

ANDROGYNOUS PERSONALITY

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1. Core Definition

The **Androgynous Personality** refers to a psychological profile characterized by the simultaneous exhibition of both instrumental (masculine) and expressive (feminine) traits, behaviors, and psychological characteristics. This concept emerged in the 1970s as a powerful alternative to traditional, unidimensional models that posited masculinity and femininity as opposite ends of a single continuum. Instead, psychological androgyny views these trait clusters as independent dimensions, allowing an individual to score highly on both, reflecting a balanced and flexible personality style. A person exhibiting an androgynous personality transcends rigidly defined gender roles, displaying traits stereotypically associated with both men (such as assertiveness and ambition) and women (such as nurturing and compassion) depending on the situational demands. This flexibility is often linked to higher levels of psychological well-being and adaptability, contrasting sharply with individuals who feel constrained by conventional expectations of their biological sex.

The core distinction of the androgynous personality is its freedom from the limitations imposed by societal gender stereotypes. Whereas traditionally sex-typed individuals (masculine males and feminine females) might suppress behaviors deemed inappropriate for their sex, the androgynous individual possesses a broader repertoire of psychological tools. For instance, they can exhibit **nurturing** behaviors in a caregiving role but seamlessly switch to **aggressive** or competitive traits when required in a professional or challenging environment. This integration of traits suggests a complexity that enhances an individual's ability to navigate diverse social and professional contexts effectively.

It is crucial to differentiate psychological androgyny from biological or physical androgyny. While the latter refers to individuals possessing physical characteristics of both sexes (intersex conditions) or having an ambiguous gender presentation, psychological androgyny is strictly concerned with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral disposition of the individual. The psychological definition centers on the presence of specific, desirable personality attributes traditionally assigned to both gender roles, rather than a mere blending or neutralization of characteristics.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "androgyny" originates from the Greek words *an?r* (meaning man) and *gyn?* (meaning woman). Historically, the concept of integrating male and female elements has appeared in various philosophical, mythological, and spiritual traditions, often symbolizing completeness or divine unity.

However, the specific psychological concept of the **Androgynous Personality**, as understood today, is a product of 20th-century feminist psychology and the critique of restrictive gender roles prevalent in post-war Western society.

Prior to the 1970s, psychological research, exemplified by instruments like the Terman and Miles Attitude-Interest Analysis Survey (1936), operated under a **unidimensional model** of sex roles. In this framework, masculinity and femininity were treated as mutually exclusive opposites. A high score on masculinity necessarily implied a low score on femininity, and vice versa. This model inherently suggested that healthy development required strict adherence to one's prescribed sex role--men must be masculine, and women must be feminine--leading to the stigmatization of cross-gender behaviors.

The pivotal shift occurred with the work of researchers like Sandra Bem and Janet Spence in the mid-1970s. They argued that gender roles were socially constructed and that the underlying traits of masculinity (instrumentality) and femininity (expressiveness) were **orthogonal**, or independent of one another. This bidimensional perspective allowed for the possibility of high scores in both dimensions, giving rise to the formal definition of psychological androgyny. Bem's work provided the empirical tools necessary to measure and validate this personality style, driving a significant paradigm shift in gender psychology.

3. Theoretical Frameworks: The Bidimensional Model

The theoretical foundation of the androgynous personality rests almost entirely on the **bidimensional model of gender roles** proposed by Sandra Bem. This model rejects the traditional binary opposition and posits two primary, independent axes of personality characteristics. The first axis is **Masculinity (Instrumentality)**, encompassing traits related to competence, action, agency, assertiveness, dominance, and objective accomplishment. The second axis is **Femininity (Expressiveness)**, encompassing traits related to communion, warmth, emotional sensitivity, nurturing, and interpersonal concern.

According to this framework, every individual can be categorized into one of four distinct personality types based on their scores relative to median norms on these two independent scales. The four primary categories derived from the bidimensional model are:

Androgynous: High masculinity and high femininity scores. These individuals possess both instrumental and expressive traits.

Masculine: High masculinity and low femininity scores. These individuals conform to traditional male stereotypes, emphasizing agency and competence.

Feminine: Low masculinity and high femininity scores. These individuals conform to traditional female stereotypes, emphasizing communion and warmth.

Undifferentiated: Low masculinity and low femininity scores. These individuals lack strong

definition in either dimension.

Bem's theory emphasized that the ability to access both instrumental and expressive domains grants the androgynous individual a psychological advantage, allowing them to engage in "situationally appropriate behavior" regardless of gender norms. This adaptability, or **behavioral flexibility**, became the hallmark of psychological health within this framework, shifting the focus from conformity to gender roles toward optimal functioning.

4. Measurement: The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)

The definitive instrument for measuring psychological androgyny is the **Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI)**, developed by Sandra Bem in 1974. The BSRI is a self-report questionnaire consisting of sixty adjectives or phrases, which participants rate on a scale according to how well each trait describes them. These sixty items are divided into three distinct subscales:

Masculinity Scale (20 items): Includes traits such as aggressive, assertive, dominant, self-reliant, and competitive.

