Pups at Pride: A Reflection on Negotiating Consent, Power, and Agency with Subversive Subcultures

James Pickles[1]
University of Brighton

Abstract

Gaining consent from individuals who give control over aspects of their agency, autonomy, and ability to consent to another person by subverting normative power dynamics - such as those who belonging to kink communities - has seen little ethical discussion. This reflection provides a critical commentary on a specific scenario that occurred while conducting an LGBT hate crime project at a local Pride event in the North-East of England. While conducting a survey on anti-LGBT+ hate crime, a self-identified 'pup' approached the researcher to express interest in participation. The pup was unable to physically sign a consent form or fill out the survey themselves as their hands were covered and restricted by paw gloves. Further, they had indicated that they were under the control and supervision of their 'handler' who was observing the interaction from a distance. The pup was an unexpected respondent in the research as the survey was not kink-orientated. The ethical guidance underpinning the research was, therefore, not prepared for engaging with members of the kink community. Due to the subverted power dynamics over 'who' should give consent in this scenario, the author uses this as a case study to pose a series of questions on best ethical practice 'in action' when conducting research with individuals who challenge normative power relations.

Keywords: kink community, pup play, puppy play, research ethics, power dynamics, consent

Introduction

This reflection critically outlines a specific scenario that emerged when conducting a paper survey at a regional Pride event in the North-East of England (generalized to uphold anonymity guidance from the author's University Ethics Committee). The survey examined the perceptions and experiences of anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) hate crime. LGBT+ people who attended Pride were approached by the researcher with information sheets detailing the nature of the project. Physical consent forms, which were printed on the back of the paper survey questions, required signatures from respondents before participation. One potential respondent, who was a self-identified 'pup', came to inquire about participating in the project. Pups are members of a kink and fetish-based subculture who engage in both sexual and non-sexual 'pup-play'. The pup who approached the researcher was wearing paw gloves, restricting the ability to provide a signature. The aims and scope of the research did not seek to specifically sample members of the kink community. Therefore, the ethical guidance underpinning the research was not prepared for engaging with members of the kink community. Decisions over how to proceed and include the pup within the research project were therefore decided in action

[1] Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James Pickles, j.pickles@brighton.ac.uk

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while in the field. I use this scenario as a case study to reflect on the choices made and pose questions over whether they contravened the subversive power dynamics the participant was engaged in as part of his pup play.

Pup individuals 'tend to adopt a submissive role, imitate the posture of a dog, and wear a collar and other "gear" associated with owning a dog' (Wignall & McCormack, 2017: 801). This gear can include dog leads, butt plugs that simulate tails, rubber suits, pup masks, and dog toys. Wearing this gear is a visible display of membership in the pup community and represents their role as a pup during roleplay. While this reflection focuses on research pertaining to pups and gaining ethical consent, the questions posed can be applied to research on other kink dynamics more generally. For example, interviewing or surveying people who are adopting a submissive role - such as a slave, servant, boi, or cuckold etc. - who willingly exchanges power with a dominant, who in turn gives permission on the submissive's behalf, raises questions over whether the submissive can ever truly provide solo consent to participate in a research context. The submissive's ability to consent has been agreeably transferred to their Dominant in an arrangement that does not involve the researcher. Researchers must consider how to navigate and respect this arrangement if involving submissives in research, especially if in the presence of their Dom, so as not to compromise or bypass this prearrangement.

Those who engage in kink subvert normative power dynamics in a variety of ways that may disrupt traditional research practices of gaining consent. Pup roleplay often, but not always, involves a 'pup' consensually giving control over aspects of their behavior to a 'handler'; a person who cares for and potentially 'owns' the pup. Pup culture has seen very little empirical study, thus there is a paucity of methodological and ethical guidance on how to conduct research with pup-identified individuals specifically, and those engaging in pup dynamics generally. As such, there is currently a lack of discussion on how one gains informed consent from participants who hand control of their autonomy to another individual, or how to negotiate such subverted power dynamics. This reflection, therefore, raises unique ethical quandaries. As the primary focus of the hate crime project did not aim to explore pup-play, the actions taken by the researcher to gain consent from the pup in question were therefore decided instinctively, 'in action', during the fieldwork of the project. Pups are in a unique (usually but not always, submissive) headspace that has been likened to "something akin to a physically active mindfulness" (Langdridge & Lawson, 2019: 2208), which makes them a good case study when scrutinizing how they can consent to participate in a research project, while in this headspace. The ability for the pup to express agency and consent to participate in research and remain in line with their handler's wishes will be the main focus of this reflection. I reflect on the ethical implications underpinning research with participants who subvert normative power dynamics. I present this reflective piece as a mechanism to pose ethically laden questions that one may consider when researching sexual subcultures or communities that disrupt normative ideas of power and consent. These questions can be posed to research students and scholars, for pedagogical purposes, in order to facilitate debate on research ethics with sexual subcultures and subversive communities.

