

## MASCULINE OR FEMININE ... OR BOTH?

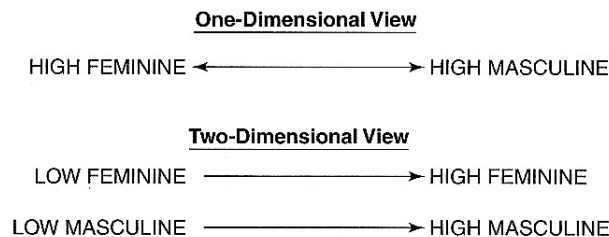
Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 42, 155-162.

Are you male or female? Are you a man or a woman? Are you masculine or feminine? Three seemingly similar questions, yet the range of possible answers may surprise you. As for the first question, the answer is usually fairly clear: it is 200 Personality a biological answer based on a person's chromosomes, hormones, and sexual anatomical structures. Most people also have little trouble answering the second question with confidence. Virtually all of you are quite sure about which sex you perceive yourself to be, and you've been sure since you were about four years old. Odds are good you did not have to stop for even a split second to think about whether you perceive yourself to be a man or a woman.

However, the third question might not be quite so easy to answer. Different people possess varying amounts of "maleness" and "femaleness," or masculinity and femininity. If you think about people you know, you can probably place some on the extremely feminine side of this dimension (they are more likely to be women), others fit best on the extremely masculine side (they are more likely to be men), and still others seem to fall somewhere in between the two, possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics (they may be either men or women). These "categories" are not intended to be judgmental, they simply define variations in one important characteristic among people. This masculinity-femininity dimension forms the basis of what psychologists usually refer to as *gender*, and your perception of your own maleness and femaleness is your *gender identity*. Your gender identity is one of the most basic and most powerful components comprising your personality: your self-concept and others' perceptions about *who you are*.

Prior to the 1970s, behavioral scientists (and most nonscientists as well) usually assumed a mutually exclusive view of gender: that people's gender identity was either primarily masculine or primarily feminine. Masculinity and femininity were seen as opposite ends of a one-dimensional gender scale. If you were to complete a test measuring your gender identity based on this view, your score would place you somewhere along a single scale, either more toward the masculine or toward the feminine side of the scale. Furthermore, researchers and clinicians presumed that psychological adjustment was, in part, related to how well a person "fit" into one gender category or the other, based on their biological sex. In other words, for optimal psychological health, men should be as masculine as possible and women should be as feminine as possible.

Then, in the early 1970s this one-dimensional view of gender was challenged in an article by Anne Constantinople (1973) claiming that masculinity and femininity are not two ends of a single scale, but rather, are best described as two *separate* dimensions on which individuals could be measured. In other words, a person could be high or low in masculinity and high or low in femininity *at the same-time*. Figure 1 illustrates the comparison of a one-dimensional and a two-dimensional concept of gender.



**FIGURE 1** Comparison of the traditional one-dimensional and the more recent two-dimensional model of gender.

This may not seem particularly surprising to you, but at the time, it was revolutionary. This two-dimensional view of gender was seized upon at the time by Sandra Bem of Stanford University. Bem challenged the prevailing notion that healthy gender identity is represented by behaving predominantly according to society's expectations for one's biological sex. She proposed that a more balanced person, who is able to incorporate both masculine and feminine behaviors, may actually be happier and more well adjusted than someone who is strongly sex-typed as either masculine or feminine. Bem took the research a step further and set out to develop a method for measuring gender on a two-dimensional scale. In the article that forms the basis for this chapter, Bem coined the term androgynous (from "andro" meaning male, and "gyn" referring to female) to describe individuals who embrace both masculine and feminine characteristics, depending on which behaviors

best fit a particular situation. Moreover, Bem contended that not only are some people androgynous, but androgyny offers an advantage of greater behavioral flexibility as a person moves from situation to situation in life. Bem explained it in this way:

The highly sex-typed individual is motivated to keep [his or her] behavior consistent with an internalized sex-role standard, a goal that [he or she] presumably accomplishes by suppressing any behavior that might be considered undesirable or inappropriate for [his or her] sex. Thus, whereas a narrowly masculine self-concept might inhibit behaviors that are stereotyped as feminine, and a narrowly feminine self-concept might inhibit behaviors that are stereotyped as masculine, a mixed, or androgynous, self-concept might allow an individual to engage freely in both "masculine" and "feminine" behaviors. (p. 155)

For example, you may know a woman who is gentle, sensitive, and soft-spoken (traditional feminine characteristics), but she is also ambitious, self-reliant, and athletic (traditional masculine characteristics). On the other hand, a male friend of yours may be competitive, dominant, and risk-taking (masculine traits), but displays traditional feminine characteristics as well, such as affectionate, sympathetic, and cheerful. When a person displays a balance of masculine and feminine traits, Bem described that person as *androgynous*. This article explains the theories and processes Bem used to develop a scale for assessing gender, called the *Bem Sex-Role Inventory* (BSRI).

