

Sandra Bem: Revolutionary and Generative Feminist Psychologist

Emily Keener¹  · Clare Mehta²

Published online: 27 April 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2017

Abstract This introduction to *The Past, Present, and Future of Masculinity, Femininity and Gender: Honoring Feminist Scholar Sandra L. Bem (1944–2014), Part 1* briefly highlights Sandra Bem’s career and provides an overview of each paper included in the first of two special issues. In doing so, we highlight how Sandra Bem’s works changed the way scholars understood gender and how much of Bem’s work continues to influence current day scholarship on gender.

Keywords Sandra Bem · Masculinity · Femininity · Androgyny · Gender schema theory

The sensibility that I bring to my work on gender is that of the gender nonconformist, the outsider, the misfit, who can see the culture’s socially and historically constructed categories because they have always been so alien to my sense of self (Bem 1995, p. 43–44).

Sandra Bem, feminist icon and scholar, began her work on gender in 1967 with the publication of *Training the Woman to know her Place: The Power of an Unconscious Ideology* (Bem and Bem 1970). This work on sexual inequality in heterosexual marriages and the proposal of egalitarian marriages was published at a time when the word *sexism* had not even

been invented (Bem 1995), and it resulted in a number of lectures on this topic by herself and then husband, Daryl Bem (Bem 1998). In the 1970s, she merged her personal interest in gender and sexual inequality with her scholarship and began researching androgyny. Bem said she focused on androgyny “because that concept seemed to challenge the traditional categories of masculine and feminine as nothing before had ever done” (Bem 1993, p. viii). However, later in Bem’s career, she came to the realization that because androgyny focused on masculinity and femininity, and not the culture that created the concepts, it reproduced “the gender polarization that it [sought] to undercut” (Bem 1993, p. viii).

To encourage scholars to move beyond gender polarization (i.e., the superimposing of the gender binary—a male/female dichotomy—on all aspects of life), Bem began to focus her work on the cultural construction of gender. Consequently in the 1980s, she began to research and write about gender schematicity, publishing not only academic work, but also an article on aschematic parenting (Bem 1983). Her 1993 book, *The Lenses of Gender* (Bem 1993) built upon her earlier ideas and explained how a society’s gender schemas or *lenses* (gender polarization, androcentrism, and biological essentialism) work to maintain the oppression of women and sexual minorities. It was through these works and revolutionary ideas that Sandra Bem gained the reputation she has today as a feminist icon.

Indeed, Sandra Bem is likely one of the most well know feminist psychologist in the field. This status is evidenced by the coverage of her passing in a number of publications including the New York Times (Henig 2015) and National Public Radio (Spiegel 2014). Also, since her passing 2 years ago, there have been numerous events and publications honoring Sandra Bem at professional conferences such as The Annual Convention of The American Psychological Association (Keener and Mehta 2015), The Association for Women in Psychology (Golden 2015), and The Gender

✉ Emily Keener
Emily.Keener@sru.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, Slippery Rock University, 1 Morrow Way, 309 Vincent Hall, Slippery Rock, PA 16057, USA

² Department of Psychology, Emmanuel College and Boston Children’s Hospital, Boston, MA, USA

Development Research Conference (Leaper and Martin 2014). Having attended these events, we have seen firsthand that to those of us who study gender, she is beloved.

As early career developmental psychologists who study gender, we are among a privileged generation who were trained with the benefit of not only Bem's cannon of work, but also decades of research building upon her earlier work. As such, it has been easy for us to reap the benefits of her work while also taking it for granted. For example, in our own scholarship we took for granted the idea, which can be attributed (at least in part) to Bem, that people can be both masculine and feminine and that assigned biological sex is independent from gender. In working on this special issue we have been afforded the opportunity to examine our privileged position as gender researchers whose careers started long after Bem's. Specifically, the process of editing a special issue to commemorate Bem has prompted us to think about how it might have been to work at a time when masculinity and femininity were assessed on two separate continuums and before psychological androgyny and gender schema theory were established or widely accepted. Editing the special issue has also made us think deeply about how Sandra Bem has influenced not only our own work, but also the entire field of feminist psychology and beyond.

