adapting elements that already exist into a new set of configurations. As Irwin does for surfing, we can trace the beginnings of this stage of the Puppy Play Scene to the end of World War II in the USA, with dog-slaves and SM clubs and spaces providing the necessary elements for the Scene's articulation.

In some ways, it started in Britain first because we had the dog slaves and we had all the Mr Puppy events and shows long before the rest of Europe, but America had it before us. (Jake)

The formation of queer communities around military bases in the USA following the end of World War II has been well documented (D'Emilio, 1991), and has been connected to the development of a number of queer subcultural groups, most famously perhaps the leather scene (Sisson, 2007; Rubin, 2011). In its original form, the leather scene, comprised not only a strict aesthetic (black leather, echoing that of the motorcycle gangs of the 40s and 50s), but also a clear set of protocols by which submissive "boys" could interact with dominant "Sirs" or "Daddies". The relationship between Sirs and boys within this framework was self evidently Dominant/submissive (D/s); boys were not just submissive, but entirely subservient to their Sirs, who were expected to care for and train their boys in the correct manner of behaviour, posture, and speech. Sirs were responsible for initiating boys into the leather scene and, potentially, allowing them to progress up the hierarchy and one day become Sirs themselves (Mains, 1984; Weal, 2010).

Punishment was a key component of training for a boy. Errors in protocol, or mistakes made in service would be corrected by punishments designed to inflict pain, or humiliate. Being reduced to the role of dog was one possible punishment: a misbehaving boy would be compelled to drop to all-fours, forbidden to speak, to eat from the floor or from a bowl (St Clair, 2015). This punishment appears to have developed into a different style of D/s relationship, closely connected to but distinct from the formal, Old Guard leather protocols; the "dog-slave". The dog-slave was a submissive individual, closely connected to the role of boy, who would be trained by a dominant Sir, or Master, to be obedient and well-behaved; to move on all-fours, to eat from a bowl, to sit or speak on command. The relationship between dog-slave

and Master was frequently, and explicitly sexual, just as the relationship between boy and Sir was in Old Guard protocol.

While puppy play may differ from dog-slave protocol in that it places a primary emphasis on play rather than sexual humiliation for many (though not all) people, and while the inclusion of or connection to sex is problematic for many individual pups within the community, aspects of this history can still be seen in our study, and also that of Wignall and McCormack (2017). Pup hoods and gear can be made of many materials but leather is particularly common, and while for many pups rough-and-tumble play that is non-sexual (pushing a ball around, playing tug-of-war) is the *sine qua non* of puppy play, for others aspects of S/M sex, humiliation and punishment are still present and significant. The historic connections to leather protocol are generally recognised within our study, and can be seen within community produced publications (Daniels, 2006; St. Clair, 2015).

This history is to some extent contested, and alternative views exist and were occasionally expressed in interviews, for example the following idea that pups emerged from bear culture:

So, the pup scene came from the bear scene, so it's the big muscle, young muscle, beefy, hairy guys in their 20s, 30s. They couldn't pigeonhole themselves into the muscle bear because they weren't big enough, but they couldn't put themselves into the cub scene because they're not rotund as the bear scene is, really. (Rufus)

Despite this, the aesthetic and practical connections of the dog-slave tradition to modern pup play seem to offer clear evidence for their connection. The dog-slave tradition differs from the contemporary puppy play scene in a number of aspects, not least in its existence as a component of another, separate scene (high protocol leather). Nevertheless, the dog-slave provides a focussing activity, around which the broader configuration of practices and patterns (“meanings and dimensions” in Irwin’s, 1973, terms) which have come to define puppy play as a distinct and coherent scene can be articulated (Wignall & McCormack, 2017; Wignall, 2017).

The central shared experiential facets of this community are the desire for play with others and the generation of headspace, facilitated through pup gear, along with a more general embrace of a BDSM inflected pup aesthetic that can be personalised (Authors, forthcoming; Wignall & McCormack, 2017; this study). The adult play with others at the heart of this practice is highly prized, perhaps not surprisingly given the paucity of opportunities for this kind of activity for adults beyond sport. In addition, the experience of headspace is of critical importance for relaxation and mental health, the experience of wider societal responsibility being stripped away with a present focus on the now of the moment, whether that is through tugging on a rope or chasing after a ball (Authors, forthcoming; Wignall & McCormack, 2017; this study). In common with BDSM communities more generally (Graham, Butler, McGraw, Cannes & Smith, 2016; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011), relationships and a sense of community belonging have also been shown to be central to this experience. Of course, for many practitioners puppy play is also sexual and the root in BDSM (Dominance and submission, in particular) is of critical importance.