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Kink: A Brief Background

Research on kink over the past two decades has proliferated from what was once a highly stigmatized area of sexualities research. Individuals who practice pup play belong to a specific subculture within the wider kink community.

> "Kink is a spectrum of sexual or erotic activities outside normative versions of sex, undertaken for sensory, emotional, or intellectual pleasure. It tends to include a combination of the exchange of power, or perception of this, the infliction/receiving of pain, the wearing of gear, or the fetishization of body parts or objects. Kink can be practiced individually or in groups and can be organized into communities and subcultures. It is *consensual*, with a shared understanding that the activities are kinky" (Wignall, 2020: 66 original emphasis).

Individuals who engage in pup play must therefore be understood as members of a kink subculture, who consensually exchange power while entering a state of 'play' and willingly adopt the performance of a pup as part of a leisure and pleasure-based kink dynamic. The terms BDSM and kink are often used interchangeably in popular culture references. However, Simula (2021) notes that kink is an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of non-normative sexual interests and practices. BDSM is a subset of these practices and cover a wide range of identity, relationships, practices, and communities. BDSM encompasses three broad subtypes of kink variation: B/D which stands for bondage and discipline, D/S which stands for dominance and submission, and S/M which stands for sadism and masochism.

According to Ortmann & Sprott (2013), terms such as sadism, masochism, and fetish were borrowed and reclaimed from the medical and psychiatric profession, whereas 'kink' was created by early communities and can be used to honor this history and to avoid language that previously pathologized practitioners. Individuals who practice kink or BDSM experiment, play, and/or live with subverting normative power dynamics. It is difficult to coherently articulate kinky individuals as belonging to a set community or social group, as many who practice kink belong to different groups across the social spectrum and "could be said to represent a 'community of practice': a community built through shared enterprise and resources (techniques, language, knowledge, use of objects)" (Fanghanel, 2020: 284). Thus, kink subcultures largely share a specific language to refer to certain sexual acts or roles (e.g. pup, boywife, slave etc.), common protocols, rituals, and rules (e.g. having a safeward when a participants wishes to end or pause kink play) to navigate consent (ibid.), and aesthetic or gear (e.g. gags, cuffs, uniforms, leather etc.). Kink communities can meet one another online (Colosi & Lister, 2019) or in person to learn from each other, engage in 'play', meet partners for short or long-term kink dynamics, and become integrated into wider kink scenes, such as attending BDSM parties. Digital media have helped the sociality of pup communities develop, specifically. Social media platforms such as X/formerly Twitter are used by pups to follow one another and expand their social networks. Further, there are now specific online networks where socials, events, and Pride spaces are organized, coordinated, and collated (e.g., https://puppypride.social/) (Wignall, 2022). Although predominantly thought of as a purely erotic practice, kink generally and pup play specifically may contain romantic and emotional dimensions that can shape how trust, respect, and love are

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built in a relationship. Indeed, there is evidence that some asexual people engage in kink play for sensual inhancement and increased intimacy with their partner (Winter-Gray & Hayfield, 2021).

While breaches of consent and patterns of coercion and abuse can occur in all sexual relationships and dynamics, kink – and BDSM in particular – is differentiated from sexual abuse and psychopathology by the practice of consent in shaping mutually defined and agreed behaviors, roles, and actions (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020). This practice can take several forms, but often involves each partner pre-negotiating their 'limits', agreeing to specific safe words, and deciding on non-verbal cues to indicate withdrawal of consent. For those who are more experienced with kink relationships and play, and who are willing to consent to the unknown, having a less scripted and more organic negoation of consent can be preferable (Weiss, 2011).