As we edited the special issue we came to fully appreciate how true the statement we included in our initial call for papers for this special issue was, that "Sandra Bem was one of the rare scholars whose work, once considered revolutionary, continues to be influential and generative decades later." When we wrote that sentence as part of the call for papers for this special issue of *Sex Roles*, we hoped we would receive submissions supporting the revolutionary and generative nature of Bem's work. Now, at the end of the process, as we reflect on the papers included in this two-issue series honoring Sandra Bem, we could not be more pleased. The papers included do just as we had hoped.

Specifically, most authors noted the degree to which Bem's work was revolutionary. For example, Liben and Bigler (2017, p. 544) stated: "Sandra Bem has shaped the ways in which generations of scholars have come to understand gender, gender roles, and gender development and their impact on human behavior..." Similarly, Golden and McHugh (2017, p. 530) stated "Her contributions to theory and research transformed the early years of feminist psychology in the United States and had an international reach, significantly impacting our evolving understanding of gender roles, stereotypes, implicit ideologies about gender, the development of gender identity, gender schemas, psychological androgyny, the lenses of gender, and the reproduction of gender inequality." Additionally, most authors note Bem's ground-breaking theory and accompanying measure, the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem 1974), asserting that masculinity and femininity exist on two separate continuua rather than on a single bipolar

and opposing continuum, which simultaneously lead to her conceptualization of "psychological androgyny." For example, Martin et al. (2017, p. 592) said "Bem's conceptualization of psychological androgyny introduced a new way of thinking in which crossing gender boundaries was seen as an adaptive form of flexibility that promoted better psychological adjustment." As can be seen in these quotes, gender scholars attribute many of the fields' current (and evolving) conceptions of gender to the works of Sandra Bem.

Related to the generative nature of Bem's work, several papers in this special issue advance Bem's original operationalizations of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. Only one paper, a cross-temporal meta-analysis (Donnelly and Twenge 2017), utilizes the BSRI in its original form. In spite of this, most of the empirical papers included in this special issue build upon Bem's work to advance our ability to assess masculinity, femininity, androgyny or similar constructs (e.g., gender typicality or flexibility). As noted by Bem (1998) herself, the BSRI was not a perfect psychometric tool. Although the continued use of the original version of the BSRI is not reflected in the papers we included, the papers included do showcase the generative nature of Bem's work by applying and building upon the knowledge gained from this revolutionary assessment tool.

In addition to building upon Bem's ideas of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny, papers in the special issue note the value of her contributions to gender schema theory. For instance, some authors (e.g., Starr and Zurbriggen 2017) note how gender schema theory has influenced the field of feminist psychology whereas others (e.g., Menon 2017) use novel methods to test gender schema theory. Taken together, we believe that, the papers across the two special issues demonstrate a continued interest in the life, ideas, and scholarship of Sandra Bem.

Additional evidence of the generative nature of Bem's theories and ideas can be seen in the ways scholars apply her work in new and interesting ways. For example, several papers included in this special issue combine Bem's theories and ideas with other theories or approaches. For example, in this issue authors draw upon social constructionist/contextual approaches to gender (Mehta and Dementieva 2017), interpersonal everyday problem solving (Keener and Strough 2017), and dynamical systems (Martin et al. 2017). Similarly, as reflected in Donnelly and Twenge's (2017) approach, there is continued interest in whether masculinity and femininity reflect culture or change when a culture adopts new gender norms. That the papers featured in the special issue combine Bem's theories with other thriving areas of scholarship demonstrates the continued utility of Bem's works.

