

ANDROGYNOUS SEX ROLE

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1. Core Definition

The **androgynous sex role** refers to the state of possessing and expressing a mixture of personality traits, behaviors, and roles typically associated with both conventional masculinity and conventional femininity. Rather than adhering strictly to gender-typed expectations--where males exhibit high levels of instrumental traits and low levels of expressive traits, and vice versa for females--the androgynous individual integrates preferred, high-level attributes from both societal sex roles. This concept fundamentally rejects the traditional, unidimensional view of gender where masculinity and femininity exist on opposing ends of a single continuum. Instead, psychological androgyny is predicated on a two-dimensional model, asserting that these sets of traits are independent, allowing an individual to score highly on both, thereby achieving greater psychological flexibility and adaptability.

A key characteristic of the **androgynous sex role** is behavioral freedom. Individuals adopting this role are not constrained by rigid societal scripts dictating appropriate behavior solely based on their biological sex. For instance, an androgynous person can exhibit strong assertiveness and independence (instrumental/masculine qualities) when required by a professional setting, while simultaneously demonstrating high levels of nurturance, empathy, and emotional sensitivity (expressive/feminine qualities) in interpersonal or caregiving contexts. This blending allows for more nuanced responses to diverse social and environmental demands, resulting in a broader repertoire of coping mechanisms and social skills than those who are strictly gender-typed.

As noted in early psychological definitions, the adoption of an **androgynous sex role** inherently involves incorporating aspects of both sexes' societal expectations, which may sometimes introduce internal or external ambiguity. When a person deviates from clearly defined, binary sex roles, observers or the individuals themselves may experience uncertainty pertaining to their behavior or identity relative to conventional norms. The source material specifically highlights this potential ambiguity, providing the example of a female who fulfills a typically male sex role within a same-sex relationship, illustrating the behavioral flexibility and non-conformance inherent in the concept, where roles are chosen based on preference or situational need rather than biological sex assignment.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "androgyny" originates from the Greek words *an?r* (stem *andros*), meaning man, and *gyn?*, meaning woman. Historically, the concept has appeared across various cultures and

philosophical traditions, often representing spiritual or mythological wholeness--the perfect union of male and female principles into a single, complete entity. Plato, in his work *Symposium*, described original human beings as spherical, possessing two sets of male and female genitalia, whose separation by Zeus led to the human search for a lost complementary half, a metaphor that speaks to the innate desire for internal integration of gendered characteristics. However, the modern psychological formulation of the **androgynous sex role** developed much later, specifically in response to the social movements of the mid-20th century.

The critical theoretical shift occurred in the 1970s, propelled by the second-wave feminist movement and growing dissatisfaction among psychologists with the limitations imposed by traditional gender role stereotypes. Before this period, psychological research often assumed a bipolar model: mental health was associated with conformity to traditional roles (masculinity for men, femininity for women), and high scores on one dimension necessarily implied low scores on the other. This model pathologized individuals who exhibited cross-sex behaviors or traits. It was within this context that psychologist **Sandra Lipsitz Bem** championed the concept of psychological androgyny, arguing that adherence to strict gender roles was detrimental to mental health and personal freedom, limiting individuals' ability to cope effectively with life's varied challenges.

Bem's work reframed the discussion, moving away from gender roles as fixed, mutually exclusive categories and introducing the influential idea that masculinity and femininity are two separate and equally valuable dimensions of personality. Her formalization of the **androgynous sex role** provided a scientific framework for studying individuals who possessed a high degree of both instrumental (traditionally masculine) and expressive (traditionally feminine) qualities. This development was groundbreaking because it offered a non-pathological alternative to traditional gender typing and suggested that the optimal psychological state involved the capacity to utilize the full range of human characteristics, regardless of one's sex, paving the way for decades of research into gender flexibility and mental well-being.

