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# THE MESSAGE OF THE MUZZLE: A STUDY IN STIGMA

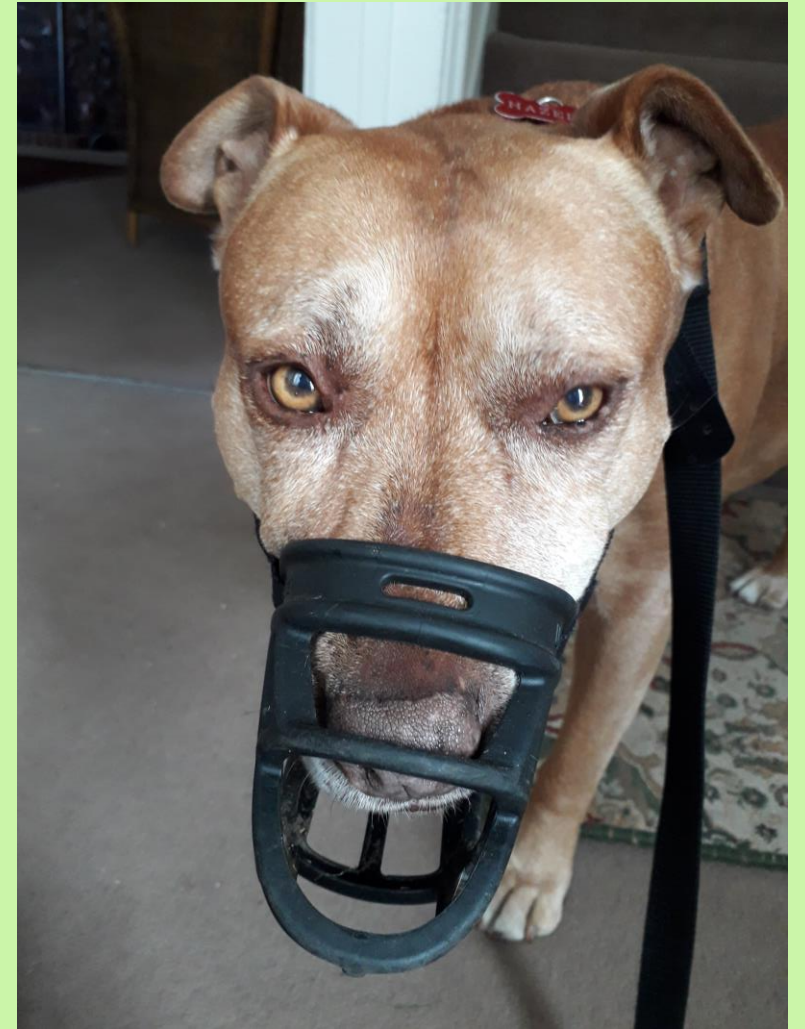
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# BACKGROUND

- The personal is political!
- Utilising unique access and insight
- Utilising previous research on labelling, management of stigma and people's reactions to stigma
- Twining et al. (2000): How Pit Bull owners deal with the stigma of banned dogs.
- Research often on how 'most people' react to stigma. Instead, I studied the *variations* in how the general public – 'most people' – reacted to a muzzled dog.



# METHODOLOGY

- Starting point: Ethnographic study of 'status' dog owners (Kaspersson 2008, 2018)
- Field journal called the Dog Log (see pic)
- Diary based autoethnographic study of reactions to the dog
- Utilising difficult to get information
- Allows for thick description but depends on self and reflexivity
- Small-scale, exploratory and hypothesis-generating study (Harding 2003)
- Emphasis on description and analysis of the reactions to the visible stigma of the muzzle

PLACE: Southwark Park, 21 Oct - 09

PRESENT: Me and Hazel, Bosch and his dad

Haven't seen B. since told about the incident. B. was let off lead, which I reacted a bit to. The other dog is fine, the owner came round with 'flowers, chocolate and bottle'. Nothing more from the police.

Told that B. had been attacked at two different occasions by a huge mastiff, off lead. He had bitten B. in the neck and B's dad had confronted the mastiff's owner. The owner wasn't concerned because B. was the only dog he had ever attacked 'he is nice to all other dogs'.

