

DISCOURSES ON GENDER  
AND SEXUAL INEQUALITY:  
THE LEGACY OF SANDRA L. BEM

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ADVANCES IN GENDER RESEARCH VOLUME 23

# **DISCOURSES ON GENDER AND SEXUAL INEQUALITY: THE LEGACY OF SANDRA L. BEM**

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# GENDERED INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES: STILL CHASING THE LEGACY OF SANDRA BEM

Marla H. Kohlman and Dana B. Krieg

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose/Approach – This chapter by the volume editors introduces the authors, concepts, and themes presented in the contributions to this special issue devoted to the research legacy of Sandra L. Bem.*

*Research Implications – This chapter provides the unique and combined viewpoints of the volume editors on the need for more dedicated research on the prevalence of gender as an institutionalized concept that organizes our lives at work, home, in social settings, and in leisure time.*

*Value – This chapter is meant to guide readers through the contents of the volume, calling attention to key findings, common themes, and methodological concerns.*

**Keywords:** Gender; institutions; pop culture; gender roles; gender essentialism

## A DIFFERENT SORT OF INTRODUCTION...TWO VOICES ON THE LEGACY OF SANDRA L. BEM

*Marla*

This volume came into being as a result of a simple conversation. Upon learning of Sandra Bem's death, Dana and I remarked upon the ways that her

theory continues to shape our engagement with teaching gender as an institutional concept, calling attention to the deeply entrenched expectations of gendered behavior that are still pervasive at this point in history.

Later reflecting upon that initial conversation, I was reminded that my gendered expectations of the world have been shaped in no small measure by what is typically regarded as a fairly innocuous source: my lifelong love of reading. My entrée into the world of romance literature began with books by Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Daphne Du Maurier's (1938) *Rebecca*, and just about any book by Victoria Holt. And then I was introduced to a big box of romance novels by an aunt who was just looking to keep me quiet and content during a summertime monthlong visit.

The box returned home with me and, once I had read through all of those novels and exhausted the supply in our local libraries, I asked my parents for my own mail-order subscription to Harlequin romance novels each month. I now realize, having teenagers of my own, that my parents gave in to my request for two reasons. One, it meant that I remained a frequent visitor to several different libraries for any number of reasons beyond obtaining romance novels and, two, devouring all of these books kept me fairly close to home during those unpredictable teen years. I had always been a bookworm but this packet of books arriving each month, in addition to my schoolwork and extracurricular activities, meant that my parents had more knowledge of my whereabouts than most of my peers' parents. This was to be even more of a comfort to them as they separated and entered into divorce proceedings, amicably sharing custody. It was pretty easy to pinpoint where I'd be during the days just after the books arrived, so for at least two weeks out of each month my parents knew that I'd be a fixture in one house or the other until I'd found the requisite time to read each of the six books that had arrived in the mail for a given month.

From that point on I was hooked. Reading those books carried me through the highs and lows of my undergraduate studies, law school, a few years of criminal and civil litigation, and the painful decision to chuck that career for another which required four more years of graduate training and writing a dissertation. Through it all romance novels were constants in my life: they saw me through failed relationships, marriage, childbirth, and the years that followed. And the tropes contained within those novels exist in the popular culture — novels, movies, television dramas — that I still consume on a regular basis. Isn't this what defines what we value most in our lives? Those friends who are there "through thick and thin," and those who, through it all, offer you the same constant companionship no matter what? You know what to expect from them and they from you. I took comfort in the formula of the writing: I knew what to expect as I turned each page, but there were plot twists and mysteries to hold my attention until the inevitable epilogue of each book.

What I had to confront as I first encountered the theory of Sandra Bem during my law school days was that these formulaic romance novels were part of a much larger structural reality that shaped the actual lives of women and men in

very different ways even as the narratives were presented as the fulfillment of complementary expectations (Parsons, 2010/1954) and companionate marriages (Cherlin, 2009) within the covers of the fiction they represented. And, as such, they were powerful agents of socialization, no different than *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, etc. In fact, these texts could be argued to wield more power because adult women like me were continuing to support this cottage industry of romance novels. So it became a type of game to me to more critically examine the narratives presented in these novels as their plot twists “evolved” over the years to incorporate working women, single mothers, and step-parents while remaining true to the “happily ever after” formula.

During my graduate school years in sociology and women’s studies, as I read the work of economist Claudia Goldin exposing the continued prevalence of the ideology of separate spheres manifest in marriage bars, the practice made perfect economic sense to me because of the many romance novels I had read. As Goldin noted, “few married women were to remain in the labor force for the most of their lives. In 1939, of all married women not currently working, but who had worked prior to marriage, more than 80% exited the workplace at the precise time of marriage” (Goldin, 13). This provided a legitimate, if not misguided, rationale for “marriage bars” which employers, and society at large, began to use as legitimate reasons for refusing to hire women at all, or hiring them for dead-end jobs which would not maximize their utility (Goldin, 176-77). In the world of the romance novel, as Samantha Simpson and I reference in our contribution to this volume, these practices are veiled and presented as pragmatic decisions made by women who can be, and want to be, financially supported by men. There is no acknowledgment of the ways some women have been blocked, or restricted from employment options, by structural forces beyond their control or the ways in which some women have been forced to work since the dawn of the United States. This realization, then, served to heighten my awareness that these gendered dynamics were socially constructed in much the same way that the lives of the heroes and heroines in romance novels were, but that the real world implications of these arrangements had dire consequences for women in the labor market.

