

# Bois and grrrls meet their daddies and mommies on gender playgrounds: Gendered age play in the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM communities

**Robin Bauer**

Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University Stuttgart,  
Germany

Sexualities

0(0) 1–17

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1363460716676987

sex.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Based on a qualitative empirical study of les-bi-trans-queer BDSM in the USA and Europe, this article discusses sexual practices that explore the significance of age, gender and sexuality and their simultaneous workings to produce desires, embodiments, identities, intimacies and kinships that transgress and partially transform hetero-normative social concepts. Queer 'age play' and 'intergenerational play' practices involved processes of becoming-child in the Deleuzian sense, renegotiating masculinity and femininity in relation to age, power and sexist stereotypes, as well as compensation for queer- and gender-related limitations experienced in one's own childhood.

## Keywords

Age, BDSM, femininity, masculinity, queer

Research has traditionally described BDSM in terms of pathology, violence and criminality. In contrast, recent empirical studies have approached the phenomenon within a framework of sexual diversity, characterizing it as a consensual activity and resulting in a more realistic picture of what BDSM practitioners actually do. Yet there still is a lack of research to understand these practices, relationships,

---

## Corresponding author:

Dr Robin Bauer, DHBW Stuttgart, Fakultät Sozialwesen, Rotebühlstr. 131, 70197 Stuttgart, Germany.  
Email: Robin.Bauer@gmx.de

identities and communities in a differentiated way (see Bauer, 2013: 11–16; Langdridge and Barker, 2007). This study is the first to focus on the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM community and its particular practices, addressing the lack of knowledge about this particular subset of practitioners as well as attempting to question heteronormative and binary gender biases in the field of research, which have so far for instance neglected particular queer BDSM practices such as gender play.

I conducted 49 qualitative semi-structured interviews in person with self-identified dyke/lesbian, bi/pansexual and queer cis- and transwomen, femmes, butches, transgender butches, transmen and genderqueers<sup>1</sup> between the ages of 20 and 60 from the USA and western Europe who practice BDSM. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, slightly edited for grammar and flow, anonymized and authorized by interview partners.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were analysed within the framework of the open coding paradigm from grounded theory, refraining from building hypotheses *ex ante* (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). When referring to the interviews, I use past tense to emphasize that these are snapshots of a particular moment in time.

The sample was mainly recruited through activist and organizer networks and snowball-sampling from the women's BDSM communities, which consists of the variety of genders just mentioned. I therefore refer to this community as the dyke + queer BDSM community, to do justice to both its significance as women's space as well as to the identities of the individual members. This variety of genders and gender expressions is further complemented by identities created and assumed for play (see Bauer, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2014). In this article, pronouns of choice are respected (he, she, ze), following the community and trans\* activist etiquette. While this community is highly diverse when it comes to gender, body types, age, sexuality and relationship practices, it is mostly populated by *white*<sup>3</sup> and often highly educated dyke + queers. This is reflected in my sample as well. Therefore one has to bear in mind that the space to explore provided by dyke + queer BDSM is not equally accessible to all mostly owing to subtle normative and effectively exclusionary dynamics. For instance, gender and age are mostly renegotiated within a framework of *whiteness* as a hardly ever acknowledged norm (Bauer, 2008, 2014; Weiss, 2011).

On all levels, my academic work (research questions, field access, manner of conducting interviews, analysis, presenting results) is informed by my positioning as a *white* German living in Belgium, a queer/gay polyamorous transman and BDSM top with a lower-class and activist background who is struggling with chronic diseases. Owing to certain inclusions, exclusions and my own biography of transition, I have roots in the dyke + queer scene and have fought for inclusion of transmen in the gay male scene for more than a decade.

In this article, I will first illustrate how dyke + queer BDSM functions as a space for exploring difference in general and next provide a definition of the particular case of 'age play'. From the various possibilities that age play offers, I will discuss how 'intergenerational play' faces boundaries through the necessity to distance oneself from seeming to endorse real-life paedophilia and sexual abuse. Then I will interpret certain age play practices as 'becoming-child' within a Deleuzian

framework and finally show how interview partners use age play to explore alternative masculinities and femininities.

## **Dyke+queer BDSM as space for exploring difference**

BDSM provided les-bi-trans-queer BDSMers with a potential space to explore differences, as femme dyke Mistress Mean Mommy explained:

We get to explore. For me it's no different than reading a book. I always use as an example James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I can't understand what it's like to be a 15-year-old Irish boy in an all boys' boarding school. But I can read the book and have a sense of what it's like. So if you wanna go out and buy a school-boy's uniform and wear it and have somebody be the school-master and I get to play it, now I have a sense of what it's like, even as me in my body as a woman. I'll never be a 15-year-old boy. I get to experience what I think a 15-year-old boy would be like. And that might be freeing in some way. Maybe it will give me a different perspective. Maybe I'll suddenly understand something I never understood about young boys.

Mistress Mean Mommy's example of not simply reading a book, but acting out its characters in role play demonstrates how BDSM not only facilitates understanding different perspectives intellectually, but through an embodied experience. Moreover, through assuming a different gender, age, and class position, the player is trying to connect to someone else's way of being in the world. Mistress Mean Mommy's statement also highlights the simultaneity of differing realities: She experiences being a 15-year-old boy in a grown woman's body. Therefore, she is aware of the fact that whatever understanding she gains is not identical to the actual boy, but *her* embodied and affective perspective on his position. Yet it may facilitate connections across social boundaries: 'maybe I'll suddenly understand something I never understood about young boys'. In these practices of exploring, interview partners were aware of the partialness and embodied situatedness of their perspectives and therefore able to explore realities different from their own.