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Whenever scientists propose new and novel theories that challenge the prevailing views of the time, they must bear the responsibility of demonstrating the validity of their revolutionary ideas. If Bem wanted to explore the notion of androgyny and demonstrate differences between androgynous people and those who are highly masculine or feminine, she needed to find a way to establish the existence of androgynous individuals. In other words, she had to *measure it*.

Bem's contended that measuring androgyny would require a scale that was fundamentally different from masculinity-femininity scales that had gone before. With this goal in mind, her scale contained the following innovations:

1. Bem's first concern was to develop a gender scale that did not assume a one-dimensional view: that masculinity and femininity were opposite ends of a single dimension. So, her test incorporated two separate scales, one measuring masculinity and another measuring femininity (see Figure 1).
2. Her scale was based on masculine and feminine traits that were *perceived* as desirable for men and women respectively. Previous gender scales were based on the behaviors most commonly *observed* in men and women, rather than those judged by American society to be more desirable.

A characteristic qualified as masculine if it was judged to be more desirable for a man than for a woman, and it qualified as feminine if it was judged to be more desirable for a woman than for a man. (pp. 155-156)

1. The BSRI was designed to differentiate among masculine, feminine, and androgynous individuals by looking at the *difference* in the score on the feminine section of the scale and the score on the masculine section. In other words when a person's feminine trait score is subtracted from his or her masculine trait score, the difference would determine the degree of masculinity, femininity, or androgyny.

Bem decided that her scale would be comprised of a list of personality characteristics or traits. To arrive at a gender score, each characteristic could simply be rated on a scale of 1 to 7 indicating the degree to which respondents perceived a particular trait described themselves. Let's take a look at how the scale was developed.

## METHOD

### Item Selection

Remember, Bem's idea was to use masculine and feminine characteristics that are seen by society as desirable in one sex or the other. To arrive at her final scale, she began with long lists of positively valued characteristics that seemed to her and several of her psychology students to be either masculine, feminine, or neither masculine or feminine. Each of these three lists of traits contained about 200 items. She then asked 100 undergraduate students (half male and half female) at Stanford University to serve as judges and rate whether the characteristics were more desirable for a man or for a woman on a 7-point scale from 1 ("not at all desirable") to 7 ("extremely desirable") in American society.

Using these ratings from the student judges, Bem selected the "top twenty" highest rated characteristics for the masculinity scale and for the femininity scale. She also selected items that were rated no more desirable for men than for women, but equally desirable for *anyone* to possess regardless of sex (these are not androgynous items, but simply gender-neutral). She selected 10 positive items and 10 negative gender-neutral items. These items were included in the final scale to ensure that respondents would not be overly influenced by seeing all masculine and feminine descriptors or all desirable items. So, the final scale consisted of 60 items. A sampling of the final selection of traits on the BSRI is shown in Table 1. Note that in the actual scale, the items are not divided according to sex-type, but are mixed up in random order.

**TABLE 1 Modified Sex Role Inventory**

RATING	FEMININE ITEMS	RATING	MASCULINE ITEMS	RATING	NEUTRAL ITEMS
_____	Affectionate	_____	Acts as a leader	_____	Adaptable
_____	Yielding	_____	Willing to take risks	_____	Conceited
_____	Cheerful	_____	Ambitious	_____	Unpredictable
_____	Flatterable	_____	Willing to take a stand	_____	Truthful
_____	Compassionate	_____	Analytical	_____	Inefficient
_____	Understanding	_____	Strong Personality	_____	Tactful
_____	Gentle	_____	Assertive	_____	Jealous
_____	Feminine	_____	Self-sufficient	_____	Sincere
_____	Loves children	_____	Masculine	_____	Moody
_____	Soft spoken	_____	Independent	_____	Reliable

Modified, based on Table 1, p. 156

**Rate items using the following scale as they apply to you:**

- 1 = Never or almost never true
- 2 = Usually not true
- 3 = Sometimes but infrequently true
- 4 = Occasionally true
- 5 = Often true
- 6 = Usually true
- 7 = Always or almost always true

