

How gender has been measured using the Bem Sex Role Inventory.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) is a classic 1974 psychological test created by American psychologist Sandra Bem. It measures how people identify with traditional cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Unlike older tests that treated masculinity and femininity as opposite ends of a single line, the BSRI measures them as two totally separate, independent dimensions.

The inventory lists 60 personality traits.

- **20 Masculine traits** (like *self-reliant, assertive, dominant*)
- **20 Feminine traits** (like *affectionate, gentle, understanding*)
- **20 Neutral "filler" items** (like *happy, conscientious, truthful*)

Individuals taking the test rate how true each adjective is for them on a 7-point scale. This scale runs from 1 ("*never or almost never true*") to 7 ("*always or almost always true*").

This big idea allowed psychologists to measure psychological androgyny; the presence of both high masculine and high feminine traits in one person.

The measurement of psychological androgyny.

Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 42(2), 155–162. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036215>

Describes the development of a new sex-role inventory that treats masculinity and femininity as 2 independent dimensions, thereby making it possible to characterize a person as masculine, feminine, or "androgynous" as a function of the difference between his or her endorsement of masculine and feminine personality characteristics. Normative data, provided by 561 male and 356 female college and junior college students, are presented, as well as the results of various psychometric analyses. Findings indicate that: (a) The dimensions of masculinity and femininity are empirically and logically independent. (b) The concept of psychological androgyny is a reliable one. (c) Highly sex-typed scores do not reflect a general tendency to respond in a socially desirable direction, but rather a specific tendency to describe oneself in accordance with sex-typed standards of desirable behavior for men and women.

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Sandra Bem believed that rigidly sticking to traditional gender roles limited human behaviour. She argued that androgynous people are psychologically healthier because they can adapt and pull from a wider toolbox of traits depending on the situation.

However, because the traits were chosen based on 1970s American gender stereotypes, critics point out that the test relies heavily on outdated cultural biases. Modern Psychology views gender identity as much more fluid, complex, and culturally shifting than these rigid 60 binary traits allow.

Background

The BSRI was designed for conducting empirical research on psychological androgyny.

Prior to the 1970s, masculinity and femininity were conceptualised and measured as opposite ends of a singular continuum, such that an individual high on masculinity was low on femininity and an individual high on femininity was low on masculinity.

In the early 1970s, Sandra Bem (1974) began developing the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), an instrument designed so that respondents could rate themselves on personality characteristics in a way that allowed the separate measures of masculinity and femininity to vary independently of one another.

On the BSRI, the score on the Masculinity scale and the score on the Femininity scale could then be used together in a calculation that classifies respondents into one of four groups: androgynous (high masculine-high feminine), masculine (high masculine-low feminine), feminine (low masculine-high feminine), and undifferentiated (low masculine-low feminine) (Bem 1981).

* See the separate document for a copy of Bem's Sex Role Inventory.