Transgressing individual and/or socio-cultural boundaries may generate (or prevent) erotic experiences through violations of taboos. Purely transgressive acts are those that generate desires and pleasures<sup>4</sup> in the crossing of boundaries without changing the status quo. Transformative acts on the other hand additionally create new meanings that may hold political potentials beyond the private or semi-public BDSM setting. They result in a shifting of boundaries: the individual emerges changed, for instance with a new perspective or a different kind of being or acting in the world (see also Beckmann, 2009). Playing with gender, age and sexuality provided interview partners with transformative experiences, while playing with class, immobility and sensory deprivation mostly remained transgressive and race seemed too great a taboo to engage with consciously in this particular sample, in which *white* and able-bodied subjectivities remain the unspoken normative reference (see Bauer, 2008, 2014).<sup>5</sup>

## Exploring age

Interview partners explored age, age differences and age-related roles in various ways. Age play might be sexual as in ‘incest play’ or not sexual, for instance going to an amusement park as parent and child. ‘Age play’ is used as an umbrella term for a variety of practices in the community. Based on the analysis of my data, they can be specified as: *Age play*, *Intergenerational play* and *Kinship play*.

1. *Age play*. Someone embodies a role younger or older than their real-life age. This enabled interview partners to choose roles independently of their actual age, race and gender. That is, a formally older person can be a ‘child’ to a formally younger partner and women can play as ‘Daddies’ and ‘bois’. ‘Children’ can also interact with each other without any intergenerational power dynamics involved. Some interview partners spelled their roles grrrl, boi, Daddi and Mommi to stress that these are role play personas. I therefore use these terms when referring to the roles or identities within the BDSM context and the regular spelling when referring to real-life children and parents or their hegemonic cultural constructions. Interview partners did not reflect upon the racist and classist tradition of calling grown-up men of colour or men working in the service industry ‘boy’ in order to deny them full masculinity,<sup>6</sup> nor did they scrutinise the sexist tradition of belittling grown-up women by calling them ‘girls’. The different spelling could also be used to distance oneself from these usages, though.

Despite this potential to disconnect role age from formal age, 20-year-old queer trans/genderqueer/butch dyke Scout encountered attitudes re-naturalizing age at a play party:

And I’m walking in and people were: ‘Look at the little boi all dressed up!’ And so I say: ‘I’m a Daddi’, they’re like: ‘Oh, that’s cute’. And it really tripped them seeing me play and walking into a Daddi energy. And they were: ‘Oh, he’s serious.’

A real-life young person was not taken seriously as Daddi, reinforcing and naturalizing social constructions of certain social roles as dependent upon ‘biological’ age. Butch-loving femme Lisa, who was in her 30s, preferred being 16 sexually and wondered: ‘How long can I do that without losing my dignity?’<sup>7</sup> She acknowledged that older bodies were still accepted as grrrls in dyke + queer BDSM spaces. But she still felt awkward as a grrrl in a body that is read as much older.

2. *Intergenerational play*. The main dynamic is a significant age difference between partners, either real (thus no age play involved) or performed. This often took the form of *responsible adult play*. The roles Daddi and Mommi were mostly not understood as imitating blood relations, but as archetypal, as queer transgender butch Jacky pointed out:

Because for me, even if I use this term Daddi/grrrl, it doesn’t have to be explicitly really a kinship relation between a real dad and the daughter. Rather, to me it is about the dynamic between this adult part and this younger part.

Responsible adult play stressed the nurturing or disciplining function of a caretaker, or might utilize the betrayal of responsibility through (sexually) abusive scenarios. Often these aspects were also combined, as Mistress Mean Mommy described herself:

I totally identify in my top dom[inant] persona as a Mommi. Very sweet, very nurturing. This is how I am with everybody, making sure they're loved and then doing something really painful. And going 'oh, poor baby' and being very sympathetic.

She expanded her generally nurturing and loving personality, the archetypical mother figure, into her BDSM life, but added 'a little cruel twist'. While this article focuses on Mommi and Daddi play, other role play may also include intergenerational dynamics implicitly or explicitly, such as teacher/student, drill sergeant/recruit and so on.

**3. Kinship play.** The roles are designed to resemble actual kinship and family relations. The sexual version is sometimes referred to as *incest play*. But none of my interview partners played as their real-life family of origin personas; nobody was the grrrl to someone impersonating their real-life father. It was the kinship structure that was played at, but with characters other than real-life family members.

Interview partners described the ways power operates in intergenerational and kinship play as complex appropriations and renegotiations of the social construction of these categories and relationships. On the one hand, the framework for this type of role play implies a clear hierarchy because the responsible adult is in a superior power position enabling them to make decisions on behalf of the child/youth, who is dependent on the caretaker. Children are still largely depicted as powerless and lacking agency in society (Kehily, 2004: 5). But in age play, power is flowing both ways, as pansexual genderqueer femme Neila explained:

Playing on top in age play is in principle a lot about having more power to start with. But therefore also having more responsibility and therefore having a very special kind of affection, that kind of weakens one somehow again. So in a moment where one is not so clear and structured and rational anymore, where a specific kind of affection develops, a weakness emerges as well.

