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# PSYCHOLOGY

## news



**ANDROGYNY-**  
**The Shape of Sex to Come?**



I suppose I must confess where I stand before I start writing about psychological androgyny. I write as a straight psycho-journalist who wears his hair long but who has never dared to flourish an earring. Whether it's because I'm scared of the pain of having my ear pierced or whether I'm scared to flout conventions too much, I can't say I agonise over. Males don't, do they? On the other hand, I look after my children a good deal, can - and do - cook often and am reasonably good at cleaning up, or so I think. I don't thinking going round with a Hoover or dust pan and brush demeans, or demans, me. I have, however, never been able to thread a needle, to knit or to hem any of my children's things. I hate ironing but will do it. I offer these short details of my character not really because I think it will fascinate you but because *Psychology News* is, in the best wet liberal tradition, committed to questioning the traditional image of the impersonal male scientist, the objective observer. If I am to be convincing on androgyny, I must own up to my position and biases.

Androgyny is, of course, a rather old idea. In Plato's *Symposium*, he suggested that the human race was descended from a race of omniscient hermaphrodites who were able to do all their own things on their own. The nasty Gods shredded these hermaphrodites in half, down the middle, leaving the human race with a permanent desire to re-unite with its other. Thus *animus* seeks *anima* eternally, as Jung suggested. To become a whole human required for the great *goy* analyst a fusion of the male and the female in oneself. This old idea with roots in alchemy as well as in philosophy, became trendy during the 1970s. Unisex became the rage of the age. It also began to influence psychological research largely through the efforts of Sandra Lipsitz Bem. Bem was always careful to distinguish *psychological androgyny* - which was good - from real androgyny with muddled up genitalia. Being a physical androgyne, or a real hermaphrodite as opposed to a platonic one dancing with nice symbolism, has never been taken as anyone's thing. Bem has been exceedingly honest about the impetus for her research. In 1978, she said;

"I consider myself an empirical scientist, and yet my interest in sex roles is and has always been frankly political. My hypotheses have derived from no formal theory, but rather from a set of strong intuitions about the debilitating effects of sex role stereotyping, and my major purpose has always been a feminist one; to help free the human personality from the restricting prison of sex-role stereotyping and to develop a conception of mental health which is free from culturally imposed definitions of masculinity and femininity."

what you like to do

Bem began her research by developing a sex role inventory in which people are asked to respond on a 7 point scale. They have to say how true 60 particular statements are of them. 20 of the items are masculine; 20 are feminine and 20 are neutral. The male items reflect traditional conceptions of the male. They include being *assertive, aggressive, ambitious, analytical, competitive, dominant, willing to take risks, being independent* and *being self sufficient*. This paragon of maleness is contrasted to the person who says yes to the female items which include *being affectionate, warm, tender, yielding, gullible, does not use harsh language, compassionate, eager to soothe hurt feelings and being*

..... Bem then tested individuals to see how male or female they were. There emerged a number of men and women who scored high both on the male and the female items. These were labelled androgynous.



Bem then looked to see how well these individuals did in terms of their flexibility, adjustment, coping with crises and other traits of behaviour. This research enabled Bem to argue that masculinity and femininity ought not to be seen as traits that were in direct opposition to each other, at far ends of one continuum. You could be high on masculine items and on feminine items, being gentle and compassionate as well as a leader who could be decisive. Bem's notion was similar to theories of thinking. One did not have to be either a fully paid-up convergent or divergent thinker. One could do with a bit of both styles.

In a persuasive experiment, Bem went on to see if it was possible to change the behaviour of men who were highly masculine and women who were highly feminine. A situation was devised to see if making subjects realise that no one cared if they acted male or female changed their action. When they came into the lab, they were told that the psychologists were doing a study of personality judgments that were made of people who did different things. Bem and her colleague, Ellen Lenney, needed pictures of the same person doing lots of different things. Only then could they be compared. The subjects had to choose between typically male acts and female acts. For example, female subjects were asked if they would rather prepare a baby bottle by mixing powdered milk and formula or oil squeaky hinges on a metal box. To give a twist of bias, Bem and Lenney offered 4c for the male oiling as against 2c for the female bottle preparation. The subjects worked in same sex pairs. The research showed that subjects who were high on masculinity tended to avoid female actions and that subjects who were highly female tended to avoid male actions. The androgynous paragons could flit between squeaky hinges and milk bottles so, clearly, androgynous parents must watch that they don't oil their babies and milk their hinges! The experiment then obliged subjects to perform one of a number of cross-sex acts so that a male male had to do a female act. They were then asked how they felt. Narrow sex-typed subjects felt much worse than androgynous subjects. Bem said that "traditional sex roles do produce an unnecessary and perhaps even dysfunctional pattern of avoidance for



Angina Regis.  
 Sie ist geboren bei Boyer aller Ehren/  
 Sanft her magel erjngeloren werden.  
 H. v. d. Hagen, 1610. (The figure is a woodcut illustration from a 1610 book, showing a crowned figure with wings, possibly representing a deity or a personification of a concept.)