Reflection: How does he dare to let B. off lead after the incident?

Irresponsible behaviour of m. owner - so if only me it's OK? Not real then?

(Also saw Ruby at distance. she was put on lead so she couldn't run to Hazel)

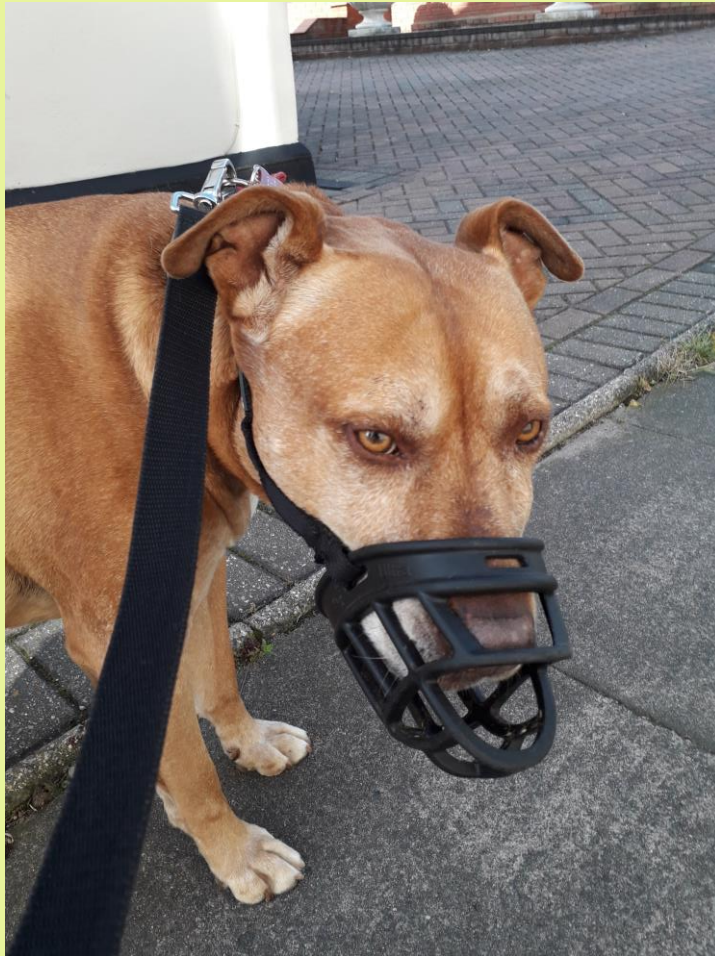


# The Dangerous Dogs Act

- DDA was put together and implemented very hastily in 1991
- Banning of four specified breeds: American Pit Bull Terrier, Dogo Argentino, Fila Brasileira, Japanese Tosa. XL Bully added 2024
- Illegal to own, breed, sell or give away
- Exemption orders can be granted
- Exempted dogs must be on lead and 'securely fitted with a muzzle sufficient to prevent it biting any person' (DDA Section 7.1.a) in public.



# BACK TO BASICS: GOFFMAN, GARFINKEL AND BECKER



- **Stigma** – imputes imperfections
- **Stigma symbols** – draw attention to a debasing identity
- Strength of stigma depending on **visibility**, **known-about-ness** and **obtrusiveness** (Goffman 1963)
- The muzzle as a successful **degradation ceremony** (Garfinkel 1956)
- **Labelling** – the muzzle makes the dog an outsider and people treat it accordingly (Becker 1963)
- **Public Stigma** – ‘what a naïve public does when they endorse the prejudice about that group’ (Corrigan 2004:616).

