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An Exercise in Gender: The Bem Sex Role Inventory in the Classroom*

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript describes a classroom exercise in which students learn about aspects of their own sex role orientation by completing the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The exercise represents one way in which the themes of clinical sociology can contribute to the teaching of other sociology courses. Specifically, the exercise is 1) interventionist, 2) multidisciplinary, 3) humane, and 4) holistic. The exercise underscores the potential for alternative conceptions of gender without reinforcing traditional stereotypes. This manuscript introduces the Bem Sex Role Inventory, describes its administration in the classroom, provides ideas for incorporating the exercise into sociology courses, and provides an annotated bibliography of some of the relevant research that has made use of the inventory. The manuscript is designed to provide the practical tools for teachers to incorporate the exercise into their own custom-made lessons and to incorporate the themes of clinical sociology into the other sociology courses they teach.

One of the primary objectives of the gender sections of introductory sociology and social psychology textbooks is distinguishing between sex and gender (see, e.g., Robertson, 1987; Stephen & Stephen, 1985). Lessons often take the form of

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cross-cultural comparisons which illustrate a range of different patterns of gender. Understanding the potential for alternative conceptions of gender in our own culture may be more difficult. Through the process of socialization, the normative expectations of the sex roles¹ come to seem natural and inevitable. Additionally, Baker and Davies (1979) argue that routine instructional practices, when combined with common knowledge, may do more to confirm traditional notions of gender than controvert them.

This paper describes an exercise in which students learn about aspects of their own sex role orientation by completing the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The Bem Sex Role Inventory has particular relevance to courses on gender, social psychology, and introductory sociology, but can also be used to demonstrate concepts relevant to sociological research methods courses. The exercise is particularly effective in elucidating the difference between sex and gender.

The exercise represents an instance in which the themes of clinical sociology can help to address some of the difficulties of teaching gender in sociology courses. Black, Enos, and Holman (1987, p. 146) characterize clinical sociology and sociological practice as 1) interventionist, 2) multidisciplinary, 3) humane, and 4) holistic. Using the BSRI as an exercise constitutes an intervention and a deliberate departure from the passive lecture format so common in undergraduate education. The exercise also reflects the interdisciplinary scope of clinical sociology. By using a psychological measure to demonstrate and explore sociological concepts, students are encouraged to recognize the articulation between culture and social structure and themselves as individuals. The exercise is humane in that it reflects a commitment to helping individuals to recognize that they can "reconstruct and shape institutions and situations, in the direction of self-determinism, human values, and human dignity" (Straus, 1979, p. 480). By understanding how "sex role orientation" is related to other dimensions of social life, students may become more aware of gender inequality and the complex ways in which gender serves to limit individuals within our society. Familiarity with these issues may constitute a kind of consciousness raising that is a first step toward social change. Additionally, the exercise reflects a holistic approach to social problems (Clark & Fritz, 1984, p. 3), recognizing that gender operates on a variety of levels from the individual to the societal and that social change can take place on various levels.

The administration and coding of the inventory can be completed in less than 15 minutes, allowing the teacher plenty of time to lecture or lead discussions over the material. Additionally, students find the exercise fun and interesting, which helps to make the material memorable. My objective in this paper is to introduce

the BSRI, describe its administration in the classroom, provide ideas for incorporating the exercise into sociology courses, and provide an annotated bibliography of some of the relevant research that has made use of the inventory.

Background of the BSRI

The BSRI was developed by Sandra Bem in 1974, in order to explore the consequences of being a strongly sex-typed individual and to provide construct validity for the concept of androgyny. Earlier studies (Kagan, 1964; Kohlber, 1966) had postulated that highly sex-typed individuals suppressed their "inappropriate behaviors" in order to behave consistently with their internalized sex role standards androgynous individuals on the other hand were believed to be able to participate freely in both masculine and feminine behaviors.

Bem and her assistants selected the inventory items on the basis of their social desirability for men and for women. From a list of approximately 200 sex-typed characteristics, Bem selected 20 characteristics that were rated as significantly more desirable for women than for men, according to a sample of undergraduates. Twenty masculine characteristics were selected in the same way, and twenty neutral items were added to balance the scale and to provide a social desirability test. Individuals could then be scored on a masculine and a feminine dimension. Androgynous individuals were defined as those whose scores on the two scales were relatively similar (Bem, 1974)

Following Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp's (1975) lead, Bem (1977) revised her coding scheme to distinguish between individuals who were high in both masculine and feminine characteristics and those who were low in both characteristics. The coding scheme advocated by Spence et al. (1975) divided masculinity and femininity components at the median. Individuals who scored above the median on both scales were labeled "androgynous" and those below the median on both scales, "undifferentiated." Bem, Martyna, and Watson (1976) found empirical support for the distinction between androgynous and undifferentiated individuals, with undifferentiated individuals being less nurturing and lower in self-esteem. The BSRI is used today to examine the effects of gender as a variable in a great variety of sociological and social psychological research.

