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Gender identity a puzzle with 58 varieties

JULIE HARE THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 18, 2015 12:00AM



Sydney University students Blythe S Worthy, Josh Han and Kyol Blakeney on campus. Picture: Britta Campion. Source: News Limited

What's the deal with kids these days? With 58 gender categories to choose from, sexual and gender identity are part of the Zeitgeist.

Ask Josh Han, the queer officer with Sydney University's Student Representative Council. "It's about deconstructing societal views of what it

means to be a man or a woman,” he says. “If you only have two genders, there are limited interactions. But if you have a diversity of gender identities you don’t have these closed categories. It means you can have way more than 58 gender categories.”

Among those 58 options, first listed on Facebook, are bigender, gender questioning, gender variant, pangender, intersex and 26 versions of trans, transgender and transsexual. Plain old male and female didn’t make the list.

But don’t think for a moment that Han is part of a fringe movement. At campuses across the country students are campaigning for gender-neutral bathrooms and official records to state chosen, not birth, names.

Kyol Blakeney, the president of Sydney University’s SRC, says these are important issues. “A lot of people who transition have a chosen name that is different to their legal name. If they go to class and their legal name is called out it can be horrifying for them.”

Ditto on the prosaic business of going to the bathroom. “For a queer person or a trans person to use a male bathroom can be a humiliating or dangerous experience because of physical and verbal assault,” says Blakeney.

Signs of gender fluidity are everywhere. Former Kardashian clan patriarch Bruce Jenner transitioned into Caitlyn on the cover of *Vanity Fair* this month. A Gucci advertising campaign on *The Australian’s* website features gender-unspecific models. And, as revealed in today’s *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, children as young as six are telling their parents they no longer identify with their assigned birth gender.

Sarah Maddison, a gender studies expert from the University of Melbourne, argues it’s not a trend. “We’ve seen over the past 40 or 50 years an absolute transformation in how we think about gender and sexuality,” she says.

“Is it that more people are coming out and identifying with diverse gender identities because it’s of the moment? I suspect the more likely scenario is that these young people have always been lurking in the shadows.”

Toby Miller, the Sir Walter Murdoch Professor of Cultural Policy Studies at Murdoch University, says one only needs to look to Andy Warhol’s *Factory* and David Bowie’s *Diamond Dogs* days to see the current fashion for

gender complexity is nothing new.

And there are indigenous cultures in Asia and the Americas “that have several different ways of categorising genders and in-betweens”.

There is no doubt, however, that social media and reality TV are driving the trend. “Reality TV has been intrinsic to normalising some of these ideas,” Miller says.

And the ubiquitousness of social media means anyone who feels different can easily find a tribe to identify with on Facebook. But is it narcissism or hyper-individuality? Not at all, says Blythe S Worthy, the women’s officer with Sydney University’s SRC. “That is almost saying it’s attention-seeking. That is not the case; it’s an identity issue.”

Karen Brooks, an honorary senior research fellow with the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, is not so convinced.

“It’s a way of making ourselves more interesting,” she says. “Like tattoos and body piercings, the search for individuality is almost the new conformity.”

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