# RESULTS:

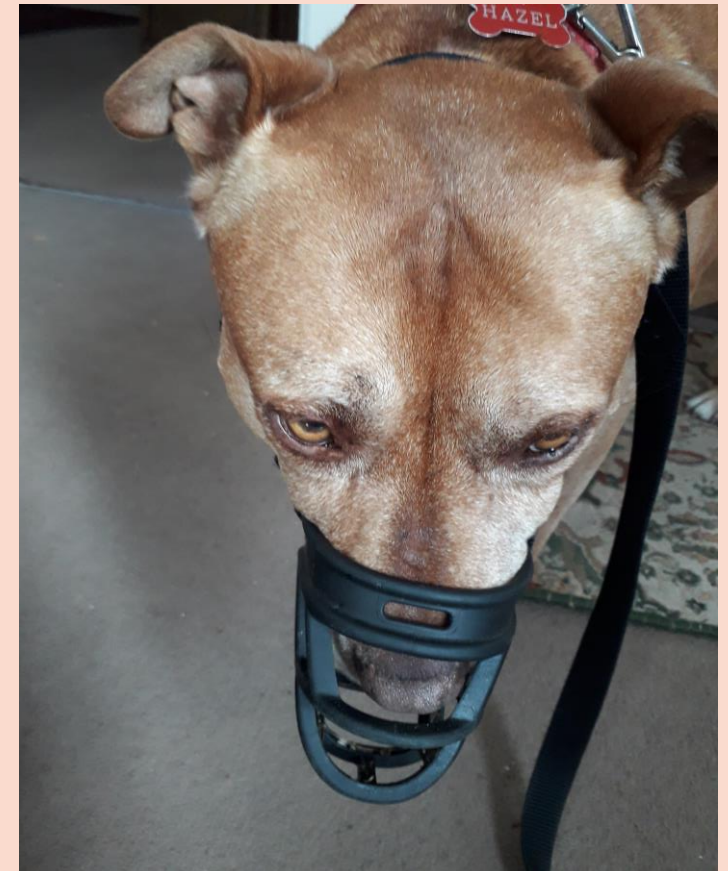
## REACTIONS TO THE MUZZLE

- Reactions categorised into four different groups depending on the degree of stigma attached to the muzzle and differences in the message sent out.
- Goffman (1963:62): it is 'possible for signs which mean one thing to one group to mean something else to another group, the same category being designated but differently characterized.'
- Lorber (1967): Two types of deviance.
  - **Deliberate Deviance** – wilful and malicious.
  - **Accidental Deviance** – no wish to be deviant (illness, inherited defects). Mitigated deviance, seen as less serious.
- Different reactions depending on whether the muzzle is seen as sign of deliberate deviance – dangerous, aggressive and biting dog – or accidental deviance – the dog itself doesn't want to be deviant, it can't help it falls under DDA.



# NON-DOG PEOPLE

- General, non-dog owning public.
- Assume the muzzle means the dog is human aggressive
- Non-dog owning people more often see Pit Bulls as ‘naturally vicious’ (Burrows & Fielding 2005) = ‘deliberately deviant’.
- ‘It is often what one is perceived to “be,” more than what one is believed to have done, that gives rise to stigmatization’ (Schur 1983:22).
- **Subtle** and **direct** manifestations of breed stigma in informal interactions with other people
- Instead of being seen as a safety measure, the muzzle is often scaring people, making them think the dog poses a danger (deliberate deviance).



# NON-DOG PEOPLE

- Hazel sat down to wait to cross the road. A little boy left the side of his mother to go and stroke Hazel, who in turn wagged her tail. The boy's mother ran to him, grabbed his arm and told him not to stroke the dog. I said she's fine and the mother replied: 'It's got a muzzle on and it scares me' at which point the light changed and we all crossed the road. (Pepys Road, June 2010).
- 'Look, the dog also's got a face covering on!' (Luffman Road, July 2020).
- 'Dad, why does that dog have an oxygen mask on?' (on way to the Bridgehouse Meadows, September 2008).
- On the way home I overtook a mother with a pram and two children, a boy and a girl, about four to five years old. As I passed them with Hazel the boy lightly stroked it. He asked his mother why the dog had this 'thing around its nose' and the mother answered: 'It's so it can't bite little boys like you.' At that point the boy froze with fear as he had touched the dog (on way from Nunhead Cemetery, May 2009).