#### Scoring

Femininity Score: Total of Feminine ratings ÷ 10 = \_\_\_\_\_

Masculinity Score: Total of Masculine ratings ÷ 10 = \_\_\_\_\_

**Androgyny Score: Subtract Masculine from Feminine = \_\_\_\_\_**

#### Interpretation:

- Feminine = 1.00 or greater
- Near Feminine = +.50 to +1.00
- Androgynous = -.50- to +.50
- Near Masculine = -1.00 to -.50
- Masculine = -1.00 or less

### Scoring

As mentioned earlier, a person completing the BSRI simply needs to respond to each item using a 7-point scale indicating how well the descriptor describes him- or herself. The response scale is as follows: 1 = Never or *almost never true*; 2 = *Usually not true*; 3 = *Sometimes, but infrequently; true*; 4 = *Occasionally true*; 5 = *Often true*; 6 = *Usually true*; 7 = *Always or almost always true*. After respondents complete the scale, they receive three scores: a masculinity score, a femininity score, and, most important for this article, an androgyny score. The masculinity score is determined by adding up all the scores on the masculine items and dividing by 20 to obtain the average rating on those items. The femininity score is likewise determined. The average score on each of these scales may be anywhere from 1.0 to 7.0. So, have you figured out how an androgyny score might be calculated from these averages? Remember, the scale taps into masculinity and femininity independently, but it does not contain

androgynous items per se. If you are thinking androgyny could be determined by looking at the degree of *difference* between a person's masculine and feminine scores, you are right: that is exactly what Bem did. Androgyny was determined by subtracting the masculinity score from the femininity score. Androgyny scores, then, could range from -6 to +6. It's simple, really. Here are three rather extreme examples to illustrate a masculine sex-typed person, a feminine sex-typed person, and an androgynous person:

Jennifer's masculinity score is 1.5 and her femininity score is 6.4. Subtracting 1.5 from 6.4 gives Jennifer an androgyny score of 4.9. Richard's masculinity score is 5.5 and his femininity score is 2.1. So, Richard's androgyny score is -3.7. Dana receives a masculinity score of 3.9 and a femininity score of 4.3. Dana's androgyny score, then, is 0.4.

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Jennifer: Femininity Score} = 6.4 \\ \text{Minus Masculinity score} = -1.5 \\ \hline \text{Androgyny score} = 4.9 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Richard: Femininity Score} = 2.1 \\ \text{Minus Masculinity score} = -5.8 \\ \hline \text{Androgyny score} = -3.7 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Dana: Femininity Score} = 4.3 \\ \text{Minus Masculinity score} = -3.9 \\ \hline \text{Androgyny score} = 0.4 \end{array}$$

Looking at the numbers, which of our three examples scored the *highest* in androgyny? The answer is Dana. Why? Because Dana's scores for masculine and feminine characteristics were about the same and did not show much bias in either direction, unlike Jennifer and Richard. Therefore, Dana's score reflected a *lack* of sex-typed self-perception, and more of a balance between masculine and feminine, which is the *definition* of androgyny.

So, the scoring on the BSRI is interpreted like this: scores closest to zero (whether positive or negative) indicate androgyny; as scores move farther away from zero in the plus direction greater femininity is indicated; as scores move farther away from zero in the minus direction, greater masculinity is indicated.

You may want to try completing the scale for yourself. Of course, at this point, you are *not* the ideal respondent, because you now know too much about how the scale works! Also, you will be rating feminine, masculine, and neutral traits separately, rather than all mixed up as they would be in the actual scale. Nevertheless, with those cautions in mind, you should feel free to give it a try. Table 1 provides simplified scoring and interpretation guidelines.

## RESULTS

Any measuring device must be both reliable and valid. Reliability refers to a scale's consistency of measurement, that is, how well the various items tap into the same characteristic being measured, and the scale's ability to produce similar results over repeated administrations. Validity refers to how well the scale truly measures what it is intended to measure—in the case of the BSRI, masculinity and femininity.

### Reliability of the BSRI

Statistical analyses on the scores from the student samples demonstrated that the internal consistency of the BSRI was very high for both scales. This implies that the 20 masculine items were all measuring a single trait (presumably masculinity), and the 20 feminine items were measuring a single trait (presumably femininity). To determine the scale's consistency of measurement over time, Bem administered the BSRI a second time to about 60 of the original respondents four weeks later. Their scores for the first and second administrations correlated very highly, thereby suggesting a high level of "test-retest" reliability.