Thus power was connected to a high degree of responsibility and a specific emotional bond towards the child. These parental emotions and duties shift the power balance in favour of the child; it is acceptable for children to demand care and attention from their parents. These affects and dynamics created in age play seem to resonate with an analysis of real-life parent-child power effects, as sociologist Norbert Elias observed that a child is in a power position concerning its parents because of the social context. It makes the parents receptive to their children's needs because of the value they see in them (1998). The child can enter into a power game and use the responsibility of the parent to its own advantage through

manipulation. Historically, this has been the result of a class-specific shift in the role of the child in the family. Instead of contributing materially to the family (as economic unit) through work, middle-class children in western cultures today are valued for giving meaning to their parents' lives (Kehily, 2004: 2, 6). This is the root of the emotional investments Elias is referring to and that interview partners drew on for intergenerational play. Less privileged models of childhood, such as exploitation as work force, were not used as a blueprint for age play, which shows how this former middle-class ideal has attained normative force across the board, even for interview partners who grew up in different contexts. The juxtaposition of children's dependency and affection of the caretakers (or the abuse of this social expectation) served as the starting point for intergenerational play. Bois and grrrls were in more powerful positions than other bottom roles (see also Brame et al., 1993: 136). For instance, many femme interview partners playing as grrrls enjoyed being disobedient and 'bratty' rather than trying to be 'good girls', rejecting social expectations about what is acceptable behaviour for girls.

### **The boundaries of intergenerational play**

Real-life age differences in sexual relationships, especially if a woman is older than a male partner, are still considered a cultural taboo or oddity, even though recently, older women who prefer younger men have started claiming the 'cougar' identity. Queer high femme Zoe started dating a transboy who was 14 years younger than her:

He called me his soccer mom. One time I was wearing some kind of sporty outfit and he was like: 'oh my god, my soccer mom's here'. [laughs] And it just totally tweaked me. He is so much younger than me and I haven't really run up against that particular cultural taboo before.

Zoe valued the challenge her emotional response to breaking this particular taboo presented to her, and many interview partners experienced transgressing such taboos as providing erotic tension, but solely in the context of role play among adults. For instance, the reference to 'soccer mom' in Zoe's example could refer not only to the age difference but could also be implying a role play including kinship relations and therefore incest. Real-life incest is not only one of the strongest cultural taboos (Hart, 1998: 35); it also stands in stark contrast to the ethical standards of interview partners. To them, real-life sexual interactions with children were unacceptable, because children are not capable of consenting to sex with adults. To interview partners, age play was unambiguously an interaction between consenting adults. Queer femme Emma explained her usage of the spelling 'grrrl' for her young feminine role persona:

The spelling is very much about being as clear as possible in written communication that I'm not first of all a biological girl. That I'm an adult woman playing this role. That's really important to me to make clear to people. If I use G-I-R-L I feel there's a

confusion there. I don't want any assumptions from that other person. I don't want them going in their head, even in their head online, that this is some underage girl.

To Emma and others, it was crucial to distance themselves from any eroticization of real-life underage girls and boys.

Despite the fact that age play eroticizes grown-ups in a certain role and not actual children, a lot of interview partners were still not able or willing to engage in sexual play that eroticized roles of a very young age, as gay transman BJ explained:

I still can't go beyond a certain age. The ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old – fine. Somebody who wants to be from an infant up to about six or seven still eeks [sic] me out. It's not good for me. There's just something about children, they're pure, they're innocent. I'm not saying that sex cannot be pure and innocent and sweet and good, I'm just saying, that is just a line even in age play I cannot broach.

The social construction of children as innocent and pure – and therefore also as asexual<sup>8</sup> – had an impact on BJ's boundaries in age play. This is part of the Romantic discourse on children, which depicts them as innocent, pure and naturally good (Kehily, 2004: 5).<sup>9</sup> Even though BJ was aware of the fact that these were social constructions, it did not change the reality of his emotional limits. As a result of the Romantic discourse, children are largely constructed as sexually innocent or asexual in contemporary European and North American cultures (Kehily and Montgomery, 2004), even though Sigmund Freud and Alfred Moll provided influential theories about children's sexuality as early as the beginning of the 20th century (Schmidt, 2012). Sexuality is still considered to mark the end of childhood, either through the advent of puberty in the physical sense, or through (sexual) abuse by adults in the psychological sense (Honig, 2012: 46). This had an impact on the way interview partners explored age. Most of their age play that involved really young children remained non-sexual. This may be due to the social taboos around incest and the ethical implications of the eroticization of real-life children in regard to real-life paedophiles and abusers. It might also add further stigma to the already marginalized group of les-bi-trans-queer BDSMers. Within the context of the dyke+queer BDSM communities and their ethical and feminist investments, not all social power dynamics were available for transgressions. For instance, some abuse survivors refrained from incest play to avoid triggering their abuse memories, while some used BDSM to work through the trauma of sexual abuse experiences (Bauer, 2014) and others looked for crossing the edge this kind of play presented to generate intense experiences beyond the question of re-traumatization or healing (see also Weiss, 2011: 146–147).<sup>10</sup>

## **Becoming-child**

For many interview partners, choosing a role younger than one's actual age was a way to explore inner children as partial identities. Their child personas developed

a life of their own, which became evident in the fact that many were given their own names and were the BDSM identities most likely to interfere spontaneously in everyday life (see also Brame et al., 1993: 129). Queer femme Katharina explained how she experienced the appearances of her grrrl persona called Daisy:

Because I believe Daisy communicates, it is her voice that speaks then. But it is not necessarily her body things are being done to. That to me is always a bit diffuse, that I experience such strange parallel realities in that moment: I am talking with a five-year-old voice, the body feels somehow teenage-like, somehow puberty-like, but simultaneously also really grown-up, female at the same time or femme respectively.