Consent and consensual practice in kink communities is prioritized. Those who break consent, such as ignoring safewords or bypassing someone's limits, can face being regarded as dangerous to play with, becoming pariahs in their community (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The preservation of consent is important to a) protect those practicing kink play as individuals and b) protect the reputation of the kink and BDSM community more generally, especially as they play on the fringes of socially normative sexual behavior (ibid). However, consent is not always a strict binary of Yes/No that is made verbally, clearly, and instructively. Indeed, some kink actively involves enjoying the grey area of consent where consent violations are broken, such as in Fanghanel's research, who interviewed a participant that "'does not particularly care' about consent and finds it 'hot' to have her consent violated by the right person" (2020: 280). In some kink contexts, sex can be both consensual and non-consensual at the same time, and, according to Szpilka (2023) can be navigated carefully to lead towards a more fulfilling sexual experience for some BDSM practitioners.

> "Consent is a nuanced and complex topic. Even within the BDSM world where prior negotiation is key, consent is not clear-cut. Instead, we can begin to see that sexual consent consists of nuanced and implicit communication between partners, even when the sexual interaction has been explicitly negotiated…An ethical and nuanced understanding of consent means looking further into how people think about communicating consent while navigating power relations and acknowledging the limits of freedom" (Beres & MacDonald, 2015: 430).

As researchers, we therefore have a delicate yet important task in navigating, respecting, and adhering to these nuances of consent, based on the specific power dynamics played out in kink relationships. Bypassing the power dynamics that have been agreed and exchanged by participants who are involved in kink play risks undermining the consensual practices they are navigating, even if they run counter to established ethical procedures. Further, 'consent' is a culturally framed practice that takes on different meanings in different contexts, communities, and social groups across the globe. Halkoaho, Pietilä, Ebbesen, Karki, & Kangasniemi's (2016) systematic review on cultural aspects of informed consent highlighted that power dynamics – which ultimately shape the ability to give informed consent – are infuenced by cultural and relational ties. For instance, "in cultures where the opinions of family members influence the

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decision-making of participants, individual decision making is not possible or reasonable…The influence of gender on family relationships has been noted, when the husband makes decisions on behalf of his wife. In particular, women in rural communities have expressed their wish to seek permission from their husbands, uncles, or other male relatives before giving consent." (Halkoaho et al., 2016: 705). Thus, there are examples of non-kink power dynamics involving those beyond the primary participant, in which researchers must carefully navigate to avoid disrupting the assumed cultural scripts on obtaining informed consent from familial gatekeepers. This does not necessarily diminish the likelihood that informed consent can be given or that voluntary participation can occur. Rather, it is necessary for researchers to create the right conditions, taking into account our own cultural and community assumptions of power and consent. I continue by reflecting on how pup subculture subverts traditional assumptions of power and consent and explore how researchers may navigate this.

Pup subculture

Although there is dispute over its exact origins, it is largely agreed that pup roleplay emerged out of the broader BDSM scene. Understanding the broad context of kink is therefore important when discussing the power relations that exist in the pup community. Lawson & Langdridge (2019: 1-2) for instance, argue that "puppy play seemingly has its historical roots as a socio-sexual practice in the wider and older BDSM/leatherman scene but has only recently emerged in terms of its visibility to the wider public." Thus, there is little empirical detail as to the interactional and relational intricacies between individuals who belong to this community. Pup play, and the activities that underpin pup relationships, takes place within the broader Dominance/submission segment of BDSM dynamics between those who performatively take on the persona of a canine or dog and their handler, who remains in a human persona but adopts the role of a dog owner or dominant (St. Clair, 2015).

Historically, queer BDSM communities, according to Lawson and Langdridge (2019) adopted a strict leather aesthetic with structured protocols of behavior to underpin the kink activities they engage in. Such behavior traditionally involved submissive 'boys' who were subservient to 'Sirs' or 'Daddies'. In these original leather scenes, boys were entirely subservient to their Sirs, while Sirs were expected to train boys in the desired manner of behavior, speech, posture, and dress; effectively becoming their owners. In order to maintain such protocols, punishment was key to maintaining this structured power dynamic. One method of punishment that reinforced this power structure was to reduce boys to a 'dog slave' with the intention to humiliate the boy for sexual pleasure (see Lawson & Langdridge, 2019). This role has since evolved to be distinct yet connected to the historical role of the boy, as pup individuals are seemingly trained by their handlers or owners to move on all fours, eat from a bowl, and to sit, speak, or bark upon command.

