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# The American Male and Female 35 Years Later: Bem Sex Role Inventory Revisited

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## **The American Male and Female 35 Years Later: Bem Sex Role Inventory Revisited**

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### **Abstract**

This study reassessed the profiles of traits associated with stereotypic males and females in 2009-2010 35 years after the Bem (1974) Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was introduced. Qualitative changes could have resulted from other cultural trends toward occupational and educational equality or growing public awareness of the nature of gender roles. The adjectives appearing in the BSRI, which produces a measure of androgyny, were rated as stereotypically male, female, or neutral by 1075 undergraduates. Chi-square tests, which assigned adjectives to genders, indicated that most of the traits formerly associated with males are now considered neutral. The characteristic "childlike," which formerly characterized women, now characterizes men. The female's stereotype was mostly unchanged although "theatrical" appears to be added to their repertoire. There was little disagreement between the genders on the assignment of adjectives to stereotypes. Implications for the identity of American males are discussed.

*Keywords:* androgyny, gender role, male stereotype, female stereotype

Bem (1974, 1975) introduced the concept of the androgynous personality as a contrast to the prevailing idea that masculinity and femininity were polar opposites. An androgynous personality exhibits many of the characteristics possessed by both stereotypic males and females. Its opposite, the undifferentiated personality, does not exhibit many of either stereotype. In principle, androgynous personalities are not confined to activities, interests, and occupations that are consistent with gender stereotypes (Orlofsky, Cohen, & Ramsden, 1985), and androgynous personalities could potentially live more rewarding lives (Flaherty & Dusek, 1980; Green & Kendrick, 1994; Lombardo & Kemper, 1992; Major, Carnevale, & Deaux, 1981; Markstrom-Adams, 1989; O'Heron & Orlofsky, 1990; Williams & D'Alessandro, 1994) although there was some disagreement on this point (Marsh & Byrne, 1991; Whitley, 1983; Woodhill & Samuels, 2004).

There have been some significant transitions in Western society over the past 35 years regarding the nature of male and female stereotypes, however. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to revisit the traits that initially comprised the stereotypes as Bem (1974, 1975) had identified them and reconsider whether they contribute to notions of male and female stereotypes as young adults see them today. Although others have asked whether Bem's list of characteristics really comprises the stereotypes and produces reliable measurements of the constructs (Ballard-Reisch & Elton, 1992; Hoffman & Borders, 2001), another decade has passed, and the psychological issue is not whether the traits really measure today's stereotypes but whether the stereotypes that were once known to be socially controversial still exist at all. The answer to this question will be informative in revealing whether the androgyny concept as a personality theory construct is still viable. The exposition that follows evaluates trends in the adoption of stereotypes and, specifically, trends in the changing content of male stereotypes.

### **Stereotype Adoption**

The traditional masculine stereotype is tough, strong, and independent, whereas the feminine stereotype is weak, fragile, and vulnerable (Gough & Peace, 2000, p. 386). The androgynous personality and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) that measures androgynous personality were conceptualized during a historical epoch characterized by widespread concern about gender stereotypes and their negative impact on women. Many of society's norms, particularly in employment and expectations for raising children, changed as a result. Not surprisingly, a round of research questions was posed to examine whether and how people had changed. To some extent people become more androgynous as they get older, but the crossover is tempered by the historical epoch during which they formed their initial gender roles (Strough, Leszczynski, Neely, Flinn, & Margrett, 2007). If one were to consider just young adults, self-reports of masculine traits increased for both males and females after Bem's original study, but there has been no indication that self-reports of feminine traits have changed (Twenge, 1997). In a two-generation study, Guastello and Guastello (2003) reported that college-age young adults were more likely to exhibit androgynous characteristics if their parents did also. In the same sample, interest and activity patterns for young men were becoming more androgynous, but young women were becoming more stereotypically male (relative to the 1970s definition).

According to Woodhill and Samuels (2004), the research results were actually mixed as to whether androgynous personalities were better off in any meaningful way. They identified part of the problem as being associated with the two stereotypes having both positive (socially desirable) and negative attributes; one may be androgynous in all the wrong ways. Another part of the problem is that, at the turn of the century, society had sounded the death knell for the stereotypic male. "The old framework, however, has not yet been replaced by an unambiguous, socially sanctioned, alternative notion of what it is to be male..." and that there is "an apparent confusion of identity for modern men" (p. 19). The next section of this paper elaborates on some

more specific features of the male stereotype that have been transitioning, according to gender theorists. Then plausibly led to the “death knell” that Woodhill and Samuels described.