Katharina was enacting a grrrl persona with the actual background, experiences and body of a 34-year-old; she experienced simultaneous realities in age play and engaged in adult versions of certain child ages. Therefore age play can be understood as ‘becoming’ according to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who also describe a reality specific to becoming (2004: 263). Becoming is not an imitation or identification, becomings are neither dreams nor fantasies, but perfectly real (2004: 262). Becoming is a necessarily open-ended process that produces new ways of being in the world, with desire as catalyst (2004: 300–301). Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between the molar and the molecular of such social categories as woman, animal and child. The molar can be understood as the hegemonic, overcoded version (‘the child’). Becomings, in contrast, are molecular, they experiment with what the body can do (2004: 283) and explore alternative modes of subjectifications. In processes of becoming, heterogeneous elements enter into composition with each other (2004: 289) to produce an in-between (2004: 323), for instance a molecular child. Deleuze and Guattari therefore distinguish this becoming-child from childhood memories: the molecular child co-exists in the present. It is not the child we once were; this would be the molar child whose future is the adult (2004: 324). Likewise, the child personas of interview partners did not equal the child from the player’s real past. They were not reliving childhood memories. Rather, these child personas were a way of exploring other possibilities, of molecular children one could have been and, more importantly, who could *co-exist now* in a kind of alternative reality with its own momentum. Femmes could be valued as feminine grrrls in a non-sexist environment or they could explore tomboy personas, butches could be valued for being a tomboy, and transwomen and transmen could explore a childhood in their gender of choice.

So becoming-grrrl in age play, Katharina was not re-enacting scenes from her actual childhood. Rather, in a process of becoming, a molecular child was produced that co-existed with the adult self and changed both the state of being adult and the meaning of childhood (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 324). Both developmental psychology and socialization theories conceptualize childhood as a stage of the path to adulthood understood as rational subjectivity (Kehily, 2004: 7–8). This is the molar version of the child, the one that is part of a liberal project of ‘the production and regulation of rational and civilized adult citizens’ (Kehily, 2004: 8).

In processes of becoming-child, interview partners refused to follow this kind of trajectory. They integrated the non-rational attributes of childhood into their current adult selves, refusing to grow-up in the normative sense. This kind of becoming-child also questioned the idea of a 'natural' development of the child in terms of gender. From the perspective of biological determinism, puberty is a period in which children turn into adults through further disambiguating their sex towards either male or female. Yet trans\*, inter\* and genderqueer embodiments and identities demonstrate that a child does not necessarily grow up to be an adult in the gender they were assigned at birth.

Interview partners identified various benefits of becoming-child within the dyke+queer BDSM context. It provided them with emotional and physical safety (see also Brame et al., 1993: 128). As children, interview partners received unconditional love from their responsible adult figures, in Mistress Mean Mommy's words: 'I want them to feel really warm and loved and safe.' Sometimes this included material support; Scout was fed by his Daddi while he was homeless. Responsible adult roles provided security and validation, with a space to let go and indulge in behaviours that are deemed inappropriate for adults, such as uncensored expressions of feelings of helplessness or neediness. Exploring inner children might provide a release for the childish parts of self, as Jacky put it: 'I also have the possibilities through BDSM to live out this childish part inside of me really, to let it out, being silly, being stupid.' These child-like traits were part of Jacky's adult personality rather than a regression. Becoming-child therefore is a way of changing the meaning of what it means to be an adult, expanding the repertoire of 'adults'. For instance, innocence is crucial in the social definition of childhood: Once their innocence is gone, children are no longer regarded as 'real children' (Kehily, 2004: 21). This points at how child and adult are constructed as exclusive, dichotomic categories: a person cannot be both at the same time. But if interview partners are able to re-integrate child-elements in their adult personality, this implies that childhood attributes like playfulness or simplicity have not been completely lost.

Inner children gave interview partners permission to nurture themselves in ways that otherwise felt too self-indulgent or self-centred (see also Brame et al., 1993: 128). Adopting a caring attitude towards oneself was sometimes easier to achieve if it was directed towards an inner child. Grrrls and bois seemed especially suitable for facilitating emotional communication and labour, for instance, when it came to dealing with insecurities: 'And she is then uninhibitedly embarrassed and giggles and hides under the blanket.' Katharina's grrrl persona allowed for the expression of emotions that are usually considered unsuitable for grown-ups. Molecular children made it easier to communicate needs, ask 'stupid' questions and speak the truth even if it was not socially appropriate. Thus, interview partners traded on cultural constructions of childhood to enrich their emotional lives. It was a means of releasing the constant social pressure to act 'grown-up' and rational. Moreover, the force and momentum these molecular children developed in the lives of interview partners demonstrated that the rationality of adulthood is ultimately an

illusion. Becoming-child questioned the cultural definition of adulthood as a state of constant rationality and of rationality as a superior way of being.