### Validity of the BSRI

To ensure that the BSRI was valid, the masculinity and femininity scales must be analyzed to be sure they are not measuring the *same* trait. This was important, because a basic theoretical proposition of Bem's study was that masculinity and femininity are *independent* dimensions of gender and should be able to be measured separately. Bem demonstrated this by correlating scores on the masculine scale and the feminine scale of the BSRI. The correlations showed that the scales were clearly *unrelated* and functioned independently from each other.

Next, Bem needed to verify that the scale was indeed measuring masculine and feminine gender characteristics. To confirm this, Bem analyzed average scores on the masculine and feminine scales for men and

women separately. You would expect such an analysis should show that men scored higher on the masculine items and women scored higher on the feminine items. This is exactly what Bem found for respondents from both colleges, and the difference was highly statistically significant.

Finally, Bem divided her sample of respondents into the gender categories listed earlier in this discussion: masculine, feminine, and androgynous. She found a large number of people who had very small differences in their feminine and masculine scores. In other words, they were androgynous. Table 2 shows the percentages of masculine, feminine, and androgynous respondents in Bem's study.

**TABLE 2 Percentages of Feminine, Masculine, and Androgynous Respondents**

CATEGORY	MALES	FEMALES
Feminine	7%	35%
Near Feminine	6%	17%
Androgynous	35%	29%
Near Masculine	19%	11%
Masculine	33%	8%

Number of respondents = 917

Adapted from Table 7, p. 161 (samples combined)

## DISCUSSION

The discussion section of Bem's article is short, succinct, and cogent. The best way to represent it is to quote it directly, in its entirety:

It is hoped that the development of the BSRI will encourage investigators in the areas of sex differences and sex roles to question the traditional assumption that it is the sex-typed individual who typifies mental health and to begin focusing on the behavioral and societal consequences of the more flexible sex-role concepts. In a society where rigid sex-role differentiation has already outlived its utility, perhaps the androgynous person will come to define a more human standard of psychological health. (p. 162)

This statement from Bem illustrates how this study changed psychology. Over the decades since Bem's article, Western cultures have become increasingly accepting of the idea that some people are more androgynous than others, and that possessing some characteristics of both traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics is not only acceptable, but may provide certain advantages. More men and women than ever before are choosing to engage in vocations, avocations, sports activities, and family activities that have traditionally been seen as "limited" to their opposite gender. From women corporate executives to stay-at-home dads, from female firefighters and soldiers to male nurses and schoolteachers, and from women taking charge to men exploring their sensitive sides, the social changes in gender roles and expectations are everywhere you look.

This is not to say, by any means, that the culture has become "gender-blind." On the contrary, sex-role expectations still exert powerful influences over our choices of behaviors and attitudes, and discrimination based on gender continues to be a significant social problem. In general, males are still expected to be more assertive and women more emotionally expressive; the vast majority of airline pilots still are men (96%) and nearly all dental hygienists still are women (98%); but the *degree* of cultural differentiation along gender lines has decreased and is continuing to do so.

A great deal of research was generated by Bem's new conceptualization of gender. As discussed earlier, prior to the 1970s, the prevailing belief was that people would be most well adjusted in life if their "gender matched their sex," that is, boys and men should display masculine attitudes and behaviors and girls and women should display feminine attitudes and behaviors. However, the "discovery" of androgyny shifted this focus, and studies began to explore gender differences among masculine, feminine, *and* androgynous individuals.

## CRITICISMS AND SUBSEQUENT RESEARCH

Research has shown that androgynous children and adults tend to have higher levels of self-esteem and are more adaptable in diverse settings (Taylor & Hall, 1982). Other research has suggested that androgynous individuals have greater success in heterosexual intimate relationships, probably due to their greater ability to understand

and accept each other's differences (Coleman & Ganong, 1985). More recent research has even revealed that people with the most positive traits of androgyny are psychologically healthier and happier (Woodhill & Samuels, 2003). However the basic theory of androgyny as developed by Bem and others has undergone various changes and refinements over the years.

Numerous researchers have suggested that the psychological advantages experienced by people who score high in androgyny may be due more to the presence of masculine traits rather than a balance between male and female characteristics (Whitley, 1983). If you think about it, this makes sense. Clearly, many traditional feminine traits, such as dependent, self-critical, overly emotional are seen by society as undesirable. So it stands to reason that people who possess more masculine than feminine characteristics will receive more favorable treatment by others which, in turn creates greater levels of self-confidence and self-esteem in the individual. However, not all masculine qualities are positive and not all feminine qualities are negative. Positive and negative traits exist for both genders.