Administration of the BSRI

The BSRI may be administered to sociology classes as part of an exercise on gender, sex roles, or a variety of other concepts. Classes can complete and code the inventory in less than 15 minutes. The BSRI consists of 60 personality characteristics, 20 masculine, 20 feminine, and 20 neutral. Class members are asked to fill out the inventory by indicating how well each item describes themselves on a 7-point scale anchored by the adjectives "never or almost never true" and "always or almost always true" (see Appendix A). After everyone has completed the inventory but before it is coded, I explain what the inventory is attempting to measure and give the students the option not to proceed. (See "A Word of Encouragement and Caution" below.)

The teacher goes on to list the masculine items (see Appendix B) while the students identify them with an "X" (or whatever symbol the instructor chooses). The teacher then lists the feminine items while the students follow along marking them with a different symbol such as an "O." The students are then asked to add up their scores on the masculine items (X's) and feminine items (O's) separately.

Once the sums for each set of items are totalled, the teacher may identify them as the "masculinity scale" and the "femininity scale." A score above the median on the masculinity scale is considered masculine, and a score above the median on the femininity scale is considered feminine. Instructors may use 95 as a median until they have information on the medians of their classes. Median scores for my students, undergraduates at a large state university², continually fall around 95. Scoring above the median on both scales indicates an "androgynous" sex role orientation, while scoring below the median on both scales indicates an "undifferentiated" sex role orientation.

A Word of Encouragement and Caution

Students have been uniformly positive in their comments about this exercise, emphasizing that it will help them to remember the material and suggesting that we try other similar exercises. Many explained that it helped to make them more aware of how gender affects their lives. None of the over 200 students who have participated in this exercise in my classes have found it particularly troublesome or threatening. One frequent response is that they want to test their friends. (I gently discourage this.) I believe that a safe learning environment, in which students feel comfortable and open with the teacher and each other, helps to assure that the exercise will be enlightening and nonthreatening.

Although my students have found this exercise unproblematic, I feel that it is best to exercise caution in the administration and interpretation of the BSRI. Gender is a sensitive topic among college students, and the ideas of masculinity and femininity are integrally tied to feelings about attractiveness and sexual preference. A teacher utilizing this exercise should be aware of her or his school's counseling and support resources and should consider in advance what he or she will do in the event that a student comes in for help. Additionally, students should be given the option not to participate in the coding aspect of the exercise. I always debrief students by letting them know that the inventory is not a measure of sexual preference, sexism, or conservatism, though it may be related to these concepts (see Appendix C). I try not to encourage joking about the idea of cross sex-typed individuals or to reinforce the traditional sex role orientations. On the other hand, I try to avoid taking the exercise too seriously. To do so would give students the impression that the measure has more credibility than it actually does.

Lesson Ideas

This section reviews some of the potential uses of the BSRI for teaching undergraduate courses in sociology. Although I have divided the section into course topics, a particular course may use ideas from any of the subsections. Rather than providing distinct and discrete lesson plans, I envision teachers combining these ideas with ideas of their own, as well as the discussion topics and themes of their courses, in order to create their own custom-made lessons.

Gender Courses

Courses on gender can treat the BSRI as a measure of one of the many aspects of the sex roles. The inventory focuses only on personality characteristics and does not attempt to capture other aspects of the sex roles such as behaviors, obligations and privileges, or attitudes.

I usually review a few of the correlates of sex role orientation at this point. Appendix C provides an annotated bibliography of some of the fascinating and relevant sociological and social psychological research that has used the BSRI. Reviewing some of the variables associated with the BSRI underscores the importance of gender to many aspects of social life and demonstrates that one's sex role orientation is more than just an interesting label. Many of the findings about

the correlates of sex role orientation are relevant to courses on gender. For example, the inventory has been used to refute myths about maternal employment (Hansson, Chernovetz, & Jones, 1977) and about mental health.