Throughout my educational career, I had a hard time reconciling the theory I was learning in my classes that interrogated the prioritized breadwinner-homemaker model of family, that existed primarily in popular culture for me, with my understanding of the real world from which I had emerged as a young Black woman, a world in which women worked and maintained families on equal footing with their husbands. I regarded both the breadwinner-homemaker notions of masculinity and femininity as fictional aberrations, they were not the way I ever expected to live my life, nor were they aspirational models to achieve. As noted by Dean, Marsh, and Landry (2013), I have been relieved to find that much research has emerged providing evidence that black families have emphasized broader roles for women (Collins, 1994; Chaney & Marsh, 2009; Daniel Barnes, 2008; Hill, 1972/2003, 2011; Lacy, 2007; Landry, 2002;

Roehling, Jarvis, & Swope, 2005; Shaw, 1996) and experience less work-family conflict than whites families (Taylor, Funk, & Clark, 2007; Voydanoff, 2005) as cited by Dean et al. (2013).

Thus, my reading of Bem's *The Lenses of Gender* reinforced my determination that gender, in and of itself, should never be and had never been a rigidly determinative force in my life or that of the women who were most instrumental in my upbringing. This gender essentialized model of the family belonged firmly within the pages of the romance novels I'd read and the worry of finding a husband to provide support were problems specific to the heroines in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, the precursors to my entry into the fictional world of romance novels. It was because of Bem's articulation of gender schema theory, in general, and gender polarization, in particular, that I became so engrossed in the study of gender, work, and family that has sustained my livelihood since then. I had a rubric provided in part by Bem, a formula parallel to my understanding of the romance novel, to aid me in deconstructing gendered philosophies premised upon any natural sort of "femininity" or "masculinity" with relative ease. Similar to the manner in which I came to see gendered explanations for our world as distinct social constructions, the purpose of this edited volume is to specifically draw attention to the significance of Sandra Bem's research for current debates about gender and gender roles in the social sciences.

### *Dana*

As a psychology professor, I often ask my students to reflect on important experiences and relationships that have contributed to their identity, their values, and their understanding of the world. For this chapter, I have taken the opportunity to consider the key experiences and relationships that have contributed to my own understanding of, and values related to, gender.

I am the product of a blended family. In this blend, I happen to be the only one with my particular set of parents. As such, even as a child, I spent a lot of time thinking about how and why my siblings and I were so different. This was an appropriate pastime for a future developmental psychologist. Was it the genetic differences? Were my half-brothers more like each other because they were full-siblings? Was it the environment? Was I different from my half-sisters because my life looked so different from the one they had lived during our mother's first marriage? As a psychology graduate student, I learned the simple and obvious answer...yes! Yes to all of it, because it all matters. I became a believer in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) and examined how my neighborhood, the different school system, the changed proximity to extended family, and our temperamental differences as well as physical characteristics interacted to make each of us unique.

As a child, I had not given much attention to gender. I lived in a family, at least the one inhabited by my parents and me, that was quite egalitarian for the time. My parents made decisions together, cooked together, and worked together as a team on household projects. My father was an engineer, but also an accomplished photographer who did alterations on our clothes (including my prom dress). My mother did not work after I was born, but I understood this to be a choice she and my father made together and not a reflection of anyone's idea of her "place." I was encouraged to play outside, get dirty, and make things. I played with dolls and cars, danced ballet, and played sports. It was not until I was older that I realized this was another feature of my environment that had not been shared with my siblings. As a result, their adult notions of gender roles and work-family balance are quite different from mine. I have made choices in these areas of my life that are quite different from those of my siblings and, like the child I once was, I still occasionally ponder (sometimes at family get-togethers) how it is possible for us to be so different.

My expectations of gender role flexibility were high because the model provided for me included a man and a woman who shared tasks and treated each other as equals. They were rewarded for this arrangement by having a loving, respectful, and mutually satisfying relationship. Thus, in keeping with Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1974), I learned that this is how relationships should work. However, as I moved through adolescence and early adulthood, I discovered that this was not the model held by all, including some members of my own family. I found that my sisters had ideas of what men should (or should not) be like and what women should (or should not) do that were much more divided than my own. My parents felt it was equally important that I be able to cook Thanksgiving dinner, change a tire, balance my checkbook, and succeed in college. While they had the same goals for my siblings, we were not equally receptive to the lesson. This illustrates the interaction between the child and the environment in influencing the adoption of gendered expectations of behavior, which is further examined in this volume by the review authored by Keener, Mehta, and Smirles.

As I read through the chapters in this volume, bits of my life resonated in the pages. As a younger, wilder version of myself, I was once congratulated for "drinking like a man," which earned me the respect and affection of my peers, a trend discussed here by Krieg and Krause. I have listened to my adult niece fantasize about being taken care of and never having to make decisions or a wage, following closely to the script provided in romance novels as reviewed by Kohlman and Simpson. I have had my career choice and trajectory questioned and challenged, as is expounded here by Gewinner, Drentea and Ballard, and Dang. The latter example has been particularly relevant as I began to balance the demands of work and family.