Introducing Papers in the First Issue

Golden and McHugh (2017) not only highlight the revolutionary nature of Bem's work, but also provide context about her

life and the sociohistorical context of her work. Specifically, they describe how Bem's scholarship "challenged us to re-conceptualize the relation between sex and gender, and to examine how nonconscious gender ideology impacts our lives" (Golden and McHugh 2017, p 529). Similarly, Liben and Bigler's (2017) paper highlights the ways in which Bem's academic scholarship promoted gender-egalitarian policy. Liben and Bigler also describe Bem's contributions to developmental psychology. They outline Bem's insights about the development of gender as a social category, how children are active agents of their own gender development, and Bem's thoughts on how to raise children free of cultural gender constraints. Both Golden and McHugh's and Liben and Bigler's articles highlight how successful Bem was in her integration of the personal and the political. For example, both papers refer to Bem's role as an expert witness in the gender discrimination case filed by the National Organization for Women (NOW) against the Pittsburgh Press for segregating classified job by gender. Interestingly, as an example of the political being personal, Bigler (Liben and Bigler 2017) notes that Bem's work on gender neutrality inspired her to request that she be referred to with gender neutral pronouns. Both of these review papers focus on the work of Sandra Bem with an emphasis on her inspirational legacy.

Highlighting the popularity and continued utility of the BSRI, Donnelly and Twenge (2017) built upon Twenge's (1997) earlier work to conduct a cross-temporal meta-analysis examining changes in ratings on the masculinity and femininity scales since the BSRI's inception in 1974. With data representing over 24,000 participants, expanded analyses of data from 1974 to 2012 showed that women's masculinity scores rose significantly. Analyses focusing on the years 1993 to 2012 found that women's femininity scores declined significantly. These findings are discussed in terms of changing gender roles since the inception of the BSRI in 1974. The utilization of Bem's BSRI to examine whether changes in masculinity and femininity scores change across historical time is clearly part of Bem's legacy.

Starr and Zurbriggen (2017) examine the legacy of Bem's gender schema theory and remind us that although Bem is most often recognized for her work on the Bem Sex Role Inventory and androgyny, her gender schema theory has been extremely impactful. These authors note how Bem moved the field forward with this theory, and they project that we should expect to see a continued impact of this work in years to come. The importance and continued relevance of gender schema theory to researchers today is further illustrated by Menon's (2017) paper, which used gender schema theory as a theoretical model. She found support for Bem's hypothesis that a strong association with one's gender is associated with gender-typing among adolescents over time. Specifically, Menon examined gender typicality, pressure,

and connectedness as aspects of gender typing and found that, consistent with Bem's gender schema theory, gender-atypical relationship styles were negatively associated with gender typicality and gender contentedness, whereas gender-typical relationship styles were positively associated with felt pressure. The authors also found that gender-atypical styles prospectively predicted lower felt typicality and contentedness over time. Indeed, gender schema theory continues to inspire a new generation of researchers.

Related to the continued impact of Bem's work, Martin et al. (2017) provide a fascinating glimpse into the future applications of Bem's work on psychological androgyny. As Bem (1993) noted and Martin et al. demonstrate in their review, despite the many criticisms of androgyny, it should not be removed from the feminist lexicon. Martin et al. discuss evidence suggesting that assessing the flexibility or adaptability of gender identity and behavior, which Bem associated with androgyny, from a dynamical systems perspective has potential to generate new research on gender development in general and androgyny specifically.

Similar to Martin et al. (2017) approach to assessing the ways in which people might adapt to situational demands of the immediate context by flexibly moving between masculinity and femininity, Mehta and Dementieva (2017) and Keener and Strough (2017) examine the role of the context on gender-typed characteristics. Specifically, Mehta and Dementieva used Ecological Momentary Assessment to investigate variations in participants' endorsement of femininity and masculinity according to whether the peers with whom they were interacting in real-life social situations were male or female. They found that men reported greater femininity when they were with women in comparison to when they were with men and that both women and men reported greater masculinity when they were with men in comparison to when they were with women.

Similarly, Keener and Strough (2017) applied Bem's ideas about the situational influences on gender-typed qualities. Specifically, they examined gender-typed traits along with a consideration of behavioral expressions of gender. Findings showed that endorsement of gender-typed behavioral expressions of gender varied depending on aspects of the social context or whether hypothetical conflicts involved a same- or other-gender friend or an other-gender romantic partner. Findings reported in these three papers (Keener and Strough 2017; Martin et al. 2017; Mehta and Dementieva 2017) provide evidence for Bem's (1974) suggestion that "individuals may be both masculine and feminine, both assertive and yielding, both instrumental and expressive—depending on the situational appropriateness of these various behaviors" (Bem 1974, p. 155). More than 40 years later, researchers have expanded this idea beyond androgyny (which was the context in which Bem discussed it) to investigate situational influences on gender-typed behavior more broadly.