Pups engage in their role-play by adopting the physical posture of a canine, such as panting, standing on all fours, sniffing, kneeling, crouching, as well as embodying the emotional and/or mental personifications of a young dog, such as obedience, loyalty, playfulness, curiosity, and unconditional love. Pup role play is symbolised through the 'gear' adopted by both handlers and pups. Pups often wear dog hoods, muzzles, collars, gloves and paw pads that restrict hand movement and resemble paws, and rubber toys that are anally inserted to resemble a tail

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(Wignall & McCormack, 2017). The restriction of hands through paw gloves is key to this case study, as the pup who approached the researcher could not sign a consent form or complete the survey independently due to his hands being restricted by paw gloves. Mimicking playful canine like behaviors such as barking, growling, whining is also a large part of pup roleplay. If provided by an owner or handler, pups can be fed treats, play with chew toys, sleep on dog beds or in a cage, and drink out of a dog bowl. A kink name is often adopted, which is different to their day-to-day name to differentiate between their pup persona and non-pup life. Pup play can also involve various aspects of discipline, bondage, and sadomasochism.

To the author's knowledge, the majority of empirical work on pups is androcentric and largely focuses on play between men, sitting within the broader queer kink community (e.g., Wignall, 2020; Wignall, 2017; Wignall & McCormack, 2017). Lawson & Langdridge (2019) observe, however, that women are joining the pup community in increasing numbers, but have historically found it difficult to access as, in practice, pup events are usually held in gay male spaces and are largely represented in the public domain by men. Further, Wignall, McCormack, Cook, & Jaspal's (2022) survey of 753 pup play participants found that the majority of responents (78.72%) were men, but 7.78% were women and 5.86% non-binary. In the Wignall et al. survey sample, it was also noted that only 3% of responents identified as straight. Pup culture therefore has its roots in queer kink culture and remains a largely queer-dominated community.

Existing outside of the realms of normative sexual practices (Rubin, 1984) pup play and other fetish activities are viewed as a socially deviant practice. Those interested in BDSM practices were historically pathologized by the psycho-medical sphere, which sought to treat and cure practitioners of their 'sickness'. However, there is now a large body of social scientific evidence that recognizes BDSM as a pleasure-based practice that actually has many psychological benefits and allows individuals to explore more about themselves and their sexuality (Easton, 2013; Fitzgerald & Grossman, 2018). Although there is an abundence of work examining the psychology of BDSM more generally, there is a lack of work exploring the psychological appeal of pup-play specifically. To bridge this gap, Langdridge & Lawson (2019) comprehensively draw on bodies of work that examine wider kink play to provide a phenomenological investigation into the psychology behind and motivations for engaging in puppy play. They find five dimensions of motivation for and meaning of pup play – which include, but are not limited to, sexual pleasure; relaxation, therapy, and escape from self; adult play and vibrant physicality; extending and expressing selfhood; and relationships and community – for those who engage in this practice. Many participants in their sample expressed that the sexual pleasure largely derived from the power play between dominant and submissive roles, in particular being emotionally, relationally, and sexually subservient to a handler. However, inasmuch as many aspects of pup play are not inherently submissive (e.g. escaping from self, relaxation, extending and expressing selfhood)submission *per se* should not be used to define the complex dimensions of pup practice and identity. Indeed, Langdridge & Lawson (2019: 2211) understand that 'puppy play involves more playfulness, less pain, and—most importantly—more agency and independence' as opposed to traditional Dominant/submissive roles, which "is somewhat ironic that the reduction of person to animal within a D/s sexual setting results in a practice where the submissive has more independence."

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Although not all pups have or desire handlers, the use of butt plug tails, chastity devices, and dog collars can aid in the sexual experience of being 'owned' by a handler. The playful performativity of behaving like a dog, such as fetching toys and being given treats, can be used as a relaxation tool that allows one to escape from the stresses of everyday human life. A handler takes responsibiltiy for the pup, relieving them of the adult responsibilities required in their day-to-day lives and facilitating the pup to enter into a 'puppy headspace' that mindfully focuses on the present, stripping away past and future worries. 'When in puppy headspace, an individual adopts the affective, behavioral, and cognitive performances of puppies. While pups do access a different frame of mind in pup headspace, it is important to note that they do not abandon their sense of reason and can still understand consent and the difference between right and wrong" (Matchett & Berkowitz, 2023: 86). It can be quite difficult for some individuals to enter a pup headspace, and can require deep mindfulness, meditation, scripted or ritualistic behaviors, and/or applying pup 'gear'.