### **Content of Male Stereotypes**

According to Connell (1995), there are several types of expressions of hegemonic masculinity, and most of them serve the purpose of establishing a dominance hierarchy that feminists find offensive. The common stereotypes are the warriors, the athletes, laborers, and the breadwinners, which are espoused to varying extents by individuals. Developing skills is an accepted means of enhancing one’s long-term employability beyond that of a laborer and for moving up the hierarchy. In the Don Juan stereotype, masculinity is expressed through the sexual exploitation of women or treating women as sex objects.

The “average guy,” according to Wetherell and Edley (1999), typically does not identify with the extreme icons of masculinity, which he regards as absurd. More conventional levels of athletic behavior and risk taking are closer to the norm, such as the competent technician or the executive who is “in control” of things. Others are willing to acknowledge some elements of gender unconventionality in interest patterns or apparel preferences, such as when men’s jewelry proliferated in the 1970s.

Connell (1995) extracted several themes from men’s discourse that explain their masculine proclivities. The biological explanation emphasizes physical differences between men and women, their evolutionary purpose, and, as a result, what might seem to be reasonable divisions of labor. The psychoanalytic explanation was rooted in Freud’s Oedipal complex where boys identify with men and no longer identify with their mothers; they maintain a psychological distance between masculine and feminine expressions often with the support and encouragement from other men in their environment. Hence, there are plausible origins for the marginalization of homosexuals and effeminate males.

There were other psychoanalytic writers who also contributed to the distancing interpretation of the male psyche where emotional flooding and feelings of vulnerability are not permitted (Gough, 2004). Yet others (Guastello & Guastello, 2003) observed that Jung’s (1959, 1960) theory of personality held that the personality contained a masculine component and a feminine component known as the animus and anima respectively. For men, the animus is closely aligned with the outer personality, the persona, whereas the anima is more closely aligned with the hidden portion of the personality, the shadow. The relationship was inverted for women; the anima is aligned with the persona, and the animus is aligned with the shadow. Better-integrated personalities, however, allowed the expression of both the anima and animus, hence the concept of androgyny.

The gender roles explanation captures the arbitrary nature of many if not most divisions of interests and employment patterns between males and females. The problem with gender role explanations, according to Connell (1995), is that they rely on definitions of masculinity and femininity that invoke singular concordances between work roles, education, and social

expectations. Although social trends might have loosened some restrictions, role concepts still result in unfair treatment of women and marginalized male groups; unfairness is bolstered by authoritarian personalities.

The fourth explanation arises in the themes of political feminism that seek to change societies in a new direction (Connell, 1995). Feminism brought political rights, equal employment, and equal educational opportunities for women. To do so required the support of men, which it received. *Economic* gender equality, however, is a complex problem that expands beyond the personality issues of concern here. The standing problem for men, nonetheless, is that men who verbally support feminist thinking in conversations, (e.g., university class discussions), found that they are shunned by the females. Men who support feminism are often regarded with suspicion as if anything they might try to contribute to the conversation is somehow wrong or an attempt to manipulate the situation back to the hegemonic state (Holmgren & Hearn, 2009). Thus, it has become an effective strategy for some men to remain silent, particularly in the company of other men whose views about women's issues are not yet known (Gough, 2001).

In other narratives, some men regard themselves as victims of feminism (Gough & Peace, 2000). Men have been chided for treating women as sex objects, yet men have noticed growing numbers of advertisements where men are also treated as sex objects. Expressions of masculinity are censured, but alternative, effeminate masculinities are not socially acceptable, particularly to other men. The social role conflicts are stressful as the men in Gough and Peace's study experienced greater responsibilities assigned to them and additional health risks due to stress as a result. Any objections they might express about their circumstances are regarded by feminists as "false arguments" to preserve gender inequality.