Exploring inner children and becoming-child had healing effects for some interview partners. A main mechanism might be characterized as healing through compensation, as Katharina put it:

I think that is really great as well, being able to go back age-wise and being able to say: OK, now I want to have completely different experiences as a teenager than those that I had in real-life. Or I want to have experiences that I never even made at a specific age.

There were various absences and traumatic experiences growing up that could be addressed through age play (see also Brame et al., 1993: 127). Queer-straight femme Teresa grew up with an abusive father:

I was kind of a 'daddy's little girl' growing up in the not sexy way at all. With dad who was a total rage-aholic I was always the sweet little one, who would go in after mother just didn't understand him well enough. I'd always go in and try to calm him down by being super cute and super little, when he was totally out of line.

In her family of origin, Teresa had to make use of the 'daddy's little girl' cultural stereotype in an attempt to prevent domestic violence. Rather than being an unproductive, innocent child, she performed gendered emotional labour. But this put her experience of being a girl into a context of being part of appeasement strategies concerning her abusive father. Playing 'Daddi's little grrrl' in dyke + queer BDSM contexts enabled her to work through this trauma:

And it's good to have someone powerful and masculine tell me I'm cute, tell me I'm sweet, sit me on their lap, pat my head, that kind of stuff. And feel really loved and nurtured and having mostly that with not super fucked up people. That is healing, continually.

Butches and transmen valued her grrrlish attributes and recognized the strength that lies therein. This allowed Teresa to develop positive notions of being young and feminine in a sexist and abusive society.

Trans\* interview partners were able to compensate for the lack of a childhood in their gender identity through age play. For Scout, growing up as a girl had been a negative experience. Because this identity did not suit him, he involuntarily ended up being 'a bad girl'. BDSM provided him with the opportunity to compensate for this experience by becoming a 'good boi'. He also used his time as a boi to work through other traumatic events caused by genital surgery in his adolescence through being intersex: 'So [me] being a boi, [my top] was trying to teach me how to have a boy cunt and reassign my body in a way that I could survive in it.' Scout's top, a transgender butch, taught his boi Scout how to reassign

'biologically female' genitals with their own queer-masculine meanings. By combining two apparent contradictions, 'boy' and 'cunt', they carved out a conceptual space for genderqueer realities and bodies and created new meanings. Thus, responsible adult figures (cis and trans\* alike) can function as gender mentors in transitioning processes (see also Kaldera, 2009: 156).

Sometimes the grrrls and bois grew up to become femmes, butches, transwomen and transmen eventually. For instance, a boi can become a Daddi himself, as in Scout's example. For him, working through gendered childhood trauma in age play was finished at the time of the interview: 'Now I feel like those parts of myself are healed. I feel like I'm whole and that little boi is happily in his bed sleeping and he's fine'. The needs of his little boi had been met and he was able to move on, which presents strong evidence of the transformative rather than just transgressive functions of gendered age play. These findings conform the healing potentials of BDSM that authors have pointed out before (Barker et al., 2007; Easton, 2007; Weille, 2002).

Age play as compensation was not only relevant in terms of sexism and gender identity, but also in regard to sexual preference. Queer children and adolescents face challenges growing up in a heteronormative environment (Focks, 2014). Interview partners had limited opportunities to explore their same-sex or queer desires and feelings of love. Since sexual development is a significant part of personal development in general, age play practices provided them with a space to make up for these deficiencies. While these practices were related to the actual childhood of interview partners, they were still becoming rather than engagements with memory, as they invented new ways of being-child in the present.

## **Exploring alternative masculinities and femininities through age play**

Age play also provided a space to explore alternative masculinities and femininities, as gender expressions and stereotypes are age-specific and ageism is gender-specific (Woodward, 2006). Social constructions of gender are in part specific to age and kinship-role. For instance, different behaviours and styles are expected from a girl aged four than from a teenage girl, a young woman, a married woman, a mother, a grandmother or a widow. Moreover, most of these roles are conceptualized within a sexist and heteronormative framework of reference; for instance a childless older woman might be given less societal approval than a mother or grandmother, or she may face 'pity' for her assumed failure to reproduce. Furthermore, ageism is gender-specific: according to heteronormative ideals, grey hair is considered sexually attractive in older men but less so in women. Ageism and sexism may have amplifying effects, for instance women have been constructed as intellectual and moral children in comparison with men (Gilligan, 1982; Schiebinger, 1989). Thus, the construction of children as 'less-than' adults is then used to belittle and incapacitate women by constructing them as child-like.

Therefore age play opened up possibilities for inhabiting different gender positions for interview partners, both in regard to these cultural constructions and to

their individual biographies. For instance, dyke femme Tanya's seven-, nine- and twelve-year old grrrl personas were exploring stereotypically masculine behaviours: 'They're all little tomboys, they wanna wrestle, they wanna play cars and trucks, they wanna wrestle some more [laughs]. They wanna dress up in baggy clothes, and they wanna try and arm wrestle, and they will show off.' Tanya switched between seven grrrl personas of various ages. This allowed her to draw on very different kinds of femininities from 'good girl' to tomboy to misbehaved promiscuous teenage grrrl. Emma connected her grrrl to *riot grrrl* and queer culture. In general, femme interview partners used age play to explore non-normative ways to be a grrrl, which were transformational rather than simply transgressive. Katharina admired Daisy's courage:

Because she does things even though it is embarrassing to her, even though she is unsure of herself, even though she is moving through uncertain territory in terms of difficult emotions all of the time. But she is extremely brave in all that.