It is in this role, as working mother, that I have seen the clearest examples and illustrations of Sandra Bem's theories on gender schema, androcentrism, and polarization. I have been routinely confronted with both institutional and

interpersonal expectations of my work and family obligations related to gender. I have witnessed and experienced institutional constraints on women in academia. I have had my commitment to my career questioned because I am a mother, while hearing male colleagues praised for taking time off to provide childcare. I have had my childrearing questioned because I am a woman working outside of my home. I share this here to emphasize the work that is yet to be done. Sandra Bem has left an extraordinary legacy that demands to be taken forward. Researchers need to continue to work to understand how constricted notions of gender roles limit opportunities. We need to examine ways in which we might loosen the reins on our ideas of what are masculine and feminine tasks, behaviors, and abilities. And we need to consider the proximal and distal environmental factors that might lead a child to think her gender is not really a big deal.

## ON SANDRA LIPSITZ BEM

When Sandra Bem passed away in May of 2014, she left an immense legacy of knowledge about all things gender for scholars to draw from in conducting research and analyses that will persist for generations to come. Even as we continue to learn more about how gender has become socially constructed over many centuries, and to dismantle prominent myths about essential characteristics of what is masculine or feminine, the research of Sandra Bem, particularly as presented in her groundbreaking text *The Lenses of Gender*, remains relevant and instructive as we confront new ideologies about gender roles as they have been used, and abused, in the construction of polarized social norms at both the micro level of interpersonal dialogue and the macro level of institutional formation.

As reported in a *New York Times* article just after her death, “Bem was a pioneer in the field of gender studies. She created the Bem Sex Role Inventory in 1974, which she designed to assesses a person’s traits along a traditional gender continuum; led Cornell’s fledgling women’s studies program from 1978 to 1985; wrote a groundbreaking book, *The Lenses of Gender*, in, 1993; published a memoir, *An Unconventional Family*, in 1998; became a licensed psychotherapist in 2000; and returned for a second term as the director of Cornell’s renamed feminist, gender and sexuality studies program in 2001 (Henig, 2015).” Our goal in editing this volume is to proffer new and original research acknowledging the legacy of Sandra Bem in calling our attention to socially constructed tropes of masculinity and femininity that remain prevalent to this day. To that end, we sought manuscripts featuring analyses of emerging discourses on gender, gender roles, and gender schemas. We did so recognizing that long before the terms *transgender* and *cisgender* were introduced into mainstream,



academic, and activist discourses on gender, Sandra Bem was busy interrogating the use of gender as an essentialist organizing principle in society.

The original manuscripts published herein specifically interrogate the ways in which the institution of gender has been, and remains, deeply contested and provide exemplars for pursuing meaningful inquiry emphasizing institutional intersections between gender as a lived reality within the dynamics of family, educational settings, the labor market, and the rendering of social services. We also feature manuscripts that explore the ascriptive and practical aspects of gender from the perspectives of social policy, family, and work. Despite the fact that there has been a long tradition of scholarly research questioning gender as a discursive concept, questions remain regarding how we operationalize gender in current studies of human behavior, social roles, social policy, employment practices, and social institutions. We have sought to address this gap in the literature of social psychology with the articles featured in this volume by presenting research and reflection on the current understanding of how gender roles continue to shape social reality and institutional structures.

Future research that we would like to see emerge on the legacy of Sandra L. Bem that we were unable to solicit in this volume includes more work on social policy and law as gender schematic domains in addition to new and original research drawing upon research regarding transgender experiences in the academy, labor market, and family formation. The research of Betsy Lucal, Kristin Schilt, and Laurel Westbrook have provided strong foundations for this line of reasoning, particularly as they call attention to the heteronormativity of gender inequality.

## **CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS**

In this volume, we present new and original research that approaches gender roles and gender norms from a variety of perspectives. In the seven chapters presented here, we consider Bem's conception of gender as a central organizing feature of society. Throughout these chapters, gender is presented as both an outcome (e.g., Keener, Mehta & Smirles) as well as an agent of determination (e.g., Drentea & Ballard, Krieg & Krause).

Major themes in these chapters involve occupational opportunities, family, and the interaction between the two. In the chapter "Gendered Career Choices and Stereotypes: A Theoretical Approach," Gewinner discusses factors contributing to the career choices of young Russian women, while in the chapter "Insights into Vietnamese Culture of Gender and Factors Hindering Academic Women's Advancement to Leadership Positions," Dang evaluates influences on occupational trajectories of mid-career women in Vietnam. Docka-Filipek, in the chapter "Masculinity and "Generational Poverty" in a Faith-Based Homelessness Advocacy Program: Race and Class Viewed through the "Lenses

of Gender”,” looks at the gendered notions of family that inform social service providers’ interactions with clients. In the chapter “How College Students Perceive Men’s and Women’s Advantages and Disadvantages Surrounding Work and Family Issues,” Drentea and Ballard consider the expectations of college students regarding career and family balance.

