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# The Freedom To Choose Your Pronoun

By JENNIFER CONLIN

A FEW weeks ago, Katy Butler, 16, updated her status on Facebook with an enthusiastic shout-out for Google+, the social network's latest rival. "Oh my God Google! I love it! I was signing up for Google+ and they asked me my gender and the choices were male, female or OTHER!!!! Oh ya Google!"

Katy, a high school junior in Ann Arbor, Mich., first encountered "other" as a gender option at a meeting of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Allies (LGBTQQA) in seventh grade. "For those of us in the nonconforming gender community, it is great to see Google make the option more mainstream," she said.

Though Google created the "other" option for privacy reasons rather than as a transgender choice, young supporters of preferred gender pronouns (or P.G.P.'s as they are called) could not help but rejoice. Katy is one of a growing number of high school and college students who are questioning the gender roles society assigns individuals simply because they have been born male or female.

"You have to understand, this has nothing to do with your sexuality and everything to do with who you feel like inside," Katy said, explaining that at the start of every LGBTQQA meeting, participants are first asked if they would like to share their P.G.P.'s. "Mine are 'she,' 'her' and 'hers' and sometimes 'they,' 'them' and 'theirs.' "

P.G.P.'s can change as often as one likes. If the pronouns in the dictionary don't suffice, there are numerous made-up ones now in use, including "ze," "hir" and "hirs," words that connote both genders because, as Katy explained, "Maybe one day you wake up and feel more like a boy."

Teenagers are by nature prone to rebellion against adult conventions, and as the gender nonconformity movement gains momentum among young people, "it is about rejecting the boxes adults try to put kids in by assuming their sexual identity

labels their personal identity,” said [Dr. Ritch C. Savin-Williams](#), director of the Cornell University [Sex and Gender Lab](#). “These teens are fighting the idea that your equipment defines what it means for you to be a boy or girl. They are saying: ‘You don’t know me by looking at me. Assume nothing.’”

Dr. Savin-Williams, who is also the author of the book [“The New Gay Teenager,”](#) went on to list some of the new adjectives young people use to describe themselves: “bi-curious,” “heteroflexible,” “polyamorous” and even “wiggly.”

The semantic variations are part of a nascent effort worldwide to acknowledge some sort of neutral ground between male and female, starting at the youngest ages. Last year, a preschool in Sweden, appropriately called Egalia, opened with the goal of eliminating all gender bias by referring to the children as “friends,” instead of girls and boys, as well as avoiding all gender-specific pronouns.

Australia last month issued [new passport guidelines](#) allowing citizens to give their official gender as male, female or indeterminate. In Britain, the Home Office is also considering a third gender category on passports, according to reports.

In the United States, the transgender movement is beginning to find advocates in high schools. There are now nearly 5,000 Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs, high school organizations offering support to teenagers, registered with the [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network](#), a national organization whose mission is “to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.”

“More students today than ever are thinking about what gender means and are using this language to get away from masculine and feminine gender assumptions,” said Eliza Byard, the network’s executive director.

Some colleges, too, are starting to adopt nongender language. Last month, students at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., voted to [edit the student constitution](#) so that it contains only gender-neutral language. And in 2009, the University of Michigan Student Assembly passed a resolution [eliminating](#) gender-specific pronouns from the Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities.

From an early age, it was obvious to Loan Tran, 16 (whose P.G.P.’s, are “he, him and his,” and “they, them and theirs”), that his “assigned” gender did not align with the roles society prescribed. “If I don’t state my P.G.P.’s, people assume I am a ‘she, her, hers,’ from my high-pitched voice,” said Loan, who is president of the Gay-Straight Alliance at his high school in Charlotte, N.C.

When told that because of the nature of his name and the fact that the interview was being conducted over the phone, I now actually had no idea if Loan was born a boy or girl, Loan replied, “Awesome.”

It was only toward the end of the conversation that Loan revealed that he was “assigned female” at birth.

Loan said he grew up in a traditional Vietnamese family, where men’s and women’s roles are strictly defined. “At first it made my parents angry that I was not this perfect extension of them,” Loan said. “But now they are trying to learn more about the community.”

Loan is a student ambassador for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. “Today more people are O.K. with the gay and lesbian community than the gender-neutral community, which feels more threatening, I suppose, because it impacts a greater portion of society,” Loan said. “But the important thing is we have a safe meeting place as teens to express our P.G.P.’s and show our true selves to one another.”