This has led researchers to propose a further refinement of the androgyny concept to include *four* dimensions: desirable femininity, undesirable femininity, desirable masculinity, and undesirable masculinity (see Ricciardelli & Williams, 1995). Qualities such as firm, confident, and strong are seen as desirable masculine traits, while bossy, noisy, and sarcastic are undesirable masculine traits. On the feminine side, patient, sensitive, and responsible are desirable traits, and nervous, timid, and weak are undesirable traits. So, depending on how someone's set of personality traits line up, a person could be seen as *positive masculine, negative masculine, positive feminine, negative feminine, positive androgynous, or negative androgynous*.

When gender characteristics are more carefully defined to consider both positive and negative traits, the advantages for positive androgynous individuals become even more pronounced (i.e., Woodhill & Samuels, 2003). People who possess the best of male and female gender qualities are more likely to be more well-rounded, happier, more popular, better liked, more flexible and adaptable, and like themselves more than those who are able to draw on only one set of gender traits, or who combine negative aspects of both genders. Just imagine someone (male or female) who is patient, sensitive, responsible, firm, confident, and strong (positive androgyny) compared to a person who is nervous, timid, weak, bossy, noisy, and sarcastic (negative androgyny) and you'll get the idea behind this enhancement of Bem's theory.

Sandra Bem continues to be a leading researcher in the field of gender roles. She has applied her theories and research to the ongoing debates about gender in equality which she discusses in detail in her 1994 book, *The Lenses of Gender*. More recently, she has mapped her ideas onto the complexities of marriage, family, and child rearing, in her book, *An Unconventional Family* (1998). In this book, Bem drew from her own experiences with her former husband, Daryl Bem (the noted Cornell Psychologist) to explore how a couple might attempt to avoid gender stereotyped expectations, function as two truly equal partners, and raise their children as "gender-liberated," positive-androgynous individuals.

## RECENT APPLICATIONS

One question that might have occurred to you as you were reading this chapter was whether or not the items used to measure masculinity and femininity are still valid, that is still able to discriminate between people who are masculine and feminine. In fact, you may have disagreed with some or many of them. After all, this study is several decades old and society's expectations of sex-typed behaviors are bound to change over time, right? Well, the answer to that question is a resounding "maybe!" One study from the late 1990s reexamined all of the items on the BSRI with a sample of students from a mid-sized southern U.S. university. The researchers were able to demonstrate all but two items from Bem's scale still distinguished masculinity and femininity to a statistically significant degree (Holt & Ellis, 1998). The two exceptions—"childlike" and "loyal"—were both feminine descriptors on the BSRI, but were not rated as more desirable for women than for men in the 1998 study.

Another study, however, found strikingly conflicting results. When students from an urban university in the northeastern U.S. were asked to validate the BSRI's descriptors, results were quite different (Konrad & Harris, 2002). These researchers found that (a) women rated only *one* masculine item out of 20 ("masculine") more desirable for men than for women; (b) men rated only 13 out of the 20 masculine items more desirable for men than for women; (c) women rated only 2 of the feminine items more desirable for women than for men ("feminine" and "soft spoken"); and (d) men rated just 7 feminine items more desirable for women than for men.

How can we reconcile these discrepancies? One possibility is that people's views of gender vary significantly according to geographic region. Holt and Ellis's data were from the southern United States (and a relatively small town) while Konrad and Ellis's participants were from the northeastern United States (and a

large city). Alternatively, the authors acknowledge that the participants in their study may have "guessed" the purpose of the study and slanted their answers accordingly:

Specifically, despite the fact that respondents were asked to rate only one sex or the other, merely specifying the sex of the target could have cued respondents to the study's purpose. Given this possibility, respondents might have provided more egalitarian responses than they actually had in order to present a positive self-image. (Konrad and Ellis, 2002, p. 270)

The BSRI continues to exert a powerful influence in studies involving sexuality and gender. In fact it has formed the basis for gender assessment in hundreds of studies on a wide range of topics. For example, the BSRI has been used in studies on the effects of men's attitudes toward women after viewing sexually explicit films (Mulac, Jansma, & Linz, 2002); how people change their gender behaviors depending on the sex of the person with whom they are interacting (Pickard & Strough, 2003); cross-cultural variations in gender roles (Sugihara & Katsurada, 2000); and how gender identity affects eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa (Klingenspor, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

This study by Sandra Bem changed psychology because it altered the way psychologists, individuals, and entire societies view one of the most basic human characteristics: gender identity. Bem's research has played a pivotal role in broadening our view of what is truly meant to be male or female, masculine or feminine and, in doing so, has allowed everyone the opportunity to expand their range of activities, choices, and life goals.

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