

## Doing Age and Gender through Fashion

Barbro Johansson

Center for Consumer Science, School of Business, Economics and Law

Göteborg University

[barbro.johansson@cfk.gu.se](mailto:barbro.johansson@cfk.gu.se)

The author discusses the intersectionality of age and gender in relation to consumption and the concept of “becoming”, taking her point of departure in some quotations from children. The data comes from a study about children in consumer society, where 84 Swedish children, aged 8-12 were interviewed. Gender and age are negotiated, translated and repeated and therefore the subject of constant change. A task for the children is to place themselves in an aged and gendered field, find places which they are comfortable with, and at the same time be aware of that they are expected to occupy new places and find new ways of performing themselves as they grow older. The article shows a sample card of different solutions: Performing a consistent 11-year-ness, by refraining to wear garments which carry inscriptions of adulthood and sexuality; creating a fashion-conscious masculinity with the help of clothes, hair products, friends and a fashion retailer; redefining a garment from female to gender-neutral; creating an aged and gendered “free zone”, where girlishness is an allowing and non-restrained place; making clothes almost invisible uniforms; rejecting fashion all together; and constructing homosocial togetherness with the help of fashion and symbols of adulthood and sexuality.

## Doing Age and Gender through Fashion

Age and gender are explicitly intertwined in children's lives. The clothes you wear and the activities you do mean different things if you are 8 or 12, and if you are a girl or a boy. In this paper, I will take my point of departure in some quotations from children to be able to discuss the intersectionality of age and gender in relation to consumption and the concept of "becoming". The data comes from a study about children in consumer society, where 84 children, aged 8-12, from two Swedish schools were interviewed (Johansson 2005).

### Becoming

We are, as Nick Lee (2001) puts it, living in an "age of uncertainty". Identities are not once and for all given, on the contrary we are expected to consider and work with our identities our whole lives. In this constant doing of oneself, different subjectivities are performed. Our identity is not something that comes from within a "true, inner self"; it is what we perform during the encounters with others. These different subjectivities are made through connections between humans, materiality and discourses. From this perspective we are all becomings – constantly changing, transforming and reinterpreted, while the state of "being" is nothing but an imagined opposite.

In childhood studies, though, the dichotomy being–becoming has been referred to in a different way. It has been used to point out the difference between adults and children and the fact that adults are regarded as "human beings" and children as incomplete and dependent "human becomings" in need of socialization, development and upbringing. Childhood researchers from the late 80s and onwards made a point of claiming that children are beings too; that they are active, competent members of society, who influence their environments in a number of ways. Later, researchers came to nuance these statements, acknowledging that it is not always in the children's best interest only to stress their competence (Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann 2004). Children are also in need of protection, of people who talk on their behalf and look after their interests. Defining children as becomings also means realizing that the same goes for adults; we are all dependent on a lot of "supplements" and "extensions", connections to other human and non-human elements, to make our lives work (Lee 2001, Prout 2005).

The twist from "children are also beings" to "adults are also becomings" made both adulthood and childhood ambiguous conditions. When, as Lee puts it, there are no 'human beings', but instead "potentially unlimited number of ways of 'becoming human'" (Lee 2001:2), age is but one belonging which is of importance when trying to comprehend and perform oneself. Understanding "becoming" as the common way for people today to deal with their lives and identities regardless of age, gender and other belongings, means trying to transgress several dualities, e.g. those between female and male and between child and adult. However, age is a belonging which is more often relevant, when you are a child, a teenager or an old person and situated outside the unproblematic "fit-for-work middle-ages". It means that as a child you mostly need to consider that you are a child in relation to "not-children", at the same time as you have all these other belongings such as gender, class, ethnicity, ablebodiedness etc. At the ages of 8-12 these considerations take on specific expressions, depending on the fact that you are moving from childhood to teens and the expressions are strongly linked to consumption. In a consumer society the body is a project as well as a process, and it is up to the individual to succeed in his/her body project (Egeberg Holmgren 2005).