As Daisy, Katharina experiences being courageous as a little grrrl, and simultaneously she is able to reflect upon this from her feminist adult self. This older self is able to analyse the sexist bias in regard to the concept of courage. Bravery is too easily granted to boys for facing physical challenges, but Daisy demonstrates how much courage it takes to face emotional challenges.

Playing as a boi was also very popular within the dyke + queer BDSM community. It provided opportunities for FTM spectrum interview partners to develop a boyish or masculine identity for everyday life, but femmes and genderqueers also played as bois. Generally considered a bottom role, in contrast to the social construction of adult masculinity, boi allows for vulnerability, insecurity, sexual curiosity, shyness, impatience and the need for protection. It also allows for being disobedient, impulsive and cheeky. The boi concept therefore provided interview partners with a space to renegotiate masculinity. FTM interview partners mostly had explicitly feminist backgrounds and did not want to reproduce sexist behaviours when expressing their gender. Identifying with the 'not-quite-yet-hegemonic' masculinity of the boy served to distance themselves from the association with the hegemonic masculinity of the grown-up *white*, heterosexual man (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), or 'the man' (see also Noble, 2013). This distance may serve to criticize hegemonic masculinity as well as to downplay one's own male privilege, sexism and/or complicity with notions of hegemonic masculinity and is therefore not univocally a subversive position. For some, this process eventually involved growing up to become a butch, transgender butch or gay man, trying to invent their own non-heteronormative versions of adult masculinities (see also Fajardo, 2013; Halberstam, 2002; Hoenes, 2014; Schirmer, 2007).

The grrrl and boi identities of interview partners were not dependent upon a 'biologically female' respectively 'male' body. Rather, they questioned biology's power to define bodies, and allowed sex, gender and age to be experienced as mutable through social practices such as age/gender play. Trans\* and genderqueer

interview partners were not grrrls/bois *despite* their male/female bodies; but their bodies were grrrlish and boyish on their own terms. Neither were cis-femme interview partners automatically grrrls or Mommys because of their 'female' bodies and their feminine presentation. Rather, femme Katharina had trouble identifying as Mommy in her responsible adult persona:

Strangely, for me it also has to do a lot with embodiment. I really have difficulties to imagine a Mommy who looks like me, who is rather tall, thin and has small breasts. As Mommy I always imagine someone who is at least twice as voluminous as myself [laughs] all around.

Katharina was aware of the fact that this mother image is a cliché and that there are real-life mothers who resemble her own body type. Yet she still had trouble seeing herself as a Mommy, despite her femme identity. This shows how femmes also have to renegotiate and reconstruct female roles and various versions of femininity, rather than being 'natural women'. Katharina had to perform gender labour to critically reclaim and reconstruct Mommy for herself, disassociating the concept from her own real-life mother in particular as well as from cultural stereotypes about mothers and motherhood in general.

Yet there also seemed to be limits to the transformation of heteronormative concepts of gender and age within the community. While Daddy was a very popular role and received a lot of attention, Mommy was less prevalent and even less acknowledged in the community. Dyke/queer high femme Mandy thought it was less visible because it is taken for granted that women act nurturing. Mistress Mean Mommy thought the Mommy role might be less prevalent because of sexist cultural constructions of the mother figure:

Maybe because when you talk about child abuse and stuff, it's mostly fathers doing it to daughters, rather than mothers to sons. So there's something about the mother that we don't like to think of as sexual maybe. You don't wanna put a mommy up in a sexual position.

Therefore the role seemed to provide less potential for erotic power exchange play. The social construction of mothers portrays them as too 'sacred' to be sexual. Many interview partners did not identify with those sexist and heteronormative mother images nor with their own mothers, and therefore the Mommy role did not appeal to them. But some took up the challenge to queer the asexual figure of the mother in their BDSM practices.

Gender stereotypes associate the mother role primarily with nurturing and the father role with protecting and disciplining the child. But interview partners did not necessarily choose to play as Mommy if they wanted to embody a nurturing parent. Rather, the descriptions of the roles Mommy and Daddy that emerged in the interviews were surprisingly similar. Both could be evil or nurturing and protective, both were powerful but tied to responsibility. Those playing as Daddy had to emphasize

that fathers can be nurturing to counter the cultural constructions of masculinity, while those playing as Mommi had to empower and sexualize the figure of the mother. The preference to embody a caretaker of a particular gender seemed to be related to the individual's gender identity rather than the stereotypical properties of Mommi and Daddi. Those with a more feminine gender expression tended to play as Mommi (even though some femmes also enjoyed the Daddi role off and on, but not permanently) and those more masculine-identified as Daddi. Transwoman Kay, who identified as butch, explained: 'I think had I been born a woman, I would be playing as a Daddi. But because there is the affirmation that I need, I play as a Mommi.' As a transwoman, being accepted as a woman was existential for Kay. This limited her options to express her butchness. Therefore she preferred the role Mommi over Daddi, while for butches who were assigned female at birth, the Daddi role served to emphasize their female masculinity. So the opportunities gendered age play offered interview partners to affirm their own sense of gender were not equally accessible across the board in a cultural context that only acknowledges transwomen as women if they perform their gender in a certain feminine way.