Two additional chapters consider the influences of gender norms and the heteronormative script on our leisure activities. In the chapter “Drinking Like a Man: How Gender Norms Influence College Students’ Perceptions of Binge Drinkers,” Krieg and Krause examine how gendered expectations of drinking behaviors contribute to college students’ perceptions and expectations of safety while drinking. In the chapter “For the Sake of Hearth and Home: Gender Schematicity in the Romance Novel,” Kohlman and Simpson consider the persistence of traditional gender roles in romance novels.

This collection addresses various components of Bem’s legacy, in both theory and methodology. Chapter authors interpret their research findings through Bem’s “lenses of gender,” discussing androcentrism (e.g., Drentea and Ballard; Docka-Filipek), biological essentialism (e.g., Dang; Krieg & Krause), and polarization. Regarding methodology, Krieg and Krause describe the use of the Bem Sex Roles Inventory in assessing college students’ perceptions of binge drinkers.

In this volume, we also see authors exploring Bem’s theory of androcentrism in the context of both Judeo-Christian and Confucian ideologies. Docka-Filipek explains that “in the Judeo-Christian tradition, two of the guiding symbols of Western male dominance are established in the patriarchal, masculine God and the sexualized, thereby inferior, female, who may tempt the male from ‘the path of righteousness.’” Similarly, Dang explains that “Confucianism nurtured the ideology of ‘valuing men and disparaging women.’” Both ideological traditions are structured such that the male experience is the standard or norm.

## MULTIPLE METHODOLOGIES

Various methodologies and diverse populations are represented in this volume. Keener, Mehta, and Smirles conducted an extensive review of literature and theory. Docka-Filipek conducted a case study of a service organization for homeless clients, collecting data through interviews, record reviews, and participant observation. Dang, studying educational administrators in Vietnam, and Drentea and Ballard, studying college students, used multiple qualitative methods. Krieg and Krause, also studying college students, used an experimental design utilizing Bem’s Sex Roles Inventory. Kohlman and Simpson performed a literary content analysis and Gewinner examined archival records of career choices in Russia. The use of these diverse methodologies and broad

populations strengthens the collective conclusions and demonstrates the continuing importance and relevance of gender for consideration in our understanding of a wide range of social phenomena.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, these chapters address various components of Bem's theories on gender. Authors in this volume consider broad notions of gender as a determining feature in individual behavior (e.g., Keener, Mehta & Smirles, Gewinner, Drentea & Ballard), as a strong influence on others' perceptions of our roles and behaviors (e.g., Docka-Filipek, Krieg and Krause), and as a component of cultural influence (Kohlman & Simpson, Gewinner, Dang).

These chapters suggest that even during and after periods of structural societal change, gender roles strongly dictate and influence choices (e.g., Gewinner, Dang), and that sources of media and leisure often reinforce inequality (e.g., Krieg & Krause; Kohlman & Simpson). Herein, we find illustrations of gendered social forces that can strongly influence decision making, perceptions, and behaviors. As Keener concludes, "it is not that men and women are vastly different or confined to specific roles, but rather that different aspects of social situations elicit specific behaviors in ways that interact with developmental factors, which for various reasons (e.g., see Bem, 1981, gender schema theory), often align with gender."

We come away from this collection with the notion that there remains considerable work to be done in the struggle for gender equality. We see this in the conclusions of various authors in this volume addressing gender related constraints. In looking at occupational aspirations of young Russian women, Gewinner concluded that "the interdependence between gender culture and gender stereotypes creates and limits the pool of available options for career choices." Similarly, Docka-Filipek concludes, in her examination of social service providers, that "traditional constructions of gender ... and family ... persisted, largely due to a lack of availability of alternative schemas for gender and family." Limitations in available flexibility of gender schemas are also reported by Drentea and Ballard, who conclude that "even in the early 21st century, both young men and women have gendered schemas, and a gendered self-identity. They perceive work and family in gendered terms. Although there appear to be hints of social change in the gendering of work and family when young men and women are asked directly about it, ... findings suggest a maintenance of a gendered schema." Therefore, as Keener, Mehta, and Smirles conclude, "we continue to be inspired by the social justice aspects of Bem's life and work."

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# CONTEXTUALIZING BEM: THE DEVELOPMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

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## ABSTRACT

*Purpose — This chapter uses Sandra Bem's scholarship to demonstrate the intersections between developmental and social psychological approaches to understanding masculinity and femininity.*

*Methodology/approach — To highlight Sandra Bem's contributions, we examined masculinity and femininity, broadly defined, from a socio-developmental theoretical perspective, conceptualizing gender development as embedded within a socio-historical context.*

*Findings — Our review of the literature illustrates that both age and social contextual features influence femininity and masculinity and more specifically that in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, femininity and masculinity vary depending on the sex (same- vs. other-sex) of those in the social context. Along with demonstrating the current utility and extensions of Sandra Bem's research, we also emphasize the feminist and social justice applications of her body of work.*

*Research limitations — Weaknesses in the existing methodology where instruments are designed based on the assumption that masculinity and*

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*femininity are stable traits rather than characteristics that vary are discussed. Limitations to research focused on either social or developmental perspectives are highlighted and suggestions for a more integrative approach are provided.*