## beyond androgyny

This model has proved to be useful. A recent example of it in Britain is Cary Cooper and Marilyn Davidson's work on female executives and managers. Cooper and Davidson have found that female executives were often decisive and aggressive. They had many of the traditional male attributes but could not use them too well in a male-dominated world. They met much hostility and much pressure to act as women. Their book describes a very well-qualified graduate who was hired as a stockbroker but found that her male colleagues left her in the cold to make the tea. Amusingly, Cooper and Davidson offer some vignettes of the roles women are meant to play like the mother, the coquette or the siren. Getting on with the job *like a man* - dubious phrase that - is what the men who complain about women don't let them do. Cooper and Davidson note, of course, that many of the women they studied were androgynous but urge that male managers ought to be trained to become more androgynous too. Such notions are even beginning to infiltrate the training of policemen.

As well as the female manager, there has been much work in the 70s on why girls fail to get into science. Part of the problem seems to me that clever girls feel that being good at maths and science is very unfeminine. Lynn Fox of Johns Hopkins has described a number of cases including one where a girl who was actually going to a summer camp for mathematically gifted kids told her friends that she had to go to remedial classes. Better to be *fem* than numerate.

The signs that research in this area is still productive are clear. Two recent studies have examined the ways in which androgynous individuals react to life stresses and the relation of androgyny to Erikson's work.

Alan S Waterman and Susan Whitbourne have just reported a study of 299 undergraduates. They tried to look at how scores on Erikson's various stages of personality development correlated with androgyny scores. First, they reviewed the evidence since Bem's last major review and found that androgyny did seem to go with higher self-esteem, higher flexibility, higher social adjustment and higher social competence. Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your stereotypes. They then gave subjects both Bem's sex role inventory and a test of psychosocial development. They predicted that there would be a correlation between being high in androgyny and high in autonomy, and intimacy. These are all good ways to develop one's personality, according to Erikson. The predictions worked out. Watersman and Whitbourne pointed out that Bem has been criticised because masculinity does contribute highly, too, to being judged flexible, adjusted and high on self-esteem but they conclude that androgyny "makes a contribution over and above that made by the endorsement of masculine traits alone." Androgynous individuals did also seem to react better to stressful life events in a second study. This body of on-going work suggests that the Bem thesis is far from dead. The irony, however, is that Bem is in the process of leaving it behind.

In a telephone interview, Bem explained to me that her work on androgyny started "when there was really no data in the field." But, after showing how being too rigidly sex-typed could damage one's health she began "to turn to the cognitive mediators." After all, being so rigid was due to something. "The phenomena of sex typing comes from gender schematic processing, the readiness to categorise things in terms of gender. Perception is an active process and people who are highly sex-typed have learned to make maleness-femaleness a very dominant cognitive dimension. Gender, however, is not the most highly available category for androgyny." Bem is now engaged on a series of studies to get to the roots of this *gender schematic processing* which seems to divide the world into one male half and one female half. "I'm trying to see where does sex typing come from. How and why does gender become a cognitive organising principle." There are, of course, a variety of answers. Culture teaches us that little boys don't do the things little girls do. Then, gender does have some functional importance. "The androgynous people have failed to learn that," Bem said. "How does the culture set out to produce gender-schematic processing. It's very speculative but we're looking at a series of child rearing strategies." Some ways of bringing up baby will produce a very well-defined, closed individual. What Bem wants to find out is what kinds of child rearing will change that, what makes a child "ready to organise things in that way?"

The enthusiasm Bem musters for this new idea is obvious - even on the phone. She does not dismiss her past work at all. "Androgyny is interesting but it never seemed to me that it went beyond the surface. It is the underlying processes that matter and the underlying process involve how one organises perceptions." She is even critical of her own definition of androgyny as a person whose behaviour is high both in masculine and feminine traits. "I don't much like that definition. Now, I'd rather talk about someone is *gender aschematic* and who makes decisions not in terms of feminine or masculine values. I think that androgyny is still useful as an umbrella term but, in terms of its specific operationalising in psychology, not so." Bem is out to go beyond androgyny or to the roots of what makes us see the world either from a macho male or frail fem point of view.

Androgyny will remain a fascinating topic as the world, and its ways, changes. Women will work more; men will care more. We will, at least in parts of the West, be less stereotyped into our sex roles by ourselves as well as others. It is easy to understand why Bem's work has threatened some conservative thinkers. A less sexfrigid world is what those revolutionaries like Reich dreamed of the marriage of Marx and Freud would feel deep change in societies. But, from a European perspective, it is curious that Bem now, eager to pursue her work, has opted to study childrearing strategies. Maybe, she will become the Dr. Spock of the 80s, guiding the bewildered to bring up baby as not too much of a boy and not too much of a girl. But she seems to ignore, in this aim, the role of culture and society. It is not all down to individuals - except in Britain where, perhaps, we think that our contribution to androgyny, Mrs Thatcher, is enough to be getting on with.