

Sex & gender terms and concepts

This activity will help you to...

- Understand and differentiate between different terms used in the study of gender
- Consider our society's beliefs about masculinity and femininity
- Understand Bem's (1974) research into androgyny and the use of surveys in studying gender

Sex & gender terms

Psychologists use many different terms when studying gender. Some important ones are defined below. Read the definitions and then the statements underneath. Each statement corresponds with a definition. Decide which, and be ready to explain your answers.

- **Sex** – the biological fact of being male or female. This may refer to chromosomal sex (XX or XY), gonadal sex (the possession of ovaries or testes) and/or genital sex (the possession of a vagina or penis).
- **Gender** – the social, psychological, behavioural and cultural aspects of being female or male (i.e. femininity and masculinity).
- **Gender identity** – the way a person understands and classifies themselves in relation to gender (i.e. how people feel, think and talk about themselves; the psychological aspects of gender).
- **Gender role** – the expected ways of acting for men and women in a given society (i.e. the behavioural aspects of gender).
- **Gender stereotypes** – simplistic ideas that regard all men/women as being the same in relation to a particular trait or characteristic.
- **Sex role stereotypes** – simplistic ideas about the appropriateness of particular behaviour for men or women.

Sex and gender statements

- Women never stop talking.
- Women have ovaries.
- Women have traditionally taken on caring occupational roles like nursing.
- I am a woman.
- Women should stay at home and look after the family.
- Men have, on average, superior spatial reasoning ability to women.
- In the West, women are expected to be empathetic.
- Men have a Y chromosome and a penis.
- Men can't multitask.
- Men should be the breadwinners.
- Women have, on average, superior verbal reasoning ability to men.
- In the West, men are expected to be dominant.
- Men should not wear skirts, although women may wear trousers.
- I'm a boy.

Androgyny

Bem (1974) was aware that our society considers some traits masculine and some feminine. However, her view was that any person, male or female, can have both feminine and masculine traits. People with equal masculine and feminine traits are called androgynous (from the Greek words for 'man' and 'woman').

Which of the following traits would our society regard as masculine, feminine or neutral?

Self-reliant	Independent	Sympathetic
Reliable	Cheerful	Self-sufficient
Sincere	Analytical	Conscientious
Shy	Moody	Affectionate
Happy	Yielding	Aggressive

Bem (1974) developed an inventory (a type of questionnaire) called the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) where respondents rate themselves on a 7-point Likert scale for sixty adjectives like the ones above (masculine, feminine and neutral). Their ratings for the different sets of adjectives are summed to give a masculinity and a femininity score. The scores can be used to classify respondents as highly masculine or feminine, androgynous (high on both) or undifferentiated (low on both).

Bem (1975) found that highly androgynous people were psychologically healthier than those who were strongly masculine or feminine.

Some questions to help you think about and evaluate this research

1. Suggest a possible reason why androgynous people were found to be more psychologically healthy than others.
2. Bem's inventory was constructed based on the views of Americans in the 1970s. To what extent does this matter?
3. What issues arise from using self-report questionnaires to study gender as Bem did?

A task to help you understand and think about cultural diversity in gender

Using your textbooks, find two studies that have looked at aspects of gender/gender identity/gender role in societies other than our own.

- Write a brief summary of each (aims, methods, findings, conclusions).
- Make an additional note of how gender identity/role in the society studied differs from ours.
- Be ready to share your findings and conclusions next session.