Underpinning these sexually and emotionally pleasure-based benefits are the relational dimensions of pup activitity. For instance, the majority of participants in Wignall and McCormack's (2017) study emphasised that puppy play involved deeply intimate and relational connections with other pups and handlers, and the wider pup community. Indeed, the bond between a pup and handler is incredibly intimate, as both share a deep connection that requires navigation to explore the risks, consent, vulnerability, and pleasure with one another and with the wider 'pack' if available or desired. Ultimately, the roleplay of pup and handler is largely founded upon the exchange of power and autonomy to varying degrees, for the purpose of play. The pup who approached the researcher at a local Pride event was with a 'pack' who were under the supervision of their handlers.

In what Matchett & Berkowitz (2023) term the 'new puppy movement', there has been a marked shift in community ideology and perspectives from their historical conceptualization, in that there is less emphasis on 'rules' and a higher emphasis on 'play' and flexibility in how pup play is performed. Contemporary pup culture, according to Wignall (2017) and Wignall & McCormack (2017) emphasizes role-play above 'real life' sexual humiliation. This role-play largely involves taking on the physical and emotional characteristics of a canine companion. Hence why actors adopt and embody 'pup' roles rather than 'dogs' due to the emphasis placed on playful behavior. However, it is observed that the shared sexual kink history between BDSM and pup communities significantly informs some of the dynamics enacted by some pup individuals. Indeed, pup-play shares and involves many aspects of BDSM practices, especially during activities of pup or canine training. Such activities can involve training the pup to obey and serve the handler in particular ways, and can include obedience activities, discipline, reward play, corporal and non-corporal punishments, submission, restraints, and playtime (Lawson & Langdridge, 2019). Thus, pup roleplay is distinct but interrelated to wider kink play and bases its dynamics on similar subversive power dynamics.

The respondent who approached the researcher was wearing a tight leather body suit, a pup mask, a lead, paw gloves, and was thus in roleplay. He was walking on two feet rather than on all fours when interacting with the researcher, whereas his handler was observing our interaction while standing among a wider group of handlers. He disclosed that his handler was in control of his diet and 'feeding time' for 48 hours over the Pride weekend. To the author's

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knowledge, all other studies engaging with members of the pup community have interviewed or surveyed participants who are not actively in roleplay. This piece reflects on the participation of a pup to complete a paper survey while a) in roleplay, b) currently in power exchange with a handler, and c) being physically restricted by pup gear.

Participation in the Survey

Before participating in the survey, the pup introduced himself to me (as the researcher) while I was conducting a paper survey with a group of people who were enjoying the Pride festival. He stated that he had been watching me approach various groups of people and was intrigued over what I was doing. The pup was on his own when he approached and interacted with me, but we were both being observed by his handler who was personally identified by the pup and visible to both of us. The handler was standing, socialising with other handlers and pups a short distance away. I informed the pup of the project I was conducting, and we built a rapport over how our Pride event was 'going' (e.g., whether we were having a good time, what we thought of the Pride march etc.). I asked if he would like to participate and provided him with an information sheet. After reading through the information, he assented to the project[1] verbally but could not sign a consent form and give written consent or fill in the survey by himself as his hands were restricted by paw gloves. I did not ask the pup to remove his paw gloves. I instinctively offered to sign the pup's print name on his behalf and fill out his answers to the questionnaire while he dictated. The Information Commissioner's Office – the UK's independent supervisory body for data protection – specifies that "explicit consent must be expressly confirmed in words. Individuals do not have to write the consent statement in their own words; you can write it for them. However, you need to make sure that individuals can clearly indicate that they agree to the statement – for example by signing their name or ticking a box next to it" (ICO, 2018: 4). The UK does not have specific regulations that mandate written consent. Indeed, the ICO further explain that consent must be freely given, specific and informed, and that an individual must clearly and unambiguously affirm consent through means outlined in Recital 32 of the GDPR "such as by a written statement, including by electronic means, or an oral statement." (ibid.: 26). For the ICO, "clear affirmative action means someone must take deliberate and specific action to opt in or agree to the processing, even if this is not expressed as an opt-in box. For example, other affirmative opt-in methods might include signing a consent statement, *oral confirmation*, a binary choice presented with equal prominence, or switching technical settings away from the default" (ibid: 26, emphasis added). If taking oral consent, the ICO emphasises that "you need to make sure you keep a record of the script" (ibid.: 29). In this case, the consent form acted as a statement informing respondents of the requirements of participation, and how their data would be used. The pup indicated verbally that he agreed with the statement, and I signed his name on his behalf, keeping a record of this consent in line with GDPR guidance.