## Artefacts and Blurred Borders

Clothes is an area of consumption which comes to the fore for many children in the ages preceding teens, and some garments are more symbolically loaded than others. Anna-Clara, 11, has a definite opinion about thongs:

Frankly it's ridiculous to wear thongs at our age. 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, that's when girls start to be mature enough for it. When you are, like, in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, it looks ridiculous if you walk around with thongs. (Anna-Clara, 11)

The design of shoes might also bring certain connotations. Fanny and Angelica, both 11, have different tastes when it comes to shoes:

Fanny: I don't think you should wear those adults' shoes, which suit adults better. There are really fine children's shoes, but some shoes only suit adults. So then, if Angelica wears such shoes I tell her that they're adults' shoes.

*Barbro: So what is it that makes them adults' shoes then?*

Angelica: Shoes that I think teenagers should wear. I saw these beige boots, which I thought were nice. But I wouldn't buy them. They had rather high heels. I thought it was nice.

The three 11-year-old girls explicitly relate to age when they discuss clothes. Thongs and high-heel shoes are symbols of teens and adulthood, and Anna-Clara and Fanny both state that there should be a consistency between age and appearance. Thongs look "ridiculous" on a girl of eleven, Anna-Clara says, and Fanny is ready to tell her friend off if she wears "adults' shoes". When you are 11 you have only two years left until you are a teenager, but the girls do not open the door for any negotiations: you shouldn't dress above your age. Angelica is more ambivalent. An 11-year-old, as everyone else, has a certain range of available subjectivities. Obviously she sometimes wears shoes which Fanny does not improve of, but in the interview she steps on to the same line as her friend and says that she wouldn't buy these nice beige boots which she saw. All three girls in the interviews relate to an 11-year-old girl which has not yet reached puberty and is consequently not physically mature to dress in garments associated with adulthood and sexuality. However, "mature" might be defined in another way, namely to be able to live up to one's "11-year-ness" (Wenzer 2002) in a sensible way, by refraining from wearing garments, which are not 'suitable' for an 11-year-old. The girls here thereby are constructed as 11-year-old 'beings', while girls of equal age wearing thongs or high-heel shoes are constructed as ridiculous 'teenager-becomings'.

These opinions are not just something that exist in the girls' heads. The clothes and shoes carry certain "inscriptions", a kind of user's manual, which determines what an artifact allows or denies a user to do (Akrich 2000). The inscriptions might be more or less open for questioning and negotiations; they are often regarded as self-evident, being part of ideals and norms, which in this way are effectively conveyed (Knuts 2006). We all have experiences of the inscriptions of different clothes: how they form our bodies and make us walk and move in certain ways, but also how they make us feel and behave, and what they do to other people who watch us.

High-heel shoes transform the child's body into a teenage body, not only by symbolizing adulthood, but also because they prevent the wearer from engaging in play and physical activities and because they expose the body in a certain way. High-heel shoes stretch the legs, emphasizing the ankles and calves; thongs under light and thin pants reveal that nothing more than the pants' fabric covers the buttocks. The inscriptions of these garments thereby pave the

way for sexual interpretations (Berggren Torell 2005). To dress in adults' shoes and thongs therefore means something more than dressing "nice". It also implies the re-coding of one's body from a child's body to a teenage body. This may explain the firm moral statements from the girls. There is a vast discussion going on about sexualized clothes for children and the messages they send out. When differentiating between adulthood and childhood, sexuality is a core element. Children are regarded as asexual, sexuality belongs exclusively to adulthood, and adults' clothes on a child's body threaten that border (ibid.). The girls convey as a child you should not send out sexual messages to people in your surroundings.

### The Attraction of Being a Teenager

Being a child of 8-12 means approaching the teens and having to relate to this fact in one way or another. In common understanding there is a dichotomy not only between child and adult, but also between child and youth. The youth phase is described as a time of identity problems, emotional outbursts, experimenting, revolting against parents and a longing to leave the safe realm of childhood. The corresponding ideal or normal childhood is instead focused on the small, safe world, close, lasting relations, harmony and a non-dramatic, gradual development. One could say that, in this understanding, youth is a "becoming-state" and childhood is a "being-state". This view-point is visible in the interviews, where some children relate explicitly to their previous, present and forthcoming conditions, as Fredrik, 11, when he talks about hair and clothes:

And I'm rather obsessed with hairstyles. If my hair doesn't look good in the morning, I just stand there and think: "Oh no, this is not good!" And then, I change hairstyles quite often, too. /.../ And then, if I don't find nice clothes. Then I stand there for like five minutes thinking: "No, I can't wear that one today. Not that one either! No!" So I usually choose my clothes in the evening before I go to bed. /.../ If I were eight but wore the clothes I am wearing now, I would have hated them. I would never have worn them. I'm pretty sure. /.../ Back then I wore a lot of sloppy clothes, I think. Nerdy. /.../ I used to wear these tracksuit pants (laughs). (Fredrik, 11).