These facets echo those within broader BDSM sub-culture where many communities have moved away from the notion of BDSM practice as work (as you might see in high protocol leather) and instead recast it as play (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011), within a broader conceptualization of it as a form of 'serious leisure' (Newmahr, 2010, 2011). Understanding puppy play within this same framework, as Wignall and McCormack (2017) argue, is undoubtedly correct. Like BDSM practice more generally, the setting and gear are critical to much puppy play practice. Framing it as play (Bateson, 1955) serves to render it harmless in the eyes of the casual onlooker for in these terms this practice is now about fantasy and performance (role-play) rather than something 'real', and therefore otherwise potentially disturbing (Stear, 2009; Weiss, 2011). That is, the risk of association with bestiality, a concern that is expressed by members of the sub-culture (Wignall & McCormack, 2017), is ostensibly reduced through this focus on play, especially if the sexual is also rendered invisible through its privatisation (Cossman, 2002) or disavowal. Serious leisure (sexual) activities work well within (and help sustain) Late Capitalism for they demand an active engagement with consumption (Parchev & Langdrige, 2018; Weiss, 2011). The possession of (often very expensive) gear becomes central to the creation of the sexual subject ('becoming a pup'), and mastery of the self (Weiss, 2011). And whilst the necessity for gear might be disavowed, this will always be within the classic neo-liberal framework of individual choice seen within BDSM that so often fails to recognise the way that the social world structures the ability of people to choose (Weiss, 2011).

Expansion

In Irwin's formulation, the expansion of the surfing scene was catalysed by media attention, and by surfing documentaries in particular. The puppy play scene has seen rapid expansion in recent years, being a fairly niche activity with a very few, disconnected practitioners until relatively recently. Scene members are themselves aware of this sudden rise in popularity and have fairly clear and consistent ideas about its causes, crediting a number of documentaries, in particular one screened on the UK's Channel 4 in 2016.

*The Secret Life of Human Pups* brought the practice and the community into the public eye, and generated a substantive amount of media attention. While the documentary has been criticised by some members of the pup community for emphasising the social (and aesthetic) aspects of puppy play at the apparent cost of the sexual, others view it as a moment when the puppy community essentially "came out" *en masse* to the rest of the world. The same year, Australian TV network SBS aired their own documentary; *Pup play: Men who live as dogs*. The new visibility of the practice appears to have led to a surge in membership, and the community in its current form began to take shape.

Today, pups are represented as a specific group within LGBTQ+ Pride parades, and have a large community presence online, with bespoke social networks ([puppypride.com](http://puppypride.com), [siriuspup.net](http://siriuspup.net)) and various Facebook pages and twitter networks (see [pahswithoutborders.com](http://pahswithoutborders.com)). Puppy gear is available in many high street sex shops, and specific pup events and competitions are hosted regularly, such as Best in Show at London Fetish Week, or Mr (and, within the last year, Ms) Puppy UK. As

Wignall (2017) has demonstrated, social media has been extremely important in the expansion of the puppy play scene:

It was really rare up until about four years ago, I suppose. I mean, it's meteoric since then, you know, that pups have been coming out of the woodwork from nowhere. Then all the big fetish shops started selling pup gear, of course, you know, jumping on the bandwagon, so that's helped it expand. I think social networking probably made it take off because before Twitter and things like it, there was no way of really communicating to people about pup play, but now you can find out about it everywhere. (Jake)

This growth has been inextricably linked to performance and consumption, as has been witnessed within the wider BDSM sub-culture (Weiss, 2011). Events like 'Mr Puppy' serve up puppy play for an audience to consume with gear and mastery of self (Foucault, 1977-78) – as pup – critical to judging success. It is through the 'practices of self', where people seek to improve and refine the notion of being a pup in relation to the wider pup community, where people become 'subjects of themselves' (Weiss, 2011). But these techniques of the self are tied to social power (Foucault, 1977-78) and this instantiate a particular – mostly white, male – iteration of the pup community. The creation of Ms Puppy whilst ostensibly about inclusion actually reinforces the disciplinary and dividing effects of power.

There is a tendency for pups to adopt a "pup is for everyone" stance with respect to identity, particularly gender and sexual orientation, and groups which may have

historically found it difficult to access the pup community, for example women, are currently starting to join the scene in increasing numbers.