## Hypothesis

In light of the ongoing entropy in the composition of gender stereotypes, the present study investigated whether the traits that were once associated with stereotypic males and females are still regarded in the same way and to what extent. In particular, the trends reported by previous researchers strongly indicated that some erstwhile male characteristics would be shared by both genders, and the males would not have acquired any specific new characteristics. New types of investigations of stereotypes or the renorming of the BSRI could be warranted by the results of the analysis.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 1075 undergraduates from two U.S. Midwestern universities who were enrolled in psychology courses and volunteered for psychological research; 504 were male and

571 were female. The sample was 89% White, 4% Hispanic, 3% African-American, 3% Asian, and 1% Other. The region of the country is known to be relatively slow to uptake cultural changes compared to the coastal regions. Data were collected in 2009-2010.

### Procedure

Participants were contacted in class and offered extra credit points for their participation, and they were reminded that alternative opportunities for extra credit existed if they chose not to participate. They were handed a consent form and the data collection form that listed the 60 adjectives from the BSRI (Bem, 1974, p. 156). They were instructed to classify each item as typically male, typically female, or not gender-specific. The participants also reported their sex and ethnicity. The total participation time required not more than 15 minutes.

### Results

Table 1 shows the primary results for the classification of adjectives. All frequencies were found to deviate from equal thirds by  $\chi^2$  tests, which were significant at  $p < .001$  for all adjectives. Column 1 of Table 1 lists the original position of the item in the BSRI preceded by whether the item was originally classified as male, female, or neutral. The most frequently assigned category based on the present sample is underlined. There was one genuine tie where exactly the same number of people classified "helpful" as neutral (its original category) or female.

For the female items, 16 out of the original 20 were still classified as typically female as based on the most frequently assigned category. Three items—loyal, shy, and yielding—were reclassified as gender neutral. The last previously female characteristic, childlike, has been reclassified as stereotypically male.

For the male items, only 9 of the original 20 were still classified as typically male. The other 11 items were recategorized as neutral: acts as a leader, ambitious, analytical, defends beliefs, displays leadership ability, independent, individualistic, self-reliant, self-sufficient, strong personality, and takes a stand. The current rendition of a stereotypic male is aggressive, assertive, athletic, competitive, dominant, forceful, makes decisions easily, masculine, risk-taking, and childlike.

For the neutral items, 15 out of the original 20 were still classified as neutral. The remaining five items—conscientious, moody, secretive, sincere, and theatrical—were recategorized as stereotypically female.

The last column of Table 1 shows  $\chi^2$  tests for gender differences in the distribution of categorizations. There were nine significant differences although three of them could have occurred by chance. The nine pairs of distributions are compared in Table 2. In only two cases did males and females assign a trait to a different category. Women classified "conceited" as a

male characteristic, but men classified it as neutral. Women classified "helpful" as a female characteristic, but men also classified it as neutral.

### **Discussion**

Psychological researchers have been chided occasionally for succumbing to fads or popularity imperatives in their topic choices or perspectives at the expense of not getting closure on important matters. For that reason, among others expressed already, the concepts of stereotypes as depicted by Bem (1974, 1975) are regarded as a meaningful basis for a follow-up study in light of the social transitions that have occurred that would have impacted any generally shared stereotypes. The researchers are, of course, aware of the volume of social constructions that might have influenced the participants in this study and in other gender-related studies. Psychological theory, however, must stand on firmer ground if it is going to present an accurate picture of the human psyche in any way similar to how natural scientists investigate their subject matter. A small step toward doing so is to mark a meaningful "time-0" point for assessing social change. Bem's androgyny concept is very useful for this purpose, and an alternative has not yet been produced.

#### **What changed?**

So what has changed about gender stereotypes? The results indicated that the stereotypic female is substantially the same as she was 35 years ago although she dropped "loyal, shy, yielding, and childlike" and acquired "conscientious, moody, secretive, sincere, and theatrical." Following Woodhill and Samuel's (2004) analysis, one can say the stereotypic female dropped one positive characteristic (loyal) but picked up two others (conscientious and sincere). She also exchanged three negatives for three different negatives.

The stereotypic male has been greatly reduced in scope. Most of his erstwhile characteristics are now regarded as gender neutral. He is now restricted to athletic demeanor and the classic characteristics of agency, which could be regarded positively as "getting things done" or as overbearing and boorish in other situations. The only new addition to his repertoire is "childlike," which is generally negative for an adult.

The foregoing interpretation of the results did not invoke the rule used by previous researchers of assigning a trait to a gender only if there was a 75% agreement about the assignment. Rather the assignment was made on the basis of the highest frequency only. Had the researchers invoked the 75% rule, the female stereotype would simplify to "affectionate, compassionate, soothe hurt feelings, feminine, gentle, moody, sensitive to others, sympathetic, and tender." Nine other characteristics would drop out. Also, if the rule were invoked, the male stereotype would simplify to "aggressive, dominant, forceful, and masculine."