In the task of relating to his approaching teens, Fredrik has chosen what sociologist Randi Wærdahl calls "explored anticipation" (Wærdahl 2003:217ff). He describes how he has left one phase of life and is now on his way somewhere else – to become a teenager. Clothes are crucial elements in the performance of himself as becoming-teenager, and an assemblage of human and non-human "actants" is constituted in the action (Latour 1998, Czarniawska 2004). His hair and the products which keep it in the desirable state, his new clothes and his old "sloppy" clothes, the school and his friends, who might evaluate his appearance.

At school Fredrik is rather unusual in that he has such a strong interest in appearance, clothes and fashion; most of the other boys' main interests are sports and motorbikes. Apart from his best friend Johan, it is mostly the girls in school who notice when he wears something new and give him compliments. Doing boyishness might therefore be an act which needs more reflection for Fredrik than for most of the boys in his school, and he tells me that his main inspiration comes from his favorite fashion retailer JC. Marie Nordberg (2005), in an article about the hairdresser's branch, writes about how masculinity is commodified and that products which were earlier coded as feminine have been recoded and connected to masculinity to appeal to men (ibid.) It is thereby possible for Fredrik and other boys to use a wider range of e.g. colors, accessories, and hair products, without putting their masculinity into question. In the other school in the study some of the girls reported that the boys are more obsessed with their appearance than girls, and that, after a physical education, the classroom stinks of the boys' hair gel and hair spray.

In the interviews, I encouraged the children to reflect on gender borders, by showing them a letter-to-the-editor where a girl claimed that it should be possible for boys to wear dresses, if they liked. The text was supplemented with a picture of a boy in a flowery dress and shoes with high heels. Most of the children forcefully rejected the idea that boys should wear dresses. But Josefin, 8, was not directly negative. She thought that boys should be able to wear “boys’ dresses”. “Not flowery. They should have boys’ dresses that are a bit tougher, in that case.” Josefin suggests a displacement of gender codes, where the boyish is still understood from the traditional matrix (tougher, not flowery), but where a female garment can be incorporated in the male fashion repertoire.

### The Attraction of Being a Child

When I interviewed the younger children they confirmed that sixth-graders are distinguished from the other students in school by dressing and behaving differently. But that is not the same as saying that the younger ones copy the older ones. On the contrary, many of them dissociate themselves from being fashion-conscious. Some 8-year-old girls claimed that they dress “ordinary” and that they do not care about what others think of their appearance. Lina, 10, says: “I have my style and I’ll keep to it until I, well, start the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.”

Even if the younger girls in the interview compellingly claimed that you should not worry about others’ opinions about your style, they obviously anticipated a time when things will be quite different, when clothes and appearance will be important and when they will be more sensitive to what friends and boys think. Being a teenager does, in Lina’s understanding, involve particular obligations, such as caring for one’s appearance and being attractive for the opposite sex. In this understanding children are given a greater freedom than teenagers, since they are allowed to be “themselves”, while the children in the sixth grade cannot disregard that they are becoming-teenagers, with everything that follows from that.

When some of the younger girls describe the ages of 8-11 as a kind of “free zone”, where you don’t have to bother about fashion or boys’ opinions, it lies close to what Judith Halberstam (1998) writes about tomboys. It is a well-known fact that it is easier for girls to be tomboys than for boys to be sissies, since masculinity has a higher status than femininity. But Halberstam claims that it is only as long as the girl is a child, that tomboyism is tolerated and read as a sign of independence and self-motivation; “as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl” (ibid:6). If the female adolescence, as Halberstam puts it, is “a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression” (ibid.), then it is not surprising that Lina and others do not feel that they need to hurry into their teens.

So, the younger girls stressed the importance of dressing as one wishes and not to bother about others’ judgments. But the view of children on a school yard shows that everybody dresses about the same, nobody stands out in conveying a specific style. “When one is small one wants to be ordinary”, Sabina, 8 years, says. It could be interpreted as if they want to be like others, that is, the same problem they claim that the teenagers struggle with. But another interpretation is that Sabina refers to an “ordinary child”, namely someone who does not prioritize presenting oneself as fashion-conscious and cool. Two 11-year-old boys have a similar opinion. In the interview I tried to find out the fashion rules at school.