Conclusion

Based on our experience editing this special issue, one conclusion is clear: Researchers continue to be fascinated by the iconoclastic ideas of Sandra Bem. They continue to ask questions about how to assess masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. They continue to theorize about a gender-neutral (or liberated) and egalitarian culture. They continue to think of new ways to demonstrate that gender is multidimensional, context-dependent, and independent of assigned biological sex, which Bem (1995, p. 46) considered her “central passion.”

Compliance with Ethical Standards The authors are collectively responsible for the contents of this manuscript, which was prepared in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association.

References

- Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 42*, 155–162. doi:10.1037/h0036215.
- Bem, S. L. (1983). Gender schema theory and its implications for child development: raising gender-aschematic children in a gender-schematic society. *Signs, 8*, 598–616.
- Bem, S. L. (1993). *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bem, S. L. (1995). Working on gender as a gender nonconformist. *Women and Therapy: A Feminist Journal, 17*, 43–53. doi:10.1300/J015v17n01_06.
- Bem, S. L. (1998). *An unconventional family*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bem, S. L., & Bem, D. J. (1970). Training the woman to know her place: The power of a nonconscious ideology. In S. Cox (Ed.), *Female psychology: The emerging self* (pp. 180–191). Chicago: SRA Associates.
- Donnelly, K., & Twenge, J. M. (2017). Masculine and feminine traits on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, 1993–2012: A cross-temporal meta-analysis. *Sex Roles, 76*, 556–565. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0625-y.
- Golden, C. (2015). *Honoring Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1944–2014) Distinguished Career Award*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Women in psychology, San Francisco, CA.
- Golden, C. R., & McHugh, M. C. (2017). The personal, political, and professional life of Sandra Bem. *Sex Roles, 76*, 529–543. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0674-2.
- Henig, R. M. (2015). The last day of her life. In *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/magazine/the-last-day-of-her-life.html?_r=0.
- Keener, E., & Mehta, C. M. (Chairs). (August, 2015). *The past, present, and future of masculinity, femininity and gender: Honoring feminist scholar Sandra L. Bem (1944–2014)*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.
- Keener, E., & Strough, J. (2017). Having and doing gender: Young adults’ expressions of gender in conflicts with friends and romantic partners. *Sex Roles, 76*, 615–626. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0644-8.
- Leaper, C., & Martin, C. (Chairs). (October, 2014). *Remembering Sandra Bem*. Symposium conducted at the gender development conference, San Francisco, CA.
- Liben, L. S., & Bigler, R. S. (2017). Understanding and undermining the development of gender dichotomies: The legacy of Sandra Lipsitz Bem. *Sex Roles, 76*, 544–555. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0519-4.
- Martin, C. L., Cook, R. E., & Andrews, N. C. Z. (2017). Reviving androgyny: A modern day perspective on flexibility of gender identity and behavior. *Sex Roles, 76*, 592–603. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0602-5.
- Mehta, C. M., & Dementieva, Y. (2017). The contextual specificity of gender: Femininity and masculinity in college students’ same-and other-gender peer contexts. *Sex Roles, 76*, 604–614. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0632-z.
- Menon, M. (2017). Multidimensional gender identity and gender-typed relationship styles in adolescence. *Sex Roles, 76*, 579–591. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0589-y.
- Spiegel, A. (2014). *How a woman’s plan to kill herself helped her family grieve*. National Public Radio. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/06/23/323330486/how-a-womans-plan-to-kill-herself-helped-her-family-grieve>. Accessed July 2014.
- Starr, C. R., & Zurbriggen, E. L. (2017). Sandra Bem’s schema theory after 34 years: A review of its reach and impact. *Sex Roles, 76*, 566–578. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0591-4.
- Twenge, J. M. (1997). Attitudes towards women, 1970–1995: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 21*, 35–51. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00099.