The present results offered some explanation for the earlier results (Guastello & Guastello, 2003): The increase in androgyny among males, which is a narrow gap between

identification with male and female traits, is as much a reduction in the identification with stereotypic male traits as an increase in the identification with female traits as defined by the 1974 inventory. The increase in the number of women identifying with typical male characteristics (Twenge, 1997) has rendered many of those characteristics as gender neutral.

Do the results justify defining new norms for what constitutes typical male, female, and androgynous personalities? An argument in favor of doing so would be that gender roles are social constructions and society has changed its views of what constitutes each stereotype. It might not be as meaningful in the future as it once was to compare people of the future with the way things were 35 years ago. An argument against it is that there is a vacuum in the male identity, and renorming the measurement of the stereotypes based on their content in 2010 as “normal” might be harmful in the long run, at least until the missing elements of the stereotype are replaced.

A related question that might make the previous one moot is whether the androgyny construct is still useful for characterizing personalities. If only little remains of the male stereotype, then there is not much point to describing people who endorse both stereotypes. Perhaps a layer of complication arises from the concept of *gender roles*: people play a variety of roles in life as, employees and coworkers, teachers, parents, romantic partners, or members of a social enclave. If they act differently in each role, it would stand to reason that the gendered elements of the roles could vary as well.

Another point to consider before dropping the androgyny construct altogether is that the theoretical precedents from Jung and Bem regarding masculine and feminine parts of the personality do exist and coexist. Perhaps it was the masculine and feminine labels that were misleading all along, but something else remains. For instance, the adjectives that remain in the male category after applying the 75% rule all reflect the personality *trait* of dominance. The adjectives surviving in the female category reflect emotional sensitivity or empathy. It is possible, in principle, for people to score high on dominance, emotional sensitivity, both traits, or neither trait without invoking any particular assumptions about masculinity, femininity, hegemonic masculinity, or feminism.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The limitations of the present study could provide another degree of flexibility for future research. The subject population for this study was localized to the U.S. Midwest, which is perhaps the slowest to reflect cultural change compared to the rest of the country. Future research on gender stereotypes should consider a broader spectrum of U.S. demographics, ethnicities, and non-U.S. cultures. Future research should also consider a broader range of characteristics that go beyond the ones used 35 years ago. It is very possible that both stereotypes have actually moved on to territory that has not yet been researched.

The questionnaire for the subjects in this study was not framed in the context of any particular social role such as work, family, or dating contexts. The omission was deliberate



because the original androgyny concepts did not carry those restrictions either, and imposing such a frame would negate the viability of making the trans-historic comparisons that were the goal here. On the other hand, the role theory of personality would suggest that different roles could support different constellations of trait words, which could be informative.

Similarly, the present study did not apply any constraints regarding the sexual orientations of the targets of the adjectives or ask any such questions of the participants for essentially the same reasons; applying new frames could produce different answers. The impact of frames suggested by the multi-gender perspective might be investigated in an organized fashion in future research. Future researchers should continue to acknowledge the distinction between psychological and political theories of gender if either is to be studied effectively, either separately or together.

### Author Biographies

Denise D. Guastello received her Ph.D. in Applied Social Psychology at Loyola University of Chicago, Illinois. She teaches Personality: Theory and Assessment, Social Psychology, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Research Seminar, and Consumer Behavior. Her research interests include the changing stereotypes of the American male and female, the relationship of midlife women's work role with life satisfaction, generational and familial consistencies/inconsistencies in constructs such as authoritarianism, generativity, and cynicism; emotional intelligence and its relationship to androgyny; and the interrelationships between creativity and mental illness.

Stephen J. Guastello is a professor of psychology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he specializes in Industrial-Organizational Psychology and Human Factors. He received his PhD in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1982, his MA in Psychology from Washington University, St. Louis; and his BA in Psychology from The Johns Hopkins University. His research interests span a number of topics including team coordination, leadership emergence, cognitive workload and fatigue, applications of personality theory, and principles of mathematical modeling.