*Barbro: Has anyone ever been teased, or have you ever commented on someone’s clothes?*

Nisse: I don’t know. Not in our class.

Olle: No, I don’t think so. I usually play bandy during the breaks, so I don’t know anything about that.

*Barbro: Don't you usually talk to each other about clothes and such things?*

Olle: No.

*Barbro: If something is nice-looking, do you usually comment on that?*

Both: Yes.

*Barbro: Which clothes are nice-looking?*

Nisse: I don't know.

Olle: Well, all clothes are nice in some way.

*Barbro: Perhaps fashion is not that important to you?*

Both: No.

Nisse: It's so tiresome.

*Barbro: Is it tiresome?*

Nisse: I never look at fashion magazines and those kinds of things. I don't follow fashion.

Dressing as everybody else, in a way which makes you fit in with the surroundings is almost like wearing a school uniform, which has the advantage of depriving the individual from personal responsibility of one's choice of clothes (Craik 2005). "Uniforms allow people to conform to groups they are part of", Craik writes (2005:5). The clothes in a way become "invisible", they do not catch the eyes of observers, and thereby the children can engage in activities, for instance play, which are of more interest to them. The adornments of the body are not active elements in Nisse's and Olle's subjectivity productions. When Nisse tells me that he does not follow fashion it is thus not a regret of insufficient competence, but rather a declaration, where he says that he prioritizes different things in life. He is not interested in fashion and he does not want to be either. The boys also perform gender in a specific way, since it is a common masculine subjectivity to be unconcerned about clothes and fashion.

### Homosociality – Being Cool

When I ask Sebastian, 9, who buys his clothes he answers from a dichotomist gender perspective, making the gender of his parents significant.

When I'm with dad, he buys more cool clothes, but mom buys such silly clothes.

It is no doubt that Sebastian here transgresses the age border and identifies with the male sphere, where clothes are cool in contrast to the female sphere where clothes are silly or nerdy. In the performance of coolness with the help of fashion, homosocial togetherness is created (Mörck & Tullberg 2004). Homosociality is also brought up when Emma, Louise and Gabriella, 12 years old, talk about thongs, which they do from quite a different point of view than the 11-year-old girls did.

*Barbro: Do you wear thongs sometimes?*

Emma: Yes, sometimes. At discos and such.

Louise: But not so often.

Gabriella. No, not now. Before.

Louise: When we thought it was cool to wear them.

*Barbro: I see. So it's not as cool now?*

Louise: Yes, it was, when we were younger or kind of /.../ In 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Then we thought it was cool 'cause nobody else wore them.

Gabriella. Yes, 'cause now everybody is wearing them. But back then, only a few were wearing them. Then it was cool.

Emma, Louise and Gabriella don't refer to thongs as something that you should wear when you have reached a certain age. On the contrary, it was okay to wear thongs when they were ten or eleven, but now it is not that interesting, since "everybody is wearing them". Fashion-consciousness is about being in the forefront, having a feeling for new trends, being cool. It is a continual and reflected state of becoming, something you actively engage in, and it transgresses age. The expressions change, not because you become older and more mature and "fit in to" new clothes, but depending on what distinguishes you from the crowd in a positive manner. The value of the garment does not lie in the way it distinguishes different life stages from each other, but in the way it distinguishes clothes that everybody wears from clothes that only those who are cool wear. Neither do the girls explicitly associate thongs to sexuality. This way of framing deprives the thongs of the essential character they had in the other girls' rhetoric. For them, thongs in themselves represented adulthood/youth, maturity and possibly also sexuality. As the girls above talk about it, the character of the thongs is entirely dependent on the context. They only have value when taking part in a performance where they are rare. If everybody wears them, they are no more or less worth than any other underwear.