Bem's original reason for creating the inventory was explicitly feminist, to challenge the current system of sex role differentiation which served to limit the development of both men and women. The purpose of the sex role inventory was to explore the limitations of sex-typed individuals and to provide construct validity for androgyny, an orientation that she thought would prove healthy and positive (Bem, 1974). This challenged assumptions that the healthy individual was one who was traditionally sex-typed.

Bem (1975) found some support for her hypotheses through a series of experiments. In one experiment, Bem found that individuals who were androgynous were more likely than others to display independence when under pressure to conform. In a second experiment, Bem found that androgynous individuals were most nurturing, and undifferentiated the least, with feminine and masculine subjects both displaying deficits of one kind or another. An additional study (Bem & Lenny, 1976) supported Bem's earlier hypothesis that the sex-typed individual was one for whom cross sex-typed behavior was problematic.

Bem has been criticized for her explicitly feminist motives for developing the inventory. Adelson (1978) believed that this kind of open advocacy threatens the moral capital of the social sciences. Similar criticisms have been leveled at applied and clinical sociology because they do not claim to be value-free. Others would argue that all researchers have agendas and biases, and that honesty about one's position is better than pretending to be neutral or objective. Class discussions on this ethical issue can be lively.

Introductory Sociology

The BSRI exercise makes the distinction between sex and gender more clear to introductory students, since the inventory clearly measures something besides biological sex. One challenge in discussing gender with the BSRI is to avoid the impressions that gender is simply a set of individually held attributes and dispositions. Students participating in the exercise should have an understanding that the items are a product of culture and a product of our society's collective structuring of gender. Following a review of the definitions of sex roles, sex, and gender, discussion can focus on the particular aspect of the sex roles that the inventory measures.

Discussion of the BSRI can enliven the concept of cultural relativism. Classes can consider whether other societies could use the same items to measure masculinity and femininity. For example, would Trobriand Islander males score masculine on this scale? It is likely that they would not, because masculinity would be defined differently in their society. Studies have shown that the scale works for Germany (Hogan, 1979) and Israel (Safir, Peres, Lichtenstein, Hoch, & Shepher, 1982), but not as well for India (Sethi & Allen, 1984).

Social Psychology

All of the above suggestions can be part of a social psychology lesson on gender as well. Additionally, the BSRI can be related to social psychological concepts such as locus of control (Johnson & Black, 1981), self-concept, personality, and roles. The implications that the BSRI has to mental health have been pursued in the literature by Nevill (1975) and by Bem. While males who score masculine endorse those traits that the society regards as positive for males, they may also be limited and constrained by their sex roles. They may feel uncomfortable having nonmasculine feelings. Sex-typed females may have similar limitations. Androgynous persons may be more flexible and more versatile. Undifferentiated individuals may have lower self-esteem, endorsing neither the positive masculine characteristics nor the positive feminine characteristics.

Sex role orientation has been related to attitudes such as feminism (Minnegrode, 1976) and political ideology (Hershey and Sullivan, 1977), behaviors such as dating (DeLucia, 1987) and sports participation (Meyers & Lips, 1978), and attribution for academic achievement (Brewer & Blum, 1979).

Research Methods

The BSRI is a useful exercise for sociological research methods because it makes the concepts that are discussed in the textbook less abstract and because it invites such a variety of methodological criticism. After students have completed the exercise, it can be invoked throughout the term in order to illustrate a variety of concepts. The BSRI can add concreteness to the discussions of concepts such as "latent variable," "indexes," "reliability," and various forms of validity.

Evaluating the validity of the BSRI is an interesting problem. Since gender role orientation consists of those characteristics that are appropriate to members of each sex, the measure must be associated with sex and should predict other variables in

the same direction as sex. But how do we know whether the BSRI is measuring the latent construct of gender? And if not gender, what is the inventory measuring? Questions such as these can provoke an interesting discussion among enthusiastic methods students.

Bem's (1974) reported test-retest reliability was .90 for masculinity and femininity and .93 for androgyny. Although this is a good reliability coefficient, it indicates that some individuals' scores fluctuate over time. Additionally, scores on the BSRI vary by age (Fisher & Narus, 1981), indicating either that sex-typing is less pronounced among older populations or that the inventory may not be effective in measuring the gender role orientation of noncollege populations.