*Originality/value — Similar to how Sandra Bem's work showed that sex and gender need not be linked, research and theory on the developmental and contextual specificity of gender also demonstrate that there is freedom in the expression of gender.*

**Keywords:** Masculinity; femininity; androgyny; Sandra Bem; gender roles; gender expression

## CATEGORY: LITERATURE REVIEW

Sandra Bem is known as a feminist trailblazer because of her arguments that the culture's emphasis on a gender dichotomy has significant cognitive, psychological, and social consequences (e.g., [Golden & McHugh, 2017](#)). She has also been a model for how scholarship on gender can extend beyond academia and impact both political (e.g., social policy) and personal (e.g., parenting, relationships) realms ([Liben & Bigler, 2017](#)). As a feminist and social advocate, at the core of all of Bem's work (and of her own life) was the promotion of gender equality ([Balzer, Hagai, & Zurbriggen, 2015](#)). We argue that, throughout her career, Bem addressed the intersections between development and social contexts in her theories and scholarship, which laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist theory and research, which influenced generations of gender scholars. To highlight this work, we will examine masculinity and femininity, broadly defined, from a socio-developmental theoretical perspective, conceptualizing gender development as embedded within a socio-historical context. Specifically, we will examine how masculinity and femininity emerge from demands present in the immediate and larger socio-historical context from a developmental perspective. As such, we will examine gender from both broad and more specific or immediate contextual and developmental perspectives.

To this end, we would like to call attention to and restate [Eckes and Trautner's \(2000\)](#) goal that social psychologists who study gender should consider development or change over time and developmental psychologists studying gender should consider change over situations or in social context. As discussed by [Eckes and Trautner \(2000\)](#), the vast majority of research on gender from a social psychological perspective often fails to consider gender from a developmental lens. Similarly, the vast majority of research on gender from a developmental perspective fails to consider gender from a social perspective. A fascinating point made by Eckes and Trunter is that when comparing

handbook chapters on gender from social psychology and developmental psychology, they only share 3% of references. This unfortunate situation results in a fragmented view of gender where neither view is complete. In this chapter, we provide information and recommendations to gender researchers studying masculinity and femininity suggesting that taking a socio-contextual developmental perspective can work to rectify this situation.

Taking a socio-contextual developmental perspective extends the work of Sandra Bem. Bem, a developmental psychologist, focused a great deal of her work on understanding how gender-typed qualities emerge. Bem's (1993a) book *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* built upon and synthesized her earlier works and presented her theory about how people either develop a traditional gender identity or, by resisting demands present in the larger culture, develop an unconventional gender identity. Understanding the development of gender identity from Bem's perspective highlights the ways in which people, without cultural constraints or depending on the contextual experiences of cultural constraints, could be free from gender roles and that one's gender identity or expression (e.g., masculine or feminine qualities) is not invariably linked to one's assigned biological sex at birth. In addition to this focus on how gender identity emerges, in her earlier works on psychological androgyny, she discussed how some might reject gender norms and behave flexibly or in ways consistent with masculinity and femininity depending on the needs of the situations. This flexibility is what she meant by psychological androgyny. Building on these ideas, as is the topic of this chapter, we discuss the degree to which masculinity and femininity vary across the context as well as the lifespan. Specifically, we discuss the ways in which researchers might capture both the developmental and contextual nature of gender identity or expression. We conclude by addressing the ways in which Bem drew from both social and developmental frameworks to reduce gender inequality.

## **BEM'S GENDER ROLE FLEXIBILITY: A PRECURSOR TO SOCIAL CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES**

In her first conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity, measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), Bem (1974) viewed femininity and masculinity as internalized personality characteristics or traits that remained relatively stable across time and contexts. However, Bem noted that whereas identifying with gender-typed traits may restrict people to gender-typed expression across contexts, identifying with both feminine and masculine traits (i.e., as androgynous) may enable a person to adapt to the demands of their environment, regardless of their gendered master status (see also Bem & Lewis, 1975). Specifically, Bem suggested that androgynous women and men may have gender role flexibility, which allows them to express feminine traits if someone needs

comfort, or masculine traits if an abstract task needs to be completed (Bem, 1974; Bem & Lewis, 1975; Bem, Martyna, & Watson, 1976). Consequently, whereas Bem conceptualized femininity and masculinity as traits (i.e., stable), her conceptualization of androgyny suggests that these characteristics may have some flexibility or state-like features where femininity and masculinity vary according to the context. In this section of the chapter, we will discuss theoretical contextual approaches to femininity and masculinity and then describe research that has examined femininity and masculinity as contextual variables. Finally, we will review methodological approaches to studying femininity and masculinity in context.

