

BERN SEX ROLE INVENTORY (BSRI)

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Introduction and Core Definition

The Bern Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) stands as a foundational instrument in the psychological study of gender roles, developed by the eminent U.S. psychologist **Sandra Bem** (1944-2014). This self-administered psychometric test was revolutionary in its assertion that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive poles of a single continuum, but rather two independent dimensions that can coexist within an individual. The BSRI shifted the paradigm away from traditional bipolar models of gender identity, allowing researchers and clinicians to explore the complexity of human personality traits beyond rigid gender stereotypes. It is formally defined as a test wherein subjects evaluate themselves on a comprehensive list of sixty traits, which are explicitly characterized as either traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine, using a detailed Likert scale to gauge applicability to their own personality.

Originally published in 1974, the BSRI quickly became one of the most widely used measures for assessing psychological gender roles, providing a quantifiable method for classifying individuals into one of four distinct sex-role categories. The inventory's structure compels the subject to reflect deeply upon personal characteristics such as assertiveness, warmth, independence, and compassion, traits which society often associates disproportionately with one gender or the other. By separating masculinity and femininity into independent scales, Bem provided the tools necessary to empirically investigate the concept of **androgyny**--the simultaneous presence of high levels of both masculine and feminine characteristics--a concept central to her broader theoretical framework regarding psychological health and adaptability.

The core mechanism of the BSRI involves the subject rating each of the sixty specified traits on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 ("Never or almost never true") to 7 ("Always or almost always true"). This self-reporting methodology provides a rich, subjective data set regarding how individuals perceive their own adherence to or deviation from societal expectations concerning gendered behavior. The inventory specifically includes twenty traits identified as stereotypically masculine, twenty identified as stereotypically feminine, and a crucial set of twenty neutral or filler items designed primarily to obscure the specific purpose of the inventory and reduce the likelihood of socially desirable responding. The statistical results derived from these ratings are then used to calculate independent scores for masculinity and femininity, which are subsequently plotted to determine the individual's prevailing sex role orientation.

Theoretical Foundations: Gender Schema Theory

The development of the BSRI was deeply rooted in Bem's overarching theoretical framework, known as **Gender Schema Theory**, which fundamentally challenged the prevailing psychoanalytic and social learning theories regarding gender development. Bem posited that individuals possess cognitive structures, or schemas, that organize the world based on cultural definitions of gender.

These gender schemas influence how individuals process information, interpret behavior, and regulate their own actions. The BSRI was designed to measure the extent to which an individual internalizes and utilizes these cultural prescriptions for masculinity and femininity in defining their self-concept.

Bem argued that traditional psychological approaches, which viewed masculinity and femininity as inverse characteristics (e.g., highly masculine meant necessarily low feminine), failed to account for individuals who exhibited a balance of traits. Her research highlighted that psychological adjustment was not necessarily correlated with adherence to traditional, polarized gender roles. Instead, the capacity to utilize both masculine (instrumental) traits, such as assertiveness and competence, and feminine (expressive) traits, such as nurturance and warmth, suggested greater behavioral flexibility and psychological well-being. This theoretical leap provided the necessary justification for creating a measurement tool that treated these dimensions independently.

The conceptual separation intrinsic to the BSRI allowed Bem to demonstrate empirically that individuals who were not rigidly confined to one set of gendered characteristics--specifically those who scored high on both scales (the androgynous)--often exhibited superior adaptation skills across various life situations. For instance, an androgynous individual could display empathetic support (a feminine trait) when dealing with interpersonal conflict, but also exhibit decisive leadership (a masculine trait) when facing a professional challenge. Gender Schema Theory provided the interpretative lens, suggesting that these individuals were less constrained by societal gender norms and possessed a more complex and adaptive self-schema.

Structure and Administration of the BSRI

The BSRI is standardized for easy administration and consists of sixty distinct personality characteristics, or items, presented in a fixed, randomized order to prevent bias related to item categorization. The items were rigorously selected based on prior research identifying traits that were widely recognized and consensually agreed upon by university students and experts as being socially desirable for either men or women. The three core sets of items are the 20 M (Masculine) items, the 20 F (Feminine) items, and the 20 N (Neutral or Filler) items.

Specific examples illustrate the nature of the content: the **Masculine scale** includes descriptors such as "competitive," "independent," "assertive," and "acts as a leader." Conversely, the **Feminine scale** includes items such as "tender," "sympathetic," "warm," and "eager to soothe hurt feelings." The twenty neutral items, which are excluded from the scoring calculation but essential for the inventory's structure, include general personality descriptors that are not strongly linked to either gender stereotype, such as "conscientious," "moody," or "sincere." The inclusion of these neutral items helps ensure that the test measures general personality dimensions alongside gender-typed ones, enhancing the overall validity of the self-report.

During administration, the subject is instructed to rate how accurately each of the sixty traits describes them personally, utilizing the 7-point Likert scale. A rating of 1 signifies that the trait is almost always untrue of the subject, while a rating of 7 signifies that the trait is almost always true. The clarity and simplicity of the rating system ensure high compliance and minimize ambiguity in interpretation. Because it is a self-administered test, the BSRI can be used efficiently in large group settings or individually, making it a highly practical tool for research across diverse populations. The final raw scores for masculinity and femininity are derived by summing the ratings for the respective twenty items in each category and then calculating the average rating for each dimension.

Scoring and Categorization of Sex Roles

Scoring the BSRI involves calculating the mean score for the twenty Masculine items (M score) and the mean score for the twenty Feminine items (F score). These two scores are then compared, traditionally using a median-split procedure based on norms established for the relevant population, to classify the individual into one of the four defined sex-role categories. The independence of the two scales is crucial here, as it allows for the high/low combinations necessary for the quadricategorical model.