It's a shame, because for me, pupping is for everybody. It's not determined by age or gender or sexuality; it's for anybody, and I have to say that when I've seen female pups, pupping out at Pride – Manchester and London particularly – they seem to be way more into the puppy side of things than the men. (Winston)

In practice, however, pup events are often held in gay male spaces, so people with other identities may find it hard to access them with structural or power differentials in gaining access rarely attended to within this community. Furthermore, attitudes towards diversity and inclusion can abruptly shift when sex is involved:

And also, being a female in the community, it's really, you know, not a natural option like it is for the, the other pups, the male pups. So, they all go to their, their fetish events as pups, and they all go to these gay clubs as pups, and as a female, I'm not actually allowed to go to these things. (Coco)

I've been to social pup moshes that have had boys, girls, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, non-binary, trans and everyone gets on as well as they can, but when it turns to a more fetish and kink, because pup play does have its roots in BDSM and the fetish leather scene, I think there's more of a, "This is ours," from the gay men. (Samson)

Puppy play, then, seems capable of being welcoming of diversity while retaining a tendency to abruptly (re)structure itself around lines of gender, race and sexuality. While adopting the former position, aesthetics and shared experience seem paramount – features which are expected from post-subcultures such as neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1996), while the latter seems mostly centred around the idea of shared territories – components of more traditional subcultures (Williams, 2011).

Underpinning this sub-cultural discursive framing is a pernicious neo-liberal discourse of citizenship in which ‘freedom’ and ‘openness’ are constructed entirely through an abstract universal individual subject, one that is not grounded in gender, class or ethnicity or structured by the social world (Langdrige & Parchev, 2018; Sabsay, 2012; Weiss, 2011).

There remain serious concerns about the place of race/ethnicity within BDSM communities (e.g. around the whiteness of some communities) and more recently there has been productive discussion about this issue (see Cruz, 2016ab). It appears that the puppy play communities represented in this study are almost uniformly white and – as yet – are lacking the critical debate about race/ethnicity that has started to emerge within the wider BDSM community. The danger here is the ready embrace of a (highly individualistic) queer liberalism of the kind that Eng (2010) argues is complicit in the forgetting of race and the denial of difference. This position sees the search for – and claims around – fundamental human rights at the heart of the liberal project, such as the right to a *private* sexual life unfettered by state control, as inherently oppositional to a more intersectional framework that acknowledges the complex material conditions of people’s lives in framing their choices and available

options (Langdrige & Parchev, 2018; Sabsay, 2012; Weiss, 2011). The 'everyone is welcome' discourse inadvertently – and paraodxically - fails to attend to barriers concerning power, access and difference in a way that may geuinely open up this practice and community to all (see Weiss, 2011).

## Corruption

The third of Irwin's four stages takes place when a sudden influx of new members cause a shift in the scene's internal dynamics. Newer members may engage with an established scene without properly understanding its rules (up to that point), and are criticised or mistrusted by older, more established members. In response, new members begin to forcefully assert their legitimacy, often by pantomiming or exaggerating their interpretation of existing norms in order to "prove" that they belong (Irwin, 1973).

Other researchers have argued that periods of fragmentation are common to subcultural (etc) groups (Anderson, 2009; Wood, 2003) and we argue that it is in this state that we currently find the pup community, at least within the UK. The sudden surge in membership over the last few years has lead to the presence at pup social events, or online, of individuals who, while drawn to the aesthetic or novelty of puppy play, are criticised by more established members for not understanding its conventions. This is visible in the following from Benny, a handler in his 50s with over twenty years experience on the scene:

The one thing which really – I just think, "No, really please no, just stop it!" is I've seen it at pup socials is you see all these kids bouncing around

in the play things and then they get up and they go out, get their cigarettes and start smoking through their rubber hood or their hood and I'm thinking, "You don't get it, you just don't understand what this is about, you don't – it's enjoyable for you and good luck to you and you can have all the fun in the world there but you don't understand what this – what pupping can be about. (Benny)

The influx of newcomers to the scene threatens its cohesion , which has provoked a period of "intense competition for legitimacy in the scene" (Irwin, 1972, p149). In response to having their legitimacy questioned by the "Old Guard" of the puppy play scene, the newer members, just as Irwin described in the surfing scene, have begun asserting their own legitimacy primarily through very conspicuous, public displays of identity (competitions, pride marches, puppy pride flags and banners and so forth). Concurrently, there is an increased pressure for people keen to attain or maintain membership of the group to behave "authentically" (Irwin, 1973). This latter drive for "authenticity" (or, more accurately, for the learning of behaviours and styles which are considered to be authentic) seems to have expressed itself in two polarised positions: One emphasising that "authentic" puppy play is sexual; the other that it is "social" (i.e. non-sexual). We might also understand this in terms of the 'cultivation of self' (Foucault, 1977-78), in which we see the the construction of the puppy subject at play through the instantiation of cultural norms and expectations. This division is seemingly most keenly felt currently within the UK pup scene, although it is mentioned by participants from North America and Australia.