## SOCIAL CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES TO GENDER

Social contextual approaches to gender, which have roots in Bem's early work on androgyny (Keener, & Mehta, 2017), were perhaps best conceptualized by Deaux and Major in their seminal 1987 paper "Putting Gender Into Context: An Interactive Model of Gender-Related Behavior." In this paper, Deaux and Major propose that "gender-linked social behaviors are multiply determined, highly flexible, and context dependent" (p. 369). The authors suggest that rather than viewing gender as stable, gender should be viewed as something that is negotiated through a number of ongoing interactions. Within these interactions, people communicate expectancies for behaviors, negotiate their identity, and any resultant behaviors are shaped by the context in which the interaction occurs (Deaux & Major, 1987). Consequently, researchers who endorse social contextual approaches to gender contend that femininity and masculinity are dynamic and context dependent, reflecting the demands of the immediate context rather than personality traits (Deaux & Major, 1987, 1998; Leaper, 2000; Maccoby, 1990). Conceptualized in this way, femininity and masculinity may be better considered as variable states rather than as stable traits (Mehta, 2015).

Despite social contextual views of gender, much of the research on femininity and masculinity has conceptualized these attributes as stable across time and context (Berenbaum & Beltz, 2011; Shields, 1998; Shields & DiCicco, 2011; Smith, Noller, & Bryant, 1999). If a social contextual view is taken and femininity and masculinity are not stable, but instead vary across time, relationships, and contexts (Anselmi & Law, 1998; Berenbaum & Beltz, 2011; Deaux & Major, 1987, 1998; Keener & Strough, 2017; Keener, Strough, & DiDonato, 2012; Leszczynski & Strough, 2008; Mehta, 2015; Shields, 1998; West & Zimmerman, 1987), then measuring and describing femininity and masculinity according to general traits may not be informative. In spite of this limitation of measuring femininity and masculinity as traits, very few studies have conceptualized these attributes as state variables which vary according to the



context (Mehta, 2015; Smith et al., 1999). Below, we review the few studies conducted from a social contextual approach where masculinity and femininity were assessed as states.

## THE CONTEXTUAL SPECIFICITY OF GENDER

Although the number of studies taking a social contextual approach to understanding femininity and masculinity is small compared to the numerous studies taking a trait approach, there is sufficient evidence from various age groups to suggest that gender-typed behaviors are flexibly elicited by contextual demands. For example, a number of studies taking a contextual approach to gender have examined the influence of sex composition (e.g., same- vs. other-sex peers) of the peer group on the behavioral expression of femininity and masculinity. As such, we focus our review on this contextual factor.

Research investigating variability in femininity and masculinity in children has found that during this stage of the lifespan, femininity and masculinity vary according to the gender of peers in a child's social context. For example, Maccoby (1990) found that when girls played with other girls there was very little passivity, an attribute often labeled as "feminine" (Bem, 1974; Spence & Buckner, 2000). Furthermore, not only did little girls show little passivity when playing with same-sex peers, but they also showed less passivity than boys playing with same-sex peers. However, when girls were paired with boys, they became more passive and stood by and watched as boys dominated the toys (Maccoby, 1990). This research suggests that even in childhood, components of femininity may be exacerbated or reduced depending on the context.

Additional evidence for the context specificity of gender is found in adolescent samples where research shows that femininity and masculinity vary according to the gender of peers in the social context. Specifically, Leszczynski and Strough (2008) found that early adolescent girls and boys endorsed feminine traits on the BSRI to a greater extent after playing a game of Jenga® with an adolescent girl in comparison to after playing with an adolescent boy. The endorsement of masculine traits did not vary between playing Jenga® with a girl or a boy for adolescent boys and girls.

Contextual influences on femininity and masculinity have also been examined in college students. For example, Pickard and Strough (2003) found that college student men and women were more likely to endorse feminine traits after playing a game of Jenga® with a woman confederate in comparison to after playing Jenga® with a confederate who was a man. As with early adolescents, masculinity did not change when men and women played Jenga® with same and cross-sex confederates (Pickard & Strough, 2003). Additional evidence for the influence of sex composition on state assessments of femininity and masculinity can be found in Leszczynski (2009). Similarly, research

investigating college student's endorsement of gender-typed conflict-management strategies found that stereotypical gender differences in the endorsement of communal/feminine or agentic/masculine conflict-management strategies were not stable across contexts. For example, women were more likely than men to endorse communal (feminine) strategies when the hypothetical conflict involved a same-gender friend, but not in the other-sex friendship context where the gender difference was not significant (Keener & Strough, 2017). In sum, research examining the sex composition of peers on the endorsement of femininity or masculinity in college students consistently supports social contextual approaches to gender.

Building on this work, contextual variation in femininity and masculinity in college students has also been assessed using Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA; see below for a more detailed description of this measurement method) in which participants complete a number of short surveys over a period of time (days, weeks, or months) in their daily contexts. Using a shortened version of the BSRI, Mehta and Dementieva (2017) used EMA to assess variations in femininity and masculinity in college students' real-life peer contexts over a two-week period. Consistent with social contextual approaches to gender, results showed that variations in femininity and masculinity were associated with the sex of peers in college students' social contexts. Specifically, men reported greater femininity when they were with women and lesser femininity when they were with men. Men and women both reported greater masculinity than femininity when they were in the company of men compared to when with women (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017).

In summary, these studies confirm one of Bem's earliest ideas – that feminine and masculine qualities are multidimensional, and have both trait- and state-like dimensions. Specifically, this research illustrates that the context influences femininity and masculinity and that femininity and masculinity vary depending on the sex of those in the social context. In the next section, we will discuss methods for assessing contextual variation in femininity and masculinity.