Interestingly, the girls in their use of thongs as symbols of cool-ness, also enroll sexuality for their own purposes. While one powerful interpretation of thongs is that it is a sexualized garment, which positions young girls as victims of adults' sexual gazes, Emma and her friends suggest another interpretation, where sexual connotations is subordinate to other values, such as friendship, popularity and status. Viveka Berggren-Torell (2005) found the same when she studied letters-to-the-editor in the magazine *Kamratposten*. The debate among the readers showed that there were several ways of relating to thongs and that the word "sexy" could be used as almost a synonym to "nice-looking". The girls also opposed the common way of seeing them as victims of the male gaze, and one girl stated that "feminism is also about letting everybody dress as they like" (ibid:85). Both the girls in my study and the girls Berggren Torell refers to seem to be less engaged in the process of becoming a woman, and more engaged in being a girl here and now.

## Conclusion

Gender and age are negotiated, translated and repeated and therefore the subject of constant change. The children of my study have opinions of what is boyish and girlish and which symbols and codes belong to each sphere, and the same goes for the areas of childhood, youth and adulthood. But they also have suggestions of different interpretations and the possibility of transgressing age and gender. A task for children of 8-12 is to place themselves in an aged and gendered field, find places which they are comfortable with, and at the same time be aware of that they are expected to occupy new places and find new ways of performing themselves as they grow older. This article has shown a sample card of different solutions: Performing a consistent 11-year-ness, by refraining to wear garments which carry inscriptions

of adulthood and sexuality; creating a fashion-conscious masculinity with the help of clothes, hair products, friends and a fashion retailer; redefining a garment from female to gender-neutral; creating an aged and gendered "free zone", where girliness is an allowing and non-restrained place; making clothes almost invisible uniforms; rejecting fashion all together and perform a traditional masculinity; and constructing homosocial togetherness with the help of fashion and symbols of adulthood and sexuality. Doing age and gender through fashion is an activity which, more or less consciously, engages everybody in consumer society of today.

## References

- Akrich, Madeleine (2000). The De-Description of Technical Objects. In: Bijker, Wiebe E. & Law, John (eds). *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge/London: The MIT Press.
- Berggren Torell, Viveka (2005). För ung för string? Vuxnas och barns debatter om "sexiga" flickkläder. *Kulturella Perspektiv* 3/2005.
- Brembeck, Helene, Johansson, Barbro & Kampmann, Jan (eds) (2004). *Beyond the competent child. Exploring contemporary childhoods in the Nordic welfare societies*. København: Samfunnsforlaget.
- Craik, Jennifer (2005). *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression*. Oxford: Berg
- Czarniawska, Barbara (2004). *On Time, Space, and Action Nets*. GRI-rapport 2004:5. Göteborgs universitet. [www.handels.gu.se/epc/archive/00003371/](http://www.handels.gu.se/epc/archive/00003371/).
- Egeberg Holmgren, (2005). "Jag känner mig lite manlig när jag bryter mot de manliga normerna" : om maskulinitet, skönhet och gränsdragande överskridanden. *Kulturella Perspektiv* 3/2005.
- Halberstam, Judith (1998). *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Johansson, Barbro (2005). *Barn i konsumtionssamhället*. Stockholm: Norstedts Akademiska Förlag.
- Knuts, Eva (2006). *Något gammalt, något nytt – skapandet av bröllopsföreställningar*. Göteborg. Mara.
- Latour, Bruno (1998). *Artefaktens återkomst: Ett möte mellan organisationsteori och tingens sociologi*. Göteborg: Nerenius & Santéus förlag.
- Lee, Nick (2001). *Childhood and society: Growing up in an age of uncertainty*. Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Mörck, Magnus and Tullberg, Maria (2004), *Catwalk för direktörer. Bolagsstämman - en performativ performans av maskuliniteter*, CFK-Rapport 2004:02a. Göteborgs universitet, Centrum för konsumentvetenskap.
- Nordberg, Marie (2005). "Det viktiga är en maskulin touche!" : maskulinitet som konsumtionsvara i frisörbranschen. *Kulturella Perspektiv* 3/2005.
- Prout, Alan (2005). *The future of childhood*, London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer Press.
- Wærdahl, Randi (2003). *Learning by consuming: consumer culture as a condition for socialization and every day life at the age of 12*. Rapport 4:2003. Institutt for sosiologi og samfunnsgeografi. Universitetet i Oslo.
- Wenzer, Jakob (2002). *Maskinisk Barndom – Ett sammanförande av fälten barndomsforskning och teknologikritik genom Gilles Deleuze och Félix Guattari*. D-uppsats. Etnologiska institutionen, Göteborgs universitet.