3. Key Characteristics and Behavioral Manifestations

The defining characteristic of the **androgynous sex role** is robust behavioral flexibility, often referred to as psychological adaptiveness. This flexibility allows the individual to shift behavioral patterns according to situational demands rather than being rigidly constrained by learned gender norms. For example, an individual who is strictly gender-typed might struggle to express vulnerability or sadness if their assigned role is highly masculine, or conversely, struggle to be assertive and competitive if their assigned role is highly feminine. The androgynous individual, having integrated both sets of qualities, can readily access the appropriate trait--be it tenderness or assertiveness--to manage a given scenario effectively, leading to enhanced overall functioning and competence across different spheres of life, including work, family, and social interactions.

Manifestations of androgyny are seen in the balanced utilization of both instrumental and expressive characteristics. Instrumental qualities, often labeled masculine, include traits such as independence, ambition, leadership ability, dominance, and a strong focus on task completion and goal achievement. Expressive qualities, often labeled feminine, encompass characteristics like warmth, sensitivity to others' needs, compassion, nurturance, and a focus on harmonious interpersonal relationships. The androgynous person does not simply possess a moderate amount of each; rather, they exhibit a high capacity for both, using the assertive, instrumental qualities to navigate the demands of society and the expressive qualities to foster deep and meaningful emotional connections with others. This integration is crucial to the concept's hypothesized benefits.

Furthermore, the manifestation of the **androgynous sex role** often involves a conscious or subconscious rejection of socially imposed limits regarding emotional expression or professional aspirations. This non-conformity, while a source of strength and adaptability, is precisely what leads to the 'uncertainty' or 'ambiguity' mentioned in the initial definition. In contexts highly dependent on gender segregation (such as historically male-dominated workplaces or highly feminized social circles), the ability of an androgynous individual to cross boundaries--such as a male displaying intense empathy or a female displaying aggressive competitiveness--can confuse those operating within traditional binary frameworks. This confusion, however, is generally viewed by proponents of androgyny as a reflection of societal rigidity rather than individual pathology, positioning the androgynous person as psychologically liberated from traditional strictures.

4. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)

The formal measurement and empirical validation of the **androgynous sex role** are inextricably linked to the development of the **Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)**, created by Sandra Bem in 1974. The BSRI was a pioneering psychometric instrument designed to measure the extent to which a person identifies with both masculinity and femininity. It consists of a list of personality characteristics rated on a seven-point scale, divided into three categories: a set of traits deemed socially desirable for males (e.g., ambitious, assertive), a set deemed desirable for females (e.g., affectionate, tender), and a set of neutral filler items. Crucially, the BSRI measured masculinity and femininity as two separate, uncorrelated scales, providing the empirical foundation for the two-dimensional model of gender roles.

The scoring methodology of the BSRI determines an individual's placement into one of four distinct categories based on whether their scores on the Masculinity (M) and Femininity (F) scales are high or low, relative to normative medians established within a given population. The four classifications derived from the inventory are fundamental to understanding how androgyny is operationalized in research. The categories are:

Masculine: Individuals scoring High on the M scale and Low on the F scale. These individuals adhere primarily to instrumental roles.

Feminine: Individuals scoring High on the F scale and Low on the M scale. These individuals adhere primarily to expressive roles.

Undifferentiated (or Unclassified): Individuals scoring Low on both the M and F scales. These individuals lack a strong identification with traits considered desirable for either gender role.

Androgynous: Individuals scoring **High** on both the M scale and the F scale. This signifies the successful integration and strong identification with the valued characteristics traditionally associated with both sexes, confirming the achievement of the flexible **androgynous sex role**.

The widespread use of the BSRI allowed researchers to empirically test Bem's hypothesis that androgynous individuals would demonstrate greater psychological health and behavioral competence compared to those categorized as strictly masculine or feminine. While subsequent researchers developed alternative scales and refined the definitions, the BSRI remains the benchmark tool that established the concept of androgyny within mainstream academic psychology, providing verifiable data that supported the notion that high levels of both instrumental competence and expressive warmth contributed optimally to psychological adjustment.

