

Twenty years of working in the field of sex therapy has certainly opened my eyes to issues that some may never have thought of. Perhaps the biggest mind shift for me occurred the first time I worked with the parents of a newborn inter-sex baby. That inevitable question “What did you have - a boy or a girl?” had sometimes in the past irritated me as I reflected on stereotyped ideas based on gender. But until that day I’d never considered what it would feel like to not be able to answer the question.

We tend to think of issues of sexuality from a binary perspective: people are assumed to either be male or female, heterosexual or homosexual. While some are still struggling to accept that latter option, can I gently suggest that actually in reality that model does not fit quite a number of people. Sexuality is in fact more varied and fluid than that. This may of course be a troubling idea for some.

I received a letter recently from an elderly aunt for whom English is a fourth language. In commenting about my field of work she wrote “...everything in the sexuality is permitted now. I am right? Every second person seems to be gay or lesbian.” Although the only member of my extended family open-minded enough to brave the topic of sex with me, it seems she is troubled by society’s growing openness to individual difference.

The brain has helped us to survive by teaching us to have a fear response when we meet with anything previously unknown. While this response can create problems for openness to new experience (eg peoples first reaction to any proposed change at their workplace will generally be a negative one) it’s also essential for preservation of the species. Imagine what would happen if we suddenly encountered a wild animal for the first time and we simply approached it with openness and curiosity.

This very sensible caution does however create problems for any person who is different. Dr Milton Diamond, international expert in the field of transgender issues, has said “Variety is the essence of evolution, life. Nature loves diversity, society hates it.” As professor in the Department of Anatomy and Reproductive Biology at the School of Medicine in the University of Hawaii, Dr Diamond has been one of the professionals who have raised questions about earlier medical responses to children of ambiguous gender.

In the past if a baby was born with genitals that were neither clearly male nor female a decision was made that they could not be male without a penis of significant size therefore they were attributed female gender. Sometimes surgery was performed to create female genitals. Now the recommended response is to not perform any surgery until a child is old enough to make their own decision about their gender. One option is that they may decide they are pansexual – they don’t relate to either of the common options.

Less extreme than a physiologically inter-sex child are children who grow up in a body that fits our society’s definitions of one gender but they feel themselves to be the opposite gender. There’s a range of reasons for this to be expressed in pre-schoolers of either gender as has been discussed in an earlier column. When this persists into the teens then you have a young person and perhaps parents too who will need lots of support and help to develop an adult with healthy self esteem.

Others grow up with both a female and male self inside their body of either gender. This goes beyond those stereotypically assigned characteristics where for example women are criticised as masculine if they have drive and ambition and men as feminine if they're willing to be gentle and loving. The less any individual restricts themselves according to gender the more whole and healthy the person. We don't know to what extent anyone's sense of themselves as male or female is socially defined but it does appear from identical twin studies that transsexuals are born, not made.

Ask a friend to tell you a story of a time when they have experienced the pain of not belonging and their biggest problem beyond deciding whether they'll risk making themselves vulnerable by answering is to choose which memory to start with. For transgendered people this sense of not fitting in, not being acceptable, is almost constant until they are able to find a support group. (eg Agender 0800 2436337, Genderbridge 0800 844357) Even then the majority live in fear of humiliation and have to deal with threat regularly. Many will never venture outside their own door, and never feel their femme role is desirable within our society.

I suspect part of what my aunt is questioning is whether by being more open to various expressions of sexuality we are creating new problematic possibilities. As if by not permitting variation we can prevent it. I'm sure it is true that now and in future years some will experiment with ways of expressing their sexuality that they may not have in previous decades. Whether that is dangerous to the individual, their family and society as a whole must surely be measured by individual and collective wellbeing: the person's ability to form loving, healthy relationships and what they then give to their families and society as a whole.

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