Another interesting dilemma is Bem's method of scoring the inventory. Because scales are divided at the medians, the evaluation of a particular score could be labeled differently depending on the sample. For example, an individual who is above the median for masculinity among high school home economics teachers might be below the median for masculinity among football players. Nevertheless, half of the individuals in both samples will be scored nonmasculine and half-masculine. This makes comparing findings between different studies problematic. It also precludes the possibility that a particular unique sample could score predominantly "androgynous" (or masculine, feminine, or undifferentiated).

Conclusion

My objective in this manuscript has been to introduce the Bem Sex Role Inventory, describe its administration in the classroom, relate the exercise to the themes of clinical sociology, provide ideas for incorporating the exercise into sociology courses, and provided an annotated bibliography of some of the relevant research that had made use of the inventory. I do not attempt to defend the BSRI from its critics or promote the use of the inventory for research. The BSRI has a number of methodological problems including those listed in the section on teaching research methods. One doubts that the BSRI is as appropriate in 1991 as it was in 1974. Assuming that the sex roles have changed, it is unlikely that the items on the inventory reflect the positive characteristics of men and women as well as they did in the 1970s. However, issues such as these can be used to the teacher's advantage to add to the richness of classroom discussion.

My decision to undertake this project stems from the interest that my colleagues have had in the exercise and their success in incorporating it into their classes. It is my hope that teachers will be able to use some of these ideas to construct their own unique lessons using the BSRI and to incorporate the themes of clinical sociology into the other sociology courses they teach.

NOTES

1. The term "gender roles" is gaining popularity over the term "sex roles," perhaps to emphasize that these roles are a product of culture rather than biology. Although some have tried to make an analytical distinction between these terms, most uses and definitions of the two terms are interchangeable. Bem is certainly aware that the "sex roles" are not biological destiny, and so are most researchers who have used the term. In this paper I use the term "sex roles" to maintain consistency with the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Readers may choose to substitute the term "gender roles."

2. My affiliation has changed since I last administered the exercise, and I am now at a small private university.

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APPENDIX A

Indicate how well each item describes you on the following scale.

never or almost never true	- 1
usually not true	- 2
sometimes but infrequently true	- 3
occasionally true	- 4
often true	- 5
usually true	- 6
always or almost always true	- 7

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 01. ___ self-reliant | 31. ___ makes decisions easily |
| 02. ___ yielding | 32. ___ compassionate |
| 03. ___ helpful | 33. ___ sincere |
| 04. ___ defends own beliefs | 34. ___ self-sufficient |
| 05. ___ cheerful | 35. ___ eager to soothe hurt feelings |
| 06. ___ moody | 36. ___ conceited |
| 07. ___ independent | 37. ___ dominant |
| 08. ___ shy | 38. ___ soft spoken |
| 09. ___ conscientious | 39. ___ likeable |
| 10. ___ athletic | 40. ___ masculine |
| 11. ___ affectionate | 41. ___ warm |
| 12. ___ theatrical | 42. ___ solemn |
| 13. ___ assertive | 43. ___ willing to take a stand |
| 14. ___ flatterable | 44. ___ tender |
| 15. ___ happy | 45. ___ friendly |
| 16. ___ strong personality | 46. ___ aggressive |
| 17. ___ loyal | 47. ___ gullible |
| 18. ___ unpredictable | 48. ___ inefficient |
| 19. ___ forceful | 49. ___ acts as a leader |
| 20. ___ feminine | 50. ___ childlike |
| 21. ___ reliable | 51. ___ adaptable |
| 22. ___ analytical | 52. ___ individualistic |
| 23. ___ sympathetic | 53. ___ does not use harsh language |
| 24. ___ jealous | 54. ___ unsystematic |
| 25. ___ has leadership abilities | 55. ___ competitive |
| 26. ___ sensitive to the needs of others | 56. ___ loves children |
| 27. ___ truthful | 57. ___ tactful |
| 28. ___ willing to take risks | 58. ___ ambitious |
| 29. ___ understanding | 59. ___ gentle |
| 30. ___ secretive | 60. ___ conventional |

APPENDIX B

1. Administer the inventory.
2. Let the class members know what the inventory is measuring and give them the option not to participate.
3. Mark the feminine items with one symbol and the masculine times with another.

Feminine items include: 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, and 59.

Masculine items include: 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37, 40, 43, 46, 49, 52, 55, and 58.