Femininity Scale (20 items): Includes traits such as affectionate, gentle, warm, sensitive to the needs of others, and understanding.

Neutral Scale (20 items): Includes filler traits that are neither masculine nor feminine, such as conscientious, friendly, and happy, used to control for response bias.

The BSRI utilizes a median split procedure for scoring, where an individual's score on the Masculinity and Femininity scales is compared to the median scores established for the relevant population. If a person scores above the median on both scales, they are classified as psychologically **androgynous**. The widespread use of the BSRI provided crucial empirical evidence supporting the bidimensionality of gender traits, confirming that a significant portion of the population possesses a mixed gender-trait profile, thus validating the concept of androgynous personality as a measurable psychological reality.

5. The Androgyny Hypothesis and Psychological Adaptation

A central tenet of the research surrounding the androgynous personality is the **Androgyny Hypothesis**. This hypothesis posits that individuals who are psychologically androgynous possess higher levels of psychological adjustment, resilience, and overall mental health compared to those who are strictly sex-typed (masculine or feminine). The rationale behind this finding is rooted in the concept of **behavioral competence**.

Androgynous individuals are not limited by socially prescribed behaviors; they can draw upon both instrumental skills (necessary for navigating challenges, achievement, and problem-solving) and expressive skills (necessary for forming deep relationships, offering social support, and managing

emotional situations). This broad competency allows them to adapt effectively to a wider variety of social and environmental demands. For example, when faced with loss, the androgynous person can access expressive traits to process grief appropriately, but when faced with a demanding career challenge, they can access instrumental traits to assert dominance and pursue solutions aggressively.

Numerous studies utilizing the BSRI have supported this hypothesis, finding that androgynous individuals often report higher self-esteem, better stress management, greater career flexibility, and lower rates of anxiety and depression than their sex-typed counterparts, particularly compared to undifferentiated individuals. While early research sometimes suggested that high masculinity alone was the primary predictor of psychological health (the **Masculinity Model**), later, more nuanced findings consistently pointed to the unique benefits derived from the integration and flexible deployment of both sets of traits, confirming the adaptive superiority of the androgynous personality configuration.

6. Relationship to Gender Identity and Stereotypes

The concept of the androgynous personality challenged the rigid relationship between biological sex, gender identity, and expected behavior. It effectively decoupled internal psychological traits from external gender roles. An individual's biological sex (male or female) no longer dictates whether they possess traditionally masculine, feminine, or mixed traits. This liberation from strict gender stereotyping is one of the most significant contributions of the theory.

Androgyny promotes the idea that personal competence is maximized when individuals are free to integrate diverse traits regardless of their assigned gender. It allows for a male to be **nurturing and sensitive** without questioning his masculinity, and for a female to be **ambitious and dominant** without sacrificing her femininity. By measuring personality traits rather than adherence to social roles, the androgynous profile highlighted the limitations and psychological costs associated with enforcing conventional expectations, paving the way for greater acceptance of behavioral variability within all gender groups. While the BSRI still relies on labeling traits as "masculine" or "feminine," the ultimate goal was to demonstrate the psychological benefit of transcending the rigidity associated with those labels.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound impact, the concept of the androgynous personality has faced substantial academic scrutiny and criticism over time, leading to revisions in how gender and personality are understood.

Specificity of Measurement

A primary criticism focuses on the BSRI itself. Critics argue that the traits labeled "masculine" and "feminine" are simply desirable instrumental and expressive traits, respectively, and that their association with gender roles is arbitrary or culturally specific. If the benefits attributed to androgyny are simply the benefits of having many generally desirable traits (e.g., being both assertive and kind), then the term "androgyny" may be unnecessary, and the model might simply be measuring **social desirability** or general competence rather than a distinct gender personality configuration. Furthermore, critics question the cultural universality of these trait assignments, arguing that what constitutes "masculine" or "feminine" varies drastically across different societies and historical periods.

The Conceptual Purity of Androgyny

A significant debate arose concerning whether androgyny represents a true blending of traits or merely the ability to switch between them effectively. Some researchers, including Janet Spence, shifted their focus from measuring "androgyny" to measuring **Gender Schema Theory**, which suggests that individuals process information based on learned gender schema, influencing which behaviors they deploy. Additionally, the critique emerged that the simple median split technique used by the BSRI might misclassify individuals who score moderately low on both scales but are still categorized as "androgynous" due to statistical artifacts, confusing true personality flexibility with merely average trait endorsement.

The Shift to Multidimensionality

More recent psychological theory has moved toward a more complex, multidimensional view of gender identity and expression that goes beyond the binary M/F scales. Modern research often uses models that incorporate dimensions such as gender identity (internal sense of self), gender expression (outward presentation), and sexual orientation, recognizing that personality traits are only one facet of gendered experience. While the androgynous personality concept was revolutionary in breaking the unidimensional mold, current models strive for a greater degree of intersectionality and complexity.

Further Reading

[Sandra Bem](#)

[Bem Sex-Role Inventory \(BSRI\)](#)

[Psychological Androgyny](#)