# DOG PEOPLE

- Dog owners and dog loving people in general. Assume the muzzle means the dog is dog (and/or animal) aggressive.
- Relates to known-aboutness – many reasons a dog is muzzled. Accidental deviance.
- Asking for reason of muzzling
- Other dog owners feel assured by muzzled dogs as they know their dogs will not be bitten, but they do not consider the vulnerability of the muzzled dog, which is defenceless.
- **Conditional disclosure** (of breed) when the ‘audience’ is someone with knowledge of offsetting positive qualities (Harding 2003:583) such as peaceful socialisation between the dogs had already taken place or non-hostile questions asked about the muzzle.
- **Disclosure strategies** (Ricciardelli and Mooney 2018) might change with time as when people got to know Hazel, her PB status mattered less and less. People saw ‘Hazel the dog’ rather than ‘Hazel the muzzled PB’.



# DOG PEOPLE

- ‘Is it because of the DDA or because it doesn’t get on with other dogs?’ (Horn Park, August 2018).
- ‘So your dog eats poo as well?’ (Horn Park, March 2020).
- The Staffie Pit Bull cross Billie’s owner implied muzzling was dog abuse and claimed that ‘in a few months’ time you can take it off’, despite my assurances that my dog *is* aggressive to some dogs and once bit a dog in the leg. ‘Yes, but it was the leg, not the neck!’ he responded (Nunhead Cemetery, September 2009).
- A dog owner did not see the reason why I asked him to keep his off-lead dog away from Hazel by stating ‘but it’s muzzled, innit’ (Elmstead Woods, November 2016).

# PIT BULL PEOPLE

- Take the muzzle as a sign the dog is 'vicious' but this is considered a positive trait
- Does not separate between human or dog aggression. Aggression not seen as an issue that needs to be dealt with.
- Muzzling rarely seen as compliance with DDA. Very little knowledge about the DDA.





# PIT BULL PEOPLE

- A neighbour of mine – who claimed to own a Pit Bull, which I never saw – lamented when he saw my dog muzzled for the first time: ‘So she’s started biting now’ (Casella Road, July 2008).
- I was a bit cautious with Hazel as she got annoyed the first time she met Prime [a Pit Bull] as he almost immediately tried to hump her (Prime was with his mum at that occasion). Prime’s dad asked about Hazel’s age and if we wanted to breed her. I told him Hazel is spayed. He asked why on earth we had had her spayed and I explained I don’t have the time, space or knowledge to have puppies. Besides, as she is registered on the Dangerous Dogs’ Register, she had to be. Prime’s dad didn’t know about the Dangerous Dogs Act so I explained. He was almost aggressive towards me (as I told about Hazel being spayed) and spat out: ‘Is she micro chipped as well?’ and I confirmed she is. (Bridgehouse Meadows, May 2009).

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# PIT BULL SPECIFIC HOSTILITY

- Overlaps with non-dog people and dog people but **breed stigma** is the defining feature.
- Know what a Pit Bull looks like.
- The muzzle signifies an aggressive Pit Bull who should not be allowed to live as it is dangerous.
- Can be hostility towards Pit Bulls in general or hostility towards the specific dog. Sometimes not possible to discern which type of hostility.



## PIT BULL-SPECIFIC HOSTILITY

- Just as I arrived at the market outside Rivington's a man on the other side of the road started shouting that my dog should not be alive, that I was breaking the law as my dog was banned, that it killed people etc. I shouted back that the dog was exempted and properly registered, but the man just kept on screaming and didn't hear me. Other people started staring, but no one said or did anything (Antique markets, Greenwich, June 2016).
- The neighbours' harassment has escalated. No longer just verbal abuse and rumours about all the biting the dog has done. Yesterday: car scratched with keys. Today: the air let out of all the tyres. Half the day spent at the police station. Just as well we are moving, can't be too soon. (Facebook post, 13 May 2010).



# PIT BULL-SPECIFIC HOSTILITY: 'TURNING'

- This group does not necessarily know what a Pit Bull looks like or why a dog wears a muzzle, but they know the stereotypes and stigma surrounding them and they attach a negative meaning to them.
- Once breed is known the behaviour alters, sometimes dramatically.
- Similar to the social reaction Kitsuse (1962) identifies as **explicit disapproval** and **immediate withdrawal**.
- Turning takes place both in the presence and absence of the dog.
- Example of **discredited knowledge** (Morrison 1983) – as my dog was a Pit Bull my dog owning experience could not be the same as that of other dog owners. My knowledge is discredited because my dog is discredited.