4. Add up the scores for the feminine and masculine items separately to yield a femininity score and masculinity score.
5. Code scores above the median on the femininity scale and below the median on the masculinity scale as feminine. You may use 95 for a median until you have information about the medians at your college. Scores above the median and masculinity scale and below the median on the femininity scale may be labeled masculine. Scores above the median on both scales may be labeled androgynous and below the median on both scales, undifferentiated.

APPENDIX C

Variable Related to Sex Role Orientation

1. *Sex-inappropriate activity*: Bem and Lenney (1976) found that sex-typed individuals (masculine males and feminine females) resisted "sex-inappropriate activity" in an experimental setting even when their resistance cost them money. Feminine activities included ironing cloth napkins and winding a package of yarn into a ball. Masculine activities included nailing two boards together and attaching artificial bait to a fishing hook.
2. *Occupational preference*: Feather and Said (1983), using the masculine and feminine scales separately, found that males with higher masculinity scores displayed a preference for higher status occupations when asked about their ideal occupation and their realistically chosen occupation. Interestingly, males with higher feminine scores also selected higher status occupations when asked about their realistically chosen occupation. Among females, those with higher masculinity scores preferred occupations with higher male dominance.
3. *Locus of control*: Johnson and Black (1981) found that masculine or androgynous males, and feminine or androgenous females had greater internal locus of control beliefs than feminine or undifferentiated males and masculine or undifferentiated females.
4. *Cognitive variables*: Mills (1981) reported that femininity scores were positively related to verbal scores among public school boys and that masculinity scores were positively related to math scores among public school girls. However, these relationships were not found among a sample of private school students.
5. *Competition*: Baxter and Shepherd (1978) found that masculine and androgynous individuals were more likely to approve a competition as a method of managing conflict than were feminine persons.

6. *Workaholism*: Doerfler and Kammer (1986) found that all of the female workaholics in their sample of professional women were grouped in the masculine and androgynous sex role categories.
7. *Feminism*: Minnegrode (1976) found that feminist females scored higher on the masculinity scale than nonfeminist females.
8. *Dating behavior*: DeLucia (1987) found that high masculine individuals (those scoring masculine or androgynous) scored higher on an index of masculine dating behaviors than low masculine individuals (feminine or undifferentiated). High feminine individuals (feminine or androgenous) scored higher on an index of feminine dating behaviors. Masculine dating items included opening doors, paying expenses, and deciding what to do, while the feminine dating index included items relating to emotional work and compromise.
9. *Working mothers*: Hansson, Chernovetz, and Jones (1977) found that androgynous female undergraduates had a higher proportion of working mothers than feminine female undergraduates.
10. *Age*: Fisher and Narus (1981) reported that, among their sample of individuals ranging from late adolescence to middle adulthood, androgyny and cross sex-typed characteristics tended to be greater among older people.
11. *Political ideology*: Hershey and Sullivan (1977) reported that among men, liberal political attitudes were associated with androgyny, while among women, liberal political attitudes were related to a traditionally masculine sex role orientation.
12. *Nurturance*: Bem, Martyna, and Watson (1976) conducted two experiments that showed feminine and androgynous subjects were more nurturing than masculine or undifferentiated subjects when interacting with a human infant or listening to a lonely student.
13. *Reasons for living*: Ellis and Range (1988) found that androgynous individuals scored higher on the "Reasons for Living" scale (RFL) among a population considered to be at high risk of suicidal behavior. The femininity scale but not

the masculinity scale was found to be related to the RFL, indicating that femininity or androgyny may help persons to adapt rather than commit suicide.

14. *Social influence*: Falbo (1977) found that masculine and androgynous undergraduates of either sex tended to receive more favorable peer evaluations than feminine individuals following group discussions.
15. *Attitudes toward sexuality*: Walfish and Meyerson (1980) found that androgynous females were more comfortable about sexuality than feminine females and that androgynous males were more comfortable about sexuality than masculine males.
16. *Help seeking*: Johnson (1989) found that feminine individuals were more confident that professionals could help them with their personal problems. Feminine and androgynous individuals were likely to recognize that they were in need of help.
17. *Courtship violence*: According to Bernard, Bernard, and Bernard (1985), masculine male college students were more likely than less sex-typed males to report that they had abused their dating partners. Feminine females were less likely to report that they had been abused in dating relationships than less sex-typed females.
18. *Sexual satisfaction*: Obstfeld, Luper, and Luper (1985) reported that, contrary to their hypotheses, masculinity was related to greater reported sexual satisfaction among both men and women, while femininity was related to lower sexual satisfaction.