The higher prevalence of the Daddi role may also have to do with a 'hype of (female) masculinity' in certain queer theoretical and community contexts, that celebrates cross-gender expressions as transgressive and neglects queer cis-femininities (see Rick, 2007). Yet the grrrl role was as common as the boi role. Therefore it seems to be the mother figure in particular that was hard to re-appropriate for interview partners. This may have to do with the fact that Mommi and Daddi are mostly roles for tops. So the sexist construction of the mother as less powerful might limit her eroticization in dyke + queer BDSM, while this is not the case for grrrl as a bottom role.

## Conclusion

Age play provided interview partners with possibilities to explore the simultaneous social constructions of age, gender, sexuality and kinship. This was not limited to merely transgressing cultural taboos like incest for sexual purposes, but also produced transformational experiences of becoming-grrrl/boi, renegotiating what it means to be a mother, a father or other responsible adult, as well as non-biological reproductions of kinship. Furthermore, it allowed interview partners to compensate for absences they encountered in heteronormative social contexts by reinventing queer versions of being Mommi, Daddi, grrrl, boi and family. Sexism also limited the potentials to use the Mommi role to create transgressive and transformative practices and subjectivities. Nonetheless, processes of becoming-child possess the potential to question hegemonic definitions of adulthood and gender, as well as the neat distinction between childhood and adulthood itself. This allowed for renegotiations and transformations of embodied subjectivity.

Age and gender play practices have not been a sufficient object of study yet, so that many open questions remain for future research. From a queer-feminist perspective of simultaneity, we need to keep interrogating why and how certain kinds of hierarchy are subject to transgression and transformation in some social

contexts, while others are not given critical attention. The potentials and limits dyke+queer BDSM spaces provide to reimagine sex/gender, sexuality, age and kinship not only intellectually, but also in terms of embodiment and subjectivity, point at desire as a productive force that we need to engage with critically.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Andrea Rick for her invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper, as well as the peer reviewers for their suggestions.

### Notes

1. Genderqueer in this sense is used as an umbrella term for all gender identities that defy the heteronormative, bipolar assumption that there are only two genders, based on two distinguishable biological sexes.
2. My intersex interview partners were assigned as female at birth and lived as butches or transmen at the time of the interview.
3. The capitalization of racializing terms like Black serves to point out that these are not natural or self-evident categories, but social constructions with political consequences and meanings. Moreover, the capitalization of Black has been a part of Black anti-racist politics. I choose not to capitalize but to italicize *white* because naming this racial category is not part of a liberationist struggle, but a means of critical (self-)positioning and therefore a claiming of political responsibility for *white* privileges (see Eggers et al., 2009: 13).
4. In the context of this study, desire is understood as a productive force that travels through bodies, stretching out to transgress and to generate heterogeneous connections, while experiences of pleasure are enabled through a state of being in the moment and letting go (for a more detailed discussion, see Bauer, 2014).
5. In other BDSM community subsets, transgressive and transformative race play takes place (see for instance Berlinger, 2006; Freeman, 2008; Weiss, 2011).
6. This does not apply to the German context in which this connotation of 'boy' does not exist and race and class differences are constructed semiotically in different ways.
7. I have translated excerpts from interviews conducted in German.
8. In this context, the term 'asexual' refers to the social construction of certain bodies or people as not having a sexuality (such as children, the mentally 'disabled' etc.) and not to the more recent usage of this term as self-chosen identity.
9. Besides the Romantic discourse going back to Rousseau depicting children as innocent, there is also the discursive concepts of tabula rasa, going back to Locke, depicting children as adults-in-the-making and the Puritan discourse, constructing children as potentially evil (Kehily, 2004: 5). Interview partners' concepts of their child personas referred to the model of innocence, but not the one of wickedness, although this might also be an interesting concept to base BDSM play on. If tops in age play used discipline, for instance, this was attributed to the evil mindset or abuse of power by the adult, not justified by the evilness of the child. It would be interesting to compare this with other versions of age play, for instance in other BDSM communities.
10. Interview partners also used BDSM role playing to dramatize and re-enact painful experiences such as sexual abuse or transphobia, but in other types of role play. They did not explicitly discuss this within the context of age play, which seemed to be centred on compensatory and healing practices.