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Table 1

*Classification of Traits by Gender Stereotype Assignment and Tests for Gender Differences in Distributions*

Item No.	Item	Percent Female	Percent Male	Percent Neutral	$\chi^2$ by Gender
M49	Acts as leader	03	46	51	0.246
N51	Adaptable	35	10	54	6.901*
F11	Affectionate	90	01	09	2.329
N36	Conceited	19	40	41	7.286*
M46	Aggressive	02	93	05	0.323
F5	Cheerful	58	01	40	1.164
M58	Ambitious	11	16	73	4.026
N9	Conscientious	59	03	38	3.852
F50	Childlike	09	57	35	1.811
N60	Conventional	23	15	62	2.886
M22	Analytical	27	29	44	9.620**
F32	Compassionate	85	01	14	3.220
M13	Assertive	10	59	31	3.966
N45	Friendly	30	02	68	1.725
F53	No harsh language	72	01	27	6.466*
N15	Happy	22	01	77	0.177
M10	Athletic	01	57	43	3.445
F35	Soothe hurt feelings	92	03	05	0.837
M55	Competitive	02	71	27	2.318
N36	Helpful	49	02	49	10.127**
F20	Feminine	97	01	02	1.251
N48	Inefficient	05	27	68	1.812
M4	Defends beliefs	09	14	77	0.084

F14	Flatterable	<u>65</u>	06	29	9.264**
M37	Dominant	02	<u>88</u>	10	1.083
N24	Jealous	30	24	<u>46</u>	3.407
F59	Gentle	<u>88</u>	02	09	1.799
N39	Likeable	18	03	<u>79</u>	4.465
M19	Forceful	01	<u>88</u>	11	0.716
F47	Gullible	<u>56</u>	04	40	1.044
M25	Leadership ability	03	24	<u>72</u>	3.014
N6	Moody	<u>78</u>	03	18	1.756
F56	Loves kids	<u>69</u>	01	30	0.704
N21	Reliable	30	05	<u>65</u>	2.081
M7	Independent	12	28	<u>61</u>	2.504
F17	Loyal	27	08	<u>65</u>	0.742
M52	Individual	10	20	<u>70</u>	0.094
N30	Secretive	<u>42</u>	19	39	1.646
F26	Sensitive to others	<u>89</u>	00	10	0.790
N33	Sincere	<u>54</u>	03	43	5.962
M31	Makes decisions easily	05	<u>49</u>	46	3.437
F8	Shy	41	05	<u>54</u>	0.133
M40	Masculine	01	<u>96</u>	03	1.316
N42	Solemn	14	19	<u>67</u>	0.107
F38	Softspoken	<u>74</u>	02	24	1.546
N57	Tactful	22	23	<u>54</u>	14.117***
M1	Self-reliant	11	40	<u>49</u>	8.736*
F23	Sympathetic	<u>85</u>	02	14	9.490**
M34	Self-sufficient	11	31	<u>58</u>	2.861
N12	Theatrical	<u>51</u>	04	44	2.234
F44	Tender	<u>86</u>	02	12	0.441
N27	Truthful	24	06	<u>70</u>	5.012
M16	Strong personality	04	35	<u>61</u>	4.193
F29	Understanding	<u>63</u>	03	34	1.402
M43	Takes a stand	06	39	<u>55</u>	1.570
N18	Unpredictable	19	28	<u>53</u>	3.304
F41	Warm	<u>71</u>	03	26	3.490
N54	Unsystematic	09	26	<u>66</u>	3.971
M28	Takes risks	01	<u>61</u>	37	1.423
F2	Yielding	42	04	<u>54</u>	1.116

Note. Underlined values reflect highest percentage scored for that question, indicating the category the trait is assigned. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 2

*Gender Differences in Distributions of Classifications*

Item	Gender of Respondent	Percent of Ratings Assigned		
		Female	Male	Neutral
Adaptable	F	38	08	54
	M	33	13	55
Conceited*	F	19	43	38
	M	20	35	45
Analytical	F	25	33	42
	M	29	25	46
No harsh language	F	75	01	24
	M	69	01	31
Helpful*	F	54	01	45
	M	44	02	54
Flatterable	F	68	04	27
	M	61	07	32
Tactful	F	24	27	48
	M	20	20	60
Self-reliant	F	09	43	48
	M	13	37	50
Sympathetic	F	88	01	11
	M	81	02	17

*Note.* \*Genders differed in their classification of the trait.