For “Old Guard” members of the scene (and for some newer members), the sexual aspects of puppy play that have been brought from the dog-slave tradition are central and can exist alongside the social (i.e. non-sexual) aspects without issue:

With me pupping, yes, I’m very sexual and if I’m not at an event, and if I’m being a pup with Yorba, then yes, it will almost definitely involve fisting and/or fucking, him fucking me, or even me fucking him as a pup. I’ve done that before. He wanted to get fucked by a pup, so I had my muzzle on and I fucked him. So, yeah, but it’s definitely a sexual thing for me when I’m being a pup. (Brutus)

It’s enjoyable to go to events and it’s enjoyable to do the social aspects but after all the social aspects have gone down, depending on the pup, I want to play or they want to play and sexual – the sexual aspect is important for me, as a handler. I said to you before, some pups there’s not sexual contact; other ones, there are. (Benny)

Nevertheless, for some in the “New Guard”, sexual elements are denatured by the adoption of a position where the social and playful (‘innocent’) elements of being a dog are emphasised; the joys of role playing as a dog with others in a social playspace allied to a disavowal of any link to bestiality. This position concurrently resists, or outright rejects, the encroachment of the sexual:

To me, pup play is innocent. It’s just being a pup. (Coco)



It's just like some people are into that, that's fine, but for me I don't think you should be because for all intents and purposes while we're doing this we believe we are a dog. But I don't want to have sex with a dog. (Jax)

This tendency of some pups to emphasise the sexual while others resist or reject it has led to a degree of tension, within the UK community at least. This has been connected by some to the increasing diversity of the sub-culture, coincident with its increased visibility and popularity:

So, certainly within the UK pup community, there's a raging debate of whether it's sexual or social and I think this comes down to the diversity across the pup community. So, there are a lot of furies that are also pups, there are a lot of girls getting – I say there's a lot of girls – one in ten pups is a female. There are some straight guys that want to do it, so it's starting to grow in other areas and the sexual side is very much a – the original roots in BDSM which was the gay men only but now that there's a widening community, there is much more of a call for social. (Samson)

In practice, the social and sexual lines are somewhat blurred and many pups acknowledge that the sexual and the social can co-exist, although sexual pup play is nevertheless increasingly restricted to the private sphere (“in the bedroom”). The drive to appear “authentic” in the face of having one's legitimacy questioned, then, appears to have driven the construction of a debate which may not, in fact, represent the experience of puppy play for most of the scene's members. Nevertheless, this

“corruption” of the scene’s original articulation is keenly felt by community members, particularly the “Old Guard”.

Of particular interest is the specific nature of this sub-cultural tension in relation to those explored within BDSM more broadly (e.g. by Weiss, 2011 or Langdrige & Parchev, 2018). That is, what is at stake here and how are the boundaries of acceptability and permissibility being policed? In similar arguments within the wider BDSM sub-culture the debate centres around safety, particularly as it relates to edgeplay and the growing regulation of sexual practice within these communities (Langdrige & Parchev, 2018). Puppy play by contrast does not seem to offer much in the way of risk to life nor require regulation so is this instead simply about respectability, perhaps as it pertains to a suggestion of an interest in bestiality, which is clearly deeply stigmatised within our culture. There is some evidence in this study, and also from Wignall and McCormack (2017), that this may be the case. Key to understanding this is the disciplinary nature of citizenship, especially regarding dissident sexual subjects and the dangers of a ‘politics of respectability’ (Cruz, 2016ab). Community members are clearly negotiating the boundaries of acceptability and permissibility within their communities (akin to tensions within BDSM communities around transgression and citizenship) even if not making explicit claims for rights within the language of citizenship.