## MEASURING FEMININE AND MASCULINE ATTRIBUTES IN CONTEXT

Although it is not the only measure of femininity and masculinity and it has been widely critiqued in the literature, the BSRI is commonly used to measure femininity and masculinity (Mehta, 2015). The BSRI is considered to be a direct measure of femininity and masculinity as participants are asked to explicitly rate themselves by indicating to what extent particular word or words describe them in general (Smith et al., 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2015). From a social contextual perspective, however, the BSRI is limited in that it assesses

general traits and behaviors, and as such, does not acknowledge that people may rate themselves differently in different contexts (Smith et al., 1999). In addition, because it measures general traits and behaviors, the BSRI was designed to be administered at a single time point.

Most of the methods and measures (including the BSRI) used to measure gender-related phenomenon do not consider or control for the context in data collection and analyses (Jones & Heesacker, 2012). This criticism led to a call for gender researchers to move beyond inventories taken at one point in time and to reconsider how they measure gender (Mehta, 2015; Shields & Diccio, 2011). When designing research studies focusing on gender, measures should be selected to match the outcome variable of the phenomenon being studied (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Thus, researchers investigating femininity and masculinity as a contextual variable will need to either use existing measures creatively, modifying them to be sensitive to the context, or they will need to develop new methods and measures specifically intended to assess contextual variation in gender-related variables (Mehta, 2015).

Research to date investigating gender as a contextual variable has taken the first approach suggested by Mehta (2015) and utilized modified versions of existing trait measures. For example, in the study described above, Pickard and Strough (2003) administered modified trait measures before and after an activity designed to elicit gendered cognitions and behaviors. Specifically, participants completed the BSRI and the Child Sex Role Inventory (CSRI; Boldizar, 1991) and returned to the lab several weeks later to complete a task (playing a game of Jenga®) with a female confederate. After completing the task, participants responded to state versions of the BSRI and CSRI in which participants were asked to “report how true the adjective or statement is about yourself while you were working on Jenga,” (Pickard & Strough, 2003, p. 425). One week later, participants completed the same task with a male confederate, and again completed state versions of the BSRI and the CSRI (Pickard & Strough, 2003). Similar protocols have been used in other research investigating contextual differences in femininity and masculinity (e.g., Leszczynski, 2009; Leszczynski & Strough, 2008).

As another approach to assessing the contextual specificity of femininity and masculinity, Keener et al. (2012) developed an assessment of gender-typed expressions of gender. Here, the authors developed survey items reflecting gender-typed (feminine/communal and masculine/agentive) conflict-management goals and strategies that participants were asked to endorse in response to hypothetical conflict situations occurring with same-sex vs. other-sex peers (see also Keener & Strough, 2017).

Although research assessing variations in masculinity and femininity before and after an activity or in response to hypothetical situations is important, it is also important to consider how gender varies according to context outside of a research lab. Specifically, in order to develop a more comprehensive

understanding of contextual variations in gender, researchers need to also consider how femininity and masculinity vary in people's real-life daily contexts.

To consider how femininity and masculinity vary in people's real-life daily contexts, EMA can be used. EMA is a research methodology designed to repeatedly measure highly variable phenomena across time and contexts (Larson & Richards, 1994; Shrier, Shih, Hacker, & de Moor, 2007). In EMA studies, participants carry a device, such as a smart phone, which prompts them to respond to a short survey at various time points in a given day (Mehta, Walls, Blood, & Shrier, 2014). This methodology enables researchers to measure the same variables of interest across differing contexts. As such, EMA is ideally suited to examine contextual variations in gender in people's daily lives (Mehta, 2015) while also increasing ecological validity and reducing recall bias (Larson & Richards, 1994).

The application of EMA methodology to the study of gender is relatively new. One research study using EMA methodology to investigate contextual variation in gender utilized a modified "momentary" version of the BSRI to assess how endorsements of femininity and masculinity varied according to real-life peer contexts (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017). Because participants in EMA studies respond to surveys in their daily lives, reporting burden has to be taken into consideration when developing momentary measures (Sunner, Walls, Blood, Mehta, & Shrier, 2013). As such, the momentary BSRI consisted of just three femininity items and three masculinity items reflecting attributes assessed in multiple measures of femininity and masculinity (e.g., assertiveness is assessed in both the BSRI and the PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974). Before being presented with the items, participants were asked to "Indicate how true each of the following six statements are about you right now." Feminine items were: "I am currently feeling affectionate," "I am currently feeling compassionate," and "I am currently feeling sensitive to the needs of others." Masculine items were: "I am currently feeling assertive," "I am currently feeling dominant," and "I am currently feeling aggressive." Participants responded on a sliding scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 7 (*very much like me*). Participants were also asked who they were with. If participants indicated that they were with friends (as opposed to family members or being alone) they were asked whether they were with same-sex or cross-sex friends. Participants were signaled to respond to these questions five times per day over a two-week period. Whereas this study was limited in that it had a small sample size (20), it highlights the promise of EMA methodology for investigating contextual variations in femininity and masculinity.

