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Teens And Gender

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NPR's Lulu Garcia-Navarro talks with Nic Rider, post-doctoral fellow at the University of Minnesota whose research shows more teens in the U.S. are identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming.

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LULU GARCIA-NAVARRO, HOST: In 2016, a survey went out to more than 80,000 teenagers in Minnesota. It included the question, do you consider yourself transgender, gender queer, gender fluid or unsure about your gender identity? Almost 3 percent of teens answered yes - way more than previous research estimates. The findings were published in the journal Pediatrics. It reveals more teens in the United States are seeing gender as more than just masculine or feminine. Nic Rider is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Minnesota and the lead author of the study. Nic joins us from Minnesota. Welcome to the show.

NIC RIDER: Thank you.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: Why do you think more teens are identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming?

RIDER: Well, I think there's been a long history of advocacy and fighting for that visibility. And there's more media attention and celebrities coming out. That has increased visibility. And with more schools having more GSAs and clubs, it gives youth a chance to feel like they can talk about their gender exploration and live more like their authentic self.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: To what extent do you see this study as a reflection of teens feeling more comfortable in diverse gender identities versus teens sort of experimenting with their identities and how they describe themselves?

RIDER: It can be a combination of two because they think that as people are experimenting with identities, they do identify with different identities at different times to try to understand if that's something that fits for them. I also think that as people are coming in to different identities, like, that feels very authentic for them, and it feels very real.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: So this study shows that more people self-identify in these ways. Does it speak to how other segments of the teenage population view gender-queer, gender-fluid, transgender teenagers?

RIDER: Well, one of the items they were asked is how they think that their peers are perceiving their gender expression, which means the way that they walk and talk and their style - how is that read in terms of gender? And what we're seeing is when people deviate from what society would expect, particularly in gender, then they experience higher rates of emotional distress and substance use, suicidal ideation, subsequent to bullying and other stigmatization.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: One of the things that is mentioned in this is that school nurses will have a bigger role to play in this subject. Can you explain how?

RIDER: Yeah. A lot of trans and gender nonconforming youth - you can see in the study they report higher nurse office visits. And that may mean that they're actually going and talking to nurses. It can also mean that they are accessing bathrooms in the nurse's office. But either way, that means that nurses are interacting with youth more often. And so they may be a really important person to start having some important conversations about gender and what that means maybe on a day-to-day basis for these youth or also providing health care for them in the school system.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: Are teenagers understanding gender differently? Are they seeing that there's just more of a range of what it means to be masculine or what it means to be feminine or what it means to be something else altogether?

RIDER: Yeah. I do think that youth are more open to understanding the expansiveness of what gender can and does entail. And I think they also have more access to information with the Internet and with each other and with more organizations and clubs within schools. They have more opportunities to discuss these topics that maybe didn't exist in the past.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: Why did you want to study this - may I ask?

RIDER: One is a personal reason. I also identify as gender nonconforming and have my own personal experiences growing up around this and what this means for me. And a second reason is that we just don't have enough data to help make policy changes and advocate for supporting trans and gender nonconforming adults and youth.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: That's Nic Rider, post-doctoral fellow at the University of Minnesota. Thank you so much.

RIDER: Thank you.

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