The survey opened with four open self-declaration questions asking for the respondent's age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. The main survey contained closed-ended questions such as 'would you report your hate crime experience to the police?' with a series of check boxes, for example 'always, only on some occasions, never.' The survey finalized with a comment section

[2]Assent is an expression of approval or agreement to participate in an activity. It is often used in lieu of 'consent' within research on children (see Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

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where respondents could write down any additional comments. Each section was dictated by the pup and written verbatim or, in the case of check boxes, checked by the researcher. The handler was visibly observing this interaction from a distance and did not intervene; the researcher and the handler never interacted.

Traditionally, respondents would fill out a survey, individually, and would only consult the researcher if they are present when raising a query over a certain question. The dynamics of this scenario meant that every response required being dictated to the researcher, so that it could be filled out on behalf of the pup. Further, the pup disclosed that he was under close supervision of his handler, who had taken control of his 'body' for the Pride event. For example, he was instructed not to drink or eat 12 hours prior to and during Pride, feeding times would be under the handler's control for 48 hours, but that he could enjoy himself separately with others under his handler's supervision. This created a unique ethical dynamic between the researcher and respondent, specifically in terms of the power relations being navigated. It also caused potential violations of anonymity whereby the pup had to orate his responses in front of other people while I dictated these responses on his behalf.

Ethical guidance (see British Society of Criminology, 2015) indicates that informed consent should be gained from a respondent, whereby full details of the project are provided to the individual participating so that they can give consent that is fully informed of how their data will be used. However, this case involved a respondent who had consensually given 'ownership', or partial ownership of himself to a handler, who had taken control of the pup's decisions and individual agency to a large degree, potentially impacting the pup's ability to provide consent that is free from their handler's permission.

Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall (2021) have interviewed participants who engaged in 24/7 Dominance/submission dynamics, such as those who practice total power exchange (TPE); the giving up of total control to another person in a consensual situation so that all decisions are made by that person. The authors maintain that 24/7 dynamics are "a socially constructed, consensual, full-time adherence to kink related roles and behaviors untethered to time-limited scenes, woven into other life domains, and operating as an umbrella term to encompass other perpetual power dynamics" (Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall, 2021: 1). Although they achieved informed consent from participants to carry out their fieldwork, they do not offer details as to the exact nature of this consent, such as whether the Dominant or Handler consented on behalf of the slave or whether both slave and Dominant had to consent to participate. In addition, by contrast, most pup dynamics tend to be roleplay orientated and thus aspects of the power exchange are time-limited and negotiated flexibly. To the author's knowledge, all previous work recruiting pups to participate in research has largely been conducted on pup individuals when not in role play. Further, this research has been conducted online rather than in person (e.g., Wignall, 2017), bypassing the physical limitations of completing consent forms and filling in a survey when restricted by pup gear such as the paw gloves restricting the ability to physically hold a pen and sign a paper survey in this case study. This presents a unique ethical quandary as to how to achieve consent from those who subvert normative power relations when in roleplay and/or in power exchange.

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There are many instances when participants may be unable to physically sign a consent form, such as people with certain disabilities. What is unique about this case is the direct, consensual transfer of power between two or more individuals as part of their relationship dynamic, and how social researchers navigate that transfer of power to honor consensual practices – including the ability to give consent when in 'play' – between participants. The researcher accepted the pup's verbal consent without the need for approval of the handler and filled out the survey on his behalf. It is important to stress that this was an instinctive decision and is not advocated as best or worst practice in this reflection. The unique power dynamics described require careful navigation and reflection, presenting specific ethical considerations that ought to be discussed for the purposes of ethics-related discourse and research. Before providing my own reflections on the case described and the protocols followed, I pose the following questions that sexuality scholars may wish to consider. These questions can in turn be posed, for the purpose of research pedagogy, with undergraduate and postgraduate students to discuss how best to navigate scenarios where unique power dynamics are upheld and displayed. Specifically, these questions center the parameters of the pup's freedoms and challenge the prevailing ethical concept of 'freely given consent' within traditional research practice.