## References

- Barker M, Gupta C and Iantaffi A (2007) The power of play. The potentials and pitfalls in healing narratives of BDSM. In: Langdridge D and Barker M (eds) *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadosomochism*. Houndmills: Palgrave, pp. 197–216.
- Bauer R (2005) When gender becomes safe, sane and consensual. Gender play as a queer BDSM practice. In: Haschemi Yekani E and Michaelis B (eds) *Quer durch die Geisteswissenschaften – Perspektiven der Queer Theory*. Berlin: Querverlag, pp. 73–86.
- Bauer R (2007) Playgrounds and new territories. The potential of BDSM to queer Genders. In: Langdridge D and Barker M (eds) *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadosomochism*. Houndmills: Palgrave, pp. 177–194.
- Bauer R (2008) Transgressive and transformative gendered sexual practices and white privileges. The case of the dyke/trans BDSM communities. *WSQ* 36(3/4): 233–253.
- Bauer R (2013) *Dyke + queer BDSM as exuberant intimacy. Exploring intimate difference and power*. Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktors der Philosophie im Fachbereich Sozialwissenschaften der Universität Hamburg. Unpublished Dissertation Thesis, available at request from the author.
- Bauer R (2014) *Queer BDSM Intimacies. Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beckmann A (2009) *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion. Deconstructing Sadosomochism*. Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Berlinger C (2006) *Black Men in Leather*. Tempe, AZ: Third Millenium Publishing.
- Brame GG, et al. (1993) *Different Loving. The World of Sexual Dominance and Submission*. New York: Villard.
- Connell RW and Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society* 19(6): 829–859.
- Deleuze G and Guattari F (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Easton D (2007) Shadowplay. S/M journeys to our selves. In: Langdridge D and Barker M (eds) *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadosomochism*. Houndmills: Palgrave, pp. 217–228.
- Eggers MM et al. (2009) Konzeptionelle Überlegungen. In: Eggers MM et al. (eds) *Mythen Subjekte Masken. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*. Münster: Unrast, pp. 11–13.
- Elias N (1998) The civilizing of parents. In: Goudsblom J and Mennell S (eds) *The Norbert Elias Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 189–211.
- Fajardo KB (2013) Transportation: Translating Filipino and Filipino American tomboy masculinities through global migration and seafaring. In: Stryker S and Aizura AZ (eds) *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 527–540.
- Focks P (2014) Lebenswelten von intergeschlechtlichen, transgeschlechtlichen und genderqueeren Jugendlichen aus Menschenrechtsperspektive. Expert\*inneninterviews. Berlin. Available at: [http://www.meingeschlecht.de/MeinGeschlecht/wp-content/uploads/Focks\\_Lebenswelten\\_Expertinneninterviews-\\_2014.pdf](http://www.meingeschlecht.de/MeinGeschlecht/wp-content/uploads/Focks_Lebenswelten_Expertinneninterviews-_2014.pdf) (accessed 19 November 2014).
- Freeman E (2008) Turn the beat around. Sadosomochism, temporality, history. *differences* 19(1): 32–70.
- Gilligan C (1982) *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Halberstam J (2002) An introduction to female masculinity. In: Adams R and Savran D (eds) *The Masculinity Studies Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 355–374.

- Hart L (1998) *Between the Body and the Flesh. Performing Sadoomasochism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hoenes J (2014) *Nicht Frosch – nicht Laborratte: Transmännlichkeiten im Bild*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Honig M-S (2012) Kinder und Sexualität. Der Beitrag der *Childhood Studies*. In: Quindeau I and Brumlik M (eds) *Kindliche Sexualität*. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Juventa, pp. 45–59.
- Kaldera R (2009) *Double Edge. The Intersections of Transgender and BDSM*. Hubbardston, MA: Alfred Press.
- Kehily MJ (2004) Understanding childhood: An introduction to some key themes and issues. In: Kehily MJ (ed) *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp. 1–21.
- Kehily MJ and Montgomery H (2004) Innocence and experience: A historical approach to childhood and sexuality. In: Kehily MJ (ed) *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp. 57–74.
- Langdridge D and Barker M (2007) Situating sadoomasochism. In: Langdridge D and Barker M (eds) *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*. Houndmills: Palgrave, pp. 3–9.
- Noble BJ (2013) Our bodies are not ourselves. Tranny guys and the racialized class politics of incoherence. In: Stryker S and Aizura AZ (eds) *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 248–257.
- Rick A (2007) Femmes, Fans, Freundinnen. Femininitäten nur in Nebenrollen? Konstruktionen von Cross-Maskulinitäten/-Männlichkeiten durch den Ausschluss von Femininitäten/Weiblichkeiten. In: Bauer R, et al. (eds) *Unbeschreiblich männlich. Heteronormativitäts-kritische Perspektiven*. Hamburg: Männerschwarm, pp. 291–305.
- Schiebinger L (1989) *The Mind has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schirmer U (2007) 'Ich will kein Mann sein wollen.' Drag Kinging, Männlichkeit und Strategien der 'disidentification'. In: Bauer R, et al. (eds) *Unbeschreiblich männlich. Heteronormativitäts-kritische Perspektiven*. Hamburg: Männerschwarm, pp. 179–194.
- Schmidt G (2012) Kindersexualität. Konturen eines dunklen Kontinents. In: Quindeau I and Brumlik M (eds) *Kindliche Sexualität*. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Juventa, pp. 60–70.
- Strauss AL and Corbin J (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Weille K-LH (2002) The psychodynamics of consensual sadoomasochistic and dominant-submissive sexual games. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 3(2): 131–160.
- Weiss MD (2011) *Techniques of Pleasure. BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Woodward K (2006) Performing age, performing gender. *NWSA Journal* 18(1): 162–189.

**Robin Bauer** wrote his PhD in sociology on les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices, identities, intimacies and communities. He has published widely in the fields of transgender studies, BDSM, sexuality, non-monogamies, queer theory, and queer-feminist science studies, seeking to connect his research with his activism. Currently he lives in Belgium and is acting professor for social work at the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University Stuttgart, Germany, where he teaches sexuality, gender and social work, disability studies and critical whiteness.