5. Psychological Benefits and Significance

The significance of the **androgynous sex role** lies primarily in its association with enhanced psychological well-being and adaptive functioning. Bem and her followers argued that strict gender typing forces individuals to suppress half of their potential behavioral repertoire, leading to limitations in dealing with complex life situations. For example, a gender-typed man might be ill-equipped to handle situations requiring emotional intimacy or caregiving, while a gender-typed woman might struggle with tasks requiring aggressive assertion or competitive independence. Androgyny resolves this limitation by providing psychological freedom.

Research studies utilizing the BSRI often demonstrated that androgynous individuals reported higher levels of self-esteem, greater overall satisfaction with life, and lower incidences of anxiety and depression compared to their gender-typed or undifferentiated peers. This superior adjustment is hypothesized to stem directly from their high behavioral flexibility. When an androgynous person encounters a demanding or ambiguous situation, they are more likely to successfully employ whichever set of skills--instrumental or expressive--is most appropriate for effective problem-solving, without being hindered by concerns about conforming to gender roles. This adaptability translates into increased efficacy and resilience across various environments, from academic performance to navigating complex adult relationships.

Furthermore, the recognition and empirical validation of the **androgynous sex role** held immense societal significance. By demonstrating that psychological health was not dependent on adherence

to sex-specific roles, the concept provided academic support for changing social norms and challenging the strict gender roles prevalent in Western society during the mid-to-late 20th century. It legitimized the idea that both men and women could, and perhaps should, cultivate traits traditionally reserved for the opposite sex. This shift helped pave the way for greater acceptance of diverse gender expressions and contributed significantly to gender equity discussions in areas like parenting, where fathers adopting nurturing roles and mothers adopting professional, instrumental roles became increasingly validated as psychologically healthy options.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound impact, the concept of the **androgynous sex role** and the BSRI have faced significant academic criticism over the decades, primarily concerning methodology and theoretical scope. One major critique revolves around the cultural specificity and potential bias embedded within the BSRI's trait list. Critics argued that the traits chosen to represent "masculinity" and "femininity" were derived from 1970s American college students and reflected white, middle-class, highly educated cultural ideals. Consequently, the applicability and relevance of these specific measures of instrumental and expressive qualities might diminish when applied to different ethnic groups, non-Western cultures, or lower socioeconomic populations, potentially undermining the universality of the androgyny construct.

A second fundamental debate centers on the "Masculinity Model" versus the "Androgyny Model" of psychological adjustment. Early research, while supporting the benefits of androgyny, also found that high masculinity scores (regardless of the femininity score) were the strongest predictors of high self-esteem and low anxiety. This led some critics to argue that the benefits attributed to androgyny were primarily due to the inclusion of socially valued instrumental (masculine) traits--such as confidence and self-reliance--rather than the balance itself. While subsequent refinements confirmed the importance of high expressive traits for interpersonal competence, this debate highlighted the persistent societal valuation of instrumental attributes in defining success and well-being, even within a flexible model.

Finally, contemporary gender studies and queer theory have largely moved beyond the framework of the **androgynous sex role**, viewing it as fundamentally limited because it remains tethered to the gender binary it attempts to transcend. Critics argue that by defining traits as inherently "masculine" or "feminine" for the purpose of measurement, the BSRI reinforces the very dualism that creates gender role restrictions. Modern perspectives often favor concepts like gender fluidity, non-binary identity, and gender performance, which completely detach psychological characteristics from biological sex categories, viewing sex roles as culturally constructed performances rather than integrated psychological characteristics. Therefore, while androgyny was revolutionary in the 1970s, it is now often viewed within Gender Studies as an important but historically contextualized step toward understanding the complexity of human identity beyond

simple biological determinism.

7. Further Reading

[Sandra Bem \(Psychologist\)](#)

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

[American Psychological Association: Concepts of Gender Identity](#)

[Simply Psychology: Gender Roles and Androgyny](#)

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