Questions:

1. Should the pup's handler have also been approached to provide consent for his pup to participate in the survey?
2. What were the issues of upholding the pup's anonymity in this case, and how could these be rectified?
3. Has the researcher executed their responsibilities in a manner that is respectful of the pup and handler?
4. How should the researcher proceed if there was disagreement between the (dissenting) handler and (assenting) pup over whether to participate or not?
5. Did the researcher undermine the power dynamics displayed and performed in the pup/handler relationship?
6. If the handler – based on their established power dynamics – has a right to compel the pup to participate, how could the researcher negotiate this to ensure they fulfil their obligation to their participant and that best practice for data collection is upheld for the integrity of their project?
7. How can researchers navigate disruptive and non-normative power relations when accessing and seeking consent?

Reflections on ethics

The research project explored the experiences of anti-LGBT hate crime in the North-East of England. The project was undertaken as part of a doctoral research program and was granted ethical approval by the author's University ethics committee. Gaining informed consent through the use of documentation – consent forms and information sheets – and retaining individual anonymity was a key condition of being granted ethical approval. Deviation from this, with this specific respondent was not reported to the committee as a) written consent *was* taken from the pup respondent, although dictated by the researcher on behalf of the pup, and b) reflections on this scenario occurred by having general conversations on methodologies and ethics with

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colleagues and other doctoral graduates after the project was completed. It was only after a significant amount of time following completion of the project that these reflections came to be. Traditionally, it is considered best practice to obtain a written confirmation of informed consent before data collection commences (British Society of Criminology, 2015). However, there are circumstances where this may not always be possible, such as when trying to recruit children, people with low levels of literacy, and physically and/or visually impaired individuals. Potential issues and difficulties in gaining written consent should be addressed in the research plans prior to collecting data. Realistically, however, researchers can only plan for foreseen potential issues that may arise during data collection. The researcher obtained ethical approval for the hate crime project prior to commencing fieldwork. However, the ethical dilemmas highlighted were not a foreseen occurrence in the planning of the research.

Where a participant is unable to physically sign a written form, as in this case, arguably, verbal consent is more appropriate (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2010). Verbal consent may be suitable where: there are physical or literacy issues, no identifying information is being collected, cultural or political apprehensions exist in signing an agreement, there are disclosure concerns by the existence of a paper record, or time for an interview or survey is limited. It must be affirmed, however, that when verbal consent is opted for, it is not a replacement for proper planning and preparation of data collection. As the pup could not physically sign the consent form or fill in the survey, I accepted his verbal consent and filled the survey out on his behalf while the answers were dictated by the pup. The oration of these responses in front of other people passing by or by the other groups previously surveyed who were seated in the local vicinity, potentially disclosed the pup's responses to others and compromised the anonymity of his responses. On reflection, it would have been more appropriate to ask the pup whether he wanted to orate his answers to the survey in a more private setting, or, given the bustling and vibrant context of Pride events which limits access to private spaces, asked if he wanted to return to his 'pack' – who were all gathered in a group – so he could be with other members of his community, and potentially a more comfortable and secure space. In addition to this, it would have been methodologically appropriate to approach the pup's pack generally to explore whether any potential respondents could be sampled. Although, I did do basic 'check ins' with the pup respondent to assess how he wanted to participate, and the pup gave no indication of being uncomfortable at any time, a more thorough probe of his comfort would have built a stronger rapport and shown a higher consideration for his potential needs as a pup respondent.