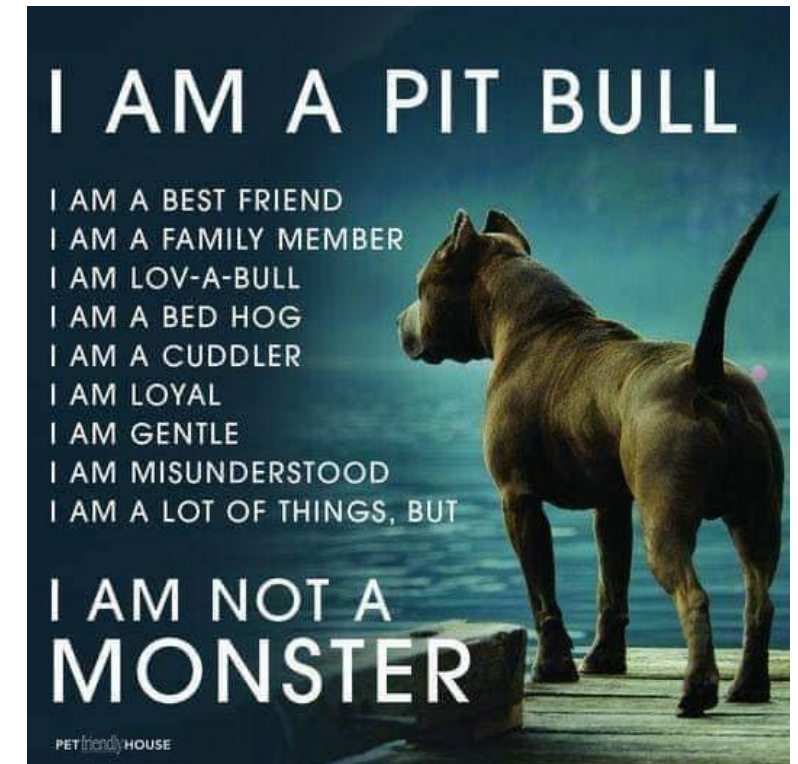
## PIT BULL-SPECIFIC HOSTILITY: 'TURNING'

- I was walking home with Hazel and we passed a man who was waiting at the bus stop. He asked about the muzzle and I explained. He withdrew when he heard Hazel is a Pit Bull and spat out 'yeah, they always turn eventually'. I couldn't help thinking that the only turning I have experienced is of people when they learn Hazel is a PB (on the way home from Chinbrook Meadows, May 2019).
- A colleague commented in a dog conversation when my dog's breed became clear: 'I would never have a dog that eats children' (at work, June 2011).



# DISCUSSION

- Unfortunate that the muzzle as a safety feature sends out a message of dangerousness
- News reporting of dog bite incidents (especially fatalities) often within a frame of dangerousness
  - Focus on breed, individual dog, ignoring context
- Risk-based reporting of dog bite fatalities 'negate any political discussion of the benefits of policies that [...] could serve to reduce incidents of victimisation' (Orrit & Harper 2015:249).
- Stigma can be diminished by protesting against inaccurate media reporting and public stigma
  - Education
  - Contact - Breed ambassador
- DDA aims to encourage responsible ownership by penalising the owner of *any* dog deemed dangerous (e.g. due to breed not deed)





# CONCLUSIONS

- The muzzle sends out a strong negative message and functions as a stigma symbol
- Reinforces people's negative perceptions
- The muzzle as a preventive measure that makes things worse
- The less a person is involved with dogs, the stronger the negative message of the muzzle
- Media has a role to play
- Given the breed stigma and negative reactions from the public, it isn't surprising that dog owners are reluctant to muzzle their dogs.
- Pity people cannot see beyond the negative press of 'status' dogs (and their owners) and recognise muzzling is a responsible measure taken by responsible dog owners.



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