The four resultant psychological sex-role categories are defined as follows:

Androgynous: Individuals scoring high on both the M scale and the F scale. They possess a flexible repertoire of both instrumental and expressive traits.

Masculine: Individuals scoring high on the M scale but low on the F scale. They primarily exhibit instrumental, traditionally male-associated traits.

Feminine: Individuals scoring high on the F scale but low on the M scale. They primarily exhibit expressive, traditionally female-associated traits.

Undifferentiated: Individuals scoring low on both the M scale and the F scale. They lack strong identification with either set of stereotyped gender characteristics.

The classification relies on establishing a median score for both the M and F scales based on a large reference group. Scores above the median are considered "high," and scores below the median are considered "low." For example, if the median M score for the reference group is 4.9 and the median F score is 5.1, an individual scoring 5.5 on M and 5.3 on F would be classified as Androgynous. Conversely, an individual scoring 3.5 on M and 3.8 on F would be classified as Undifferentiated. This methodical classification system moves beyond the simplistic dichotomy of old models, providing a nuanced perspective on self-perception concerning gender roles.

The Concept of Psychological Androgyny

Central to the BSRI's contribution to psychology is the empirical measurement and validation of

psychological androgyny. Before Bem's work, psychological health was often implicitly or explicitly tied to conforming to one's prescribed biological sex role--men were expected to be highly masculine, and women highly feminine. Bem argued persuasively that this rigidity was psychologically restrictive and that the ability to incorporate traits traditionally associated with the opposite gender led to greater psychological resilience and adaptive functioning.

The androgynous individual, as measured by the BSRI, possesses the freedom to engage in situation-appropriate behavior regardless of whether that behavior is culturally defined as masculine or feminine. Studies utilizing the BSRI have consistently shown that androgynous individuals exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, better social adjustment, and superior coping mechanisms compared to individuals categorized as purely masculine, purely feminine, or undifferentiated. This heightened adaptability stems from having access to a fuller range of behavioral options. For instance, they can be assertive when necessary but also supportive and nurturing in relationships, adapting their behavior fluidly to meet environmental demands.

The significance of androgyny lies not in blurring gender lines entirely, but in demonstrating that desirable human characteristics are not the exclusive domain of one sex. The BSRI provided the quantitative evidence needed to support the claim that instrumental competence and expressive warmth are beneficial traits for all individuals, regardless of their biological sex. This conceptualization profoundly influenced therapeutic approaches and educational models, advocating for environments that encourage the development of a broad spectrum of traits in both boys and girls, moving away from prescriptive gender typing.

Psychometric Properties and Evaluation

The BSRI is generally recognized for possessing strong psychometric properties, particularly concerning its reliability and initial validity. Sandra Bem and subsequent researchers invested significant effort in demonstrating that the inventory consistently measures the intended constructs of masculinity and femininity as independent dimensions. Establishing **internal consistency** was paramount; the items within the M scale should correlate highly with each other, and similarly for the F scale, while the M and F scales should ideally show low correlation with each other, confirming their orthogonality.

Reliability studies, often using the test-retest method, have generally shown that the BSRI scores are stable over time, meaning an individual classified as androgynous today is likely to retain that classification several weeks or months later. Furthermore, the **construct validity** of the BSRI was initially established by demonstrating that individuals classified as masculine or feminine based on the inventory also exhibited gender-typed behaviors in laboratory settings. For example, individuals scoring high on the F scale demonstrated greater expressive behavior, while those high on the M scale demonstrated greater assertiveness in controlled tasks, confirming that the self-report scores

corresponded to observable behaviors.

However, the psychometric properties have also been subject to scrutiny over the decades, particularly concerning the stability of the median-split scoring method and the cultural specificity of the traits. While the BSRI was highly reliable in its original context--predominantly white, educated American college students--concerns have been raised regarding its **cross-cultural validity**. What constitutes an ideal "masculine" or "feminine" trait can vary significantly across different societies, suggesting that the BSRI's specific sixty items may not accurately capture gender roles in non-Western or highly diverse populations without necessary modifications or re-norming.

Criticisms and Contemporary Relevance

Despite its immense influence, the BSRI has faced several significant criticisms since its inception. One major critique revolves around the inherent subjectivity of the self-report mechanism; subjects may rate themselves based on how they believe they should be (social desirability bias) rather than how they truly are. Furthermore, the use of the **median-split procedure** for categorization has been criticized as statistically arbitrary, potentially misclassifying individuals who score near the median and reducing continuous data into discrete, potentially misleading categories. Alternative scoring methods, such as utilizing continuous scores or establishing specific regression equations, have been proposed to address this statistical limitation.

Another powerful critique addresses the static nature of the inventory's item pool. As societal views on gender roles evolve rapidly, the sixty traits selected in the early 1970s may no longer represent the contemporary cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. Traits such as "athletic" or "career-oriented," which might have been strongly gender-typed historically, may now be viewed as gender-neutral or equally desirable for all individuals, diminishing the BSRI's ability to accurately measure current sex role stereotyping. This raises questions about the BSRI's long-term utility without constant re-evaluation and modernization of its item content.

Despite these limitations, the BSRI's historical and conceptual relevance remains undeniable. It successfully challenged restrictive gender models and laid the groundwork for research into gender flexibility, psychological health, and the cognitive organization of gender information. While contemporary research often utilizes more sophisticated and multidimensional measures of gender identity (such as the Personal Attributes Questionnaire or measures incorporating non-binary identities), the BSRI remains a crucial pedagogical tool and a benchmark in the history of personality and gender psychology, enduring as the primary instrument responsible for popularizing and validating the concept of androgyny in mainstream social science.