Individuals engaged in kink are actively playing with power in complex ways and reshaping existing power structures by ultimately playing with the boundaries and edges of pleasure. It involves playing with identity, roles, rules, boundaries, risk, and the exchange of power to varying degrees, including the ability to consensually transfer consent. When reflecting on these boundaries, Thompson and Miss Couple (2020) maintain that a key issue for researchers is navigating the politics of one's primary contact with the kink community. In the case of Thompson's field research, which took place in a professional BDSM household and dungeon, this manifested as her losing access to existing participants if there were conflicts or if they left on bad terms, consequently losing the ability to hear a more critical side of the profession in which she was observing. This also involves careful navigation of the power exchange and power play between BDSM practitioners, and in this case, the transfer of power and agency from pup to handler. Given the historic context of pathologising individuals for engaging in kink

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practices (Turley & Butt, 2015), it is improper to reinforce normative notions of consent on those who engage in power exchange, as it undermines the established roles within kink relationships. By not fully checking in with the pup respondent, for example by asking if I should consult his handler, offer more private venues, or ask if he would feel more comfortable participating in the company of other members of his community, it is possible that I undermined these established roles. One may argue, therefore, that in order to respect and navigate the intimate politics of the pup dynamic while in roleplay, the pup's handler should have been approached to provide consent for his pup to participate in the survey. The scenario described throughout was 'an unforseen' scenario that I, as the researcher, did not plan for. I dealt with it, in action, and took my cues from the pup by building a rapport with him, in the same way I would with any participant. On reflection, if this scenario occurred again, I would ask the pup more specifically whether his handler would like him to participate in the research and whether we should confirm with his handler if it was okay for him to participate. The pup would then have more optionality to consider whether they could provide solo consent and more time to check and confirm with their handler to maintain the established protocols that had been established for the given play time.

The handler, having been granted authority over the pup – in the context of this dynamic – arguably has the power to affect or shape the pup's ability to offer independent, informed, and freely given consent for participation. I argue that the actions of researchers must be respectful of a participant's agency, which in this case is inclusive of the dynamic between pup and handler. Thus, one must be attuned to whether their own actions appear to impinge upon the established boundaries of participants from pup communities – for example, by not approaching the handler for their permission – and consider how their conduct may cause embarrassment or conflict between either party. To the author's knowledge, most research on kink dynamics has been conducted when participants are not in play. However, in Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall's (2021) study on 24/7 power exchange, the participants were already known to the researchers through their own community links to kink subcultures – so were not approached spontaneously while conducting a different research project – and were recruited as co-consenting couples rather than as individuals. Co-consenting as a couple – where both Dominant and submissive consent as a pair to participate in research – is somewhat distinct from a person in a submissive role individually consenting without their Dominant's input or co-consent. In their research, both parties navigate their relational power dynamics and (seemingly) co-consent to being interviewed for a specific project aimed at kink dynamics. However, the pup participant in the case described spontaneously approached the researcher and participated in a project that was not specifically kink oriented.

In the case described, I followed what instinctively 'felt right' at the time and took verbal consent on behalf of the pup participant, in view of their physical restrictions. I instinctively wanted to be inclusive to everyone LGBTQ at the Pride event and thought it would be interesting to gain a response from someone who was part of the pup community. I felt intrigued over their dynamic and built a rapport on that basis. The pup was intrigued that I was giving out paper surveys and moving between groups of people. Overall, we had a friendly rapport and I felt I did my best to facilitate his participation in the survey, in the moment. It is upon reflection that questions over best conduct are posed. Readers may consider that when the researcher appears to be presented with a willing participant who, after reading an information sheet, states explicitly

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that they are happy to proceed, informed consent has been provided. Especially as the pup gave no indication that they would need to consult their handler first. Fundamentally, in the moment, the pup wanted to participate, and the researcher wanted the pup to participate. After participation, we carried on a rapport until I departed. It instinctively felt like a positive encounter that included friendly rapport with a research respondent. It is with hindsight and reflection that I question whether I carried out best methodological practice to suit the specific relational dynamics of the pup respondent. As with all ethical procedures, determining best practice must be contextual, nuanced, flexible, and tailored to specific dynamics and settings. I argue that researchers must be mindful of the specific boundaries and rules that kink participants have arranged as part of an exchange of power, when including them - particularly those who are adopting a submissive role, such as pups - in their research. Given the paucity of methodological and ethical commentary in this field, this reflection advances the mindfulness of sexuality positive research protocols to consider the relational dynamics that involve consent and power transferal. It further contributes towards a reflexive understanding of how researchers may unintentionally undermine subversive but pre-arranged sexual scripts and power dynamics and provides discussion on how to navigate these potential pitfalls.

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