Respectability is figured in two distinct ways: (1) by disassociating puppy play entirely from sex, thereby warding off any link to bestiality no matter how ill-informed that association may be; (2) by privatising the sexual so that the public sphere of puppy play practice is constructed solely as a playspace, one that is almost child-like

in appearance and ethics. These moves shut down any sense of puppy play as a 'politics of perversion' (Cruz, 2016ab), in which it might act to subvert or transform normative sex and sexualities. This is not about re-defining the boundaries of what is (or is not) sex as we have seen in BDSM (Newmahr, 2011; Simula, 2017) or engaging in some means of sexual subversion concerning erotic power or even a critique of 'speciesism', whether real or fantastical. It is instead about advocacy of a position through a socially acceptable – indeed, even desirable - discourse, of 'innocent' adult play, which may also be 'therapeutic' (Authors, forthcoming; Wignall & McCormack, 2017). Clearly, the 'struggle for self-determination' (Langdridge & Parchev, 2018) will continue here and it will be fascinating to see how this community resolves this tension, develops further or enters a stage of decline if this is not productive.

## **Conclusions**

Puppy play is a modern socio-sexual practice with historical roots in the gay BDSM/leather subculture of the post-war USA. The origin of this practice/identity was likely the 'dog slave' of gay Leatherman dominant/submissive sexual relationships. In recent years the puppy play community has seen a sudden surge in popularity having become newly visible to the public following some substantive media attention. This has resulted in massive expansion and increasing diversity, with the inclusion of women and trans participants, albeit with the community still dominated by white cis gay men. The community remains based predominantly within gay male spaces and so whilst the 'everyone is welcome' discourse is popular among

practitioners there is a lack of reflection about power or other structural inequalities in people gaining access.

We argue that the puppy play community is best understood as a “postmodern-subculture” in that traditional lines of identity operate within a diffuse, non-localised community, which is bonded together by shared aesthetic (as in Maffesoli’s “neo-tribes”). This aesthetic involves the use of specific puppy ‘gear’ – such as pup hoods, mitts and tails - to facilitate mimesis and a sense of ‘becoming puppy’. This produces a shared aesthetic but one which is open to individual expression of identity, personality and taste. Additionally, we have used Irwin’s model for the evolution of a “scene” to chart the sociohistorical rise of puppy play, identify its central cultural elements, and explore how recent expansion has resulted in some serious tensions. Whether or not the scene will progress into the fourth stage of Irwin’s model (“Decline”) remains to be seen.

One central tension that has emerged and has been explored in this article is the place of sex within this community. For some practitioners puppy play is sexual and the root in a BDSM/leatherman sub-culture is of critical importance. For others, there is a clear desire to distance themselves and their practices from sex and wider BDSM sub-culture. The tension that has emerged between these two positions may not, we have argued, be reflective of the experience of the majority of the scene’s members, for whom sex and sociality may exist comfortably side by side (albeit with sex restricted to the private sphere). Rather, we argue that the social vs sexual positioning adopted by individual pups may be reflective of attempts to assert and display “authenticity” and the management of boundaries around acceptability and

permissibility following a sudden increase in membership. That is, this tension may echo similar arguments about edgeplay in BDSM (Langdrige & Parchev, 2018), and the 'struggle for self-determination' within sexual minority communities. What is somewhat different here however is the focus of what is at stake. Whilst in BDSM communities the tensions that have arisen have concerned risk to life and legal sanction, in puppy play we argue that the risk revolves around public sex and associations with bestiality, in the context of the disciplinary apparatus of citizenship and wider public recognition.

The key for the future of this sub-culture then is how the tension between providing (discursive and material) space for activities deemed transgressive (Parchev & Langdrige, 2017; Langdrige & Parchev, 2018; Weiss, 2011), that are outside the charmed circle of sexual respectability (Rubin, 2011), and a sensitivity to a strategic politics of respectability (Cruz, 2016ab) is managed, taken up or refused. There are risks here, for these respective demands will not necessarily be equally placed with respect to power and without consideration of such matters there is a danger of one side being subsumed by the other and the closing down of possibilities rather than the opening up of the community to all (see Langdrige, 2013). Balancing individual desires with political expediency within a neo-liberal culture in which citizenship is grounded on an abstract individualism (Sabsay, 2012) is a difficult one. There are signs within this study of community members seeking to find creative ways through some of these tensions. And there are examples of how such tensions can be managed that already exist within the broader BDSM sub-culture (see Langdrige & Parchev, 2018), where we can see practitioners arguably managing more community

tension, with arguably more significant consequences (e.g. around risk to life and threat of imprisonment), than we see with puppy play community divisions.

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