While Bem initially conceptualized femininity and masculinity as stable traits, she highlighted the importance of context later in her career (Bem, 1993). In addition, Bem's (1974) conceptualization of androgyny suggested that femininity and masculinity may have state-like features in that androgynous people are able to express feminine traits or masculine traits according to

situational demands (see also Bem, 1974; Bem & Lewis, 1975; Bem et al., 1976). Consequently, we believe that social contextual approaches to gender are firmly rooted in Bemian notions of femininity and masculinity and is part of Bem's lasting legacy to feminist psychology. In this way, we believe that exploring contextual variations in femininity and masculinity not only complements, but also extends Bem's work, and highlights Bem's continuing influence on current conceptions of gender.

## **FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY: PROVIDING THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT**

Research and theory suggest that the degree to which men and women endorse femininity (expressivity/communion) and masculinity (instrumentality/agency) varies across the lifespan. As such, in addition to considering how femininity and masculinity might vary across social contexts, it is important to acknowledge that femininity and masculinity may also vary across developmental context. There are numerous theories about how (e.g., Bem, 1981; Kohlberg, 1966) and why (e.g., Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000) femininity and masculinity develop. Some theories specifically highlight developmental changes across the lifespan. For example, crossover theory (Neugarten & Gutmann, 1958) predicts that as people age, gender roles change or cross over for men and women. Another developmental theory, gender intensification theory, predicts that adolescents experience an increased pressure to conform to gender roles (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990). Although there is mixed support for these theories, it is clear that gender roles reflect a complex developmental process.

Despite there being a large body of research and theory on the developmental nature of the expression of gender-typed traits and characteristics, few psychologists who study gender attend to developmental theory and research. We contend that the failure to do so provides an incomplete picture of gender. The developmental context of gender may be under-investigated because of a belief that complicated developmental research designs (e.g., longitudinal designs) are required to study children or older adults or because gender psychologists believe that they must delve into and describe research findings related to a topic at every age period in the lifespan. We believe that there are other, simpler ways to incorporate the developmental context of gender into psychological research.

One such way is to incorporate the developmental context into research in a way similar to how the cultural context is often incorporated in gender research. Specifically, many gender researchers acknowledge the cultural context in their research by noting that gender is a social construction, which varies depending on the cultural context. These researchers include literature in their

work relating to the specific cultural factors most relevant to their research. Similarly, we suggest that gender researchers acknowledge that femininity and masculinity are influenced by the developmental context.

The absence of the developmental context is particularly noted in research on college students. However, it is important to consider that college students, too, are embedded in a developmental context. As an example on how to incorporate the developmental context in research utilizing a college sample, consider Keener, et al.'s (2012) study, which considered college students' endorsement of gender-typed (communal/feminine vs. agentic/masculine) strategies for managing conflict with same-sex friends vs. other-sex romantic partners. In this study, the authors noted that the choice to focus on friendships and romantic relationships was appropriate or important given the priority of these relationships (i.e., compared to relationships with parents) at this point in the lifespan. Erickson's (1950/1993) well-known theory of psychosocial development and research was used as supportive evidence for this claim. Thus, thinking about the developmental task of gaining independence from parents and developing intimate relationships and how these developmental tasks might interact with gender to influence the way conflicts are managed with same- vs. other-sex peers at this period in the lifespan can enrich a study using a college student sample. That is, researchers can provide the developmental context by considering the developmental stage of the target population by noting potential distal or broad causes of masculine and feminine qualities, such as developmental life tasks, motives, and normative transitions which correspond to age.

There are several theories that can be used to provide the developmental context in gender research. For example, Baltes (1987) contends that broad motivational orientations or goals correspond to age, gender, or developmental life tasks and that early in life people are oriented toward growth, whereas later in life there's a shift toward maintenance and loss prevention. Similarly, developmental life tasks, such as identity development in adolescence and establishing intimate relationships in emerging adulthood (Erickson, 1950/1993) are especially useful for providing the developmental context when they align with normative developmental transitions such as seeking autonomy from parents in adolescence (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Broad motivational goals, developmental life tasks, and normative developmental transitions interact to influence the enactment or expression of femininity and masculinity in varying ways at different points in the lifespan.

For example, while studying the influence of same- vs. other-sex friends on the expression of gender, one might consider the developmental trajectory of same- vs. other-gender friendships (see Mehta & Strough, 2009; for a review). In childhood, when oriented toward growth, same-gender friendships dominate. According to Rose and Rudolph (2006, p. 117), "exposure to same-sex peers elicits and strengthens sex-linked relationship processes." More specifically, during childhood, via socialization by same-sex peers, girls learn that to effectively manage conflict, they must use feminine/communal strategies with

same-sex friends, whereas boys learn that masculine/agentive strategies are most effective with their same-sex friends (Maccoby 1998). Maccoby (1998) theorizes that this gender-typed pattern of conflict management persists across the lifespan when the conflict involves a same-gender friend. However, Maccoby theorized that because the strategies men and women learned to use when interacting within same-sex peer groups are largely ineffective in other-sex contexts, different strategies are used. Developing effective conflict-management strategies for use with other-sex friends might be a developmental task of adolescents where other-sex friendships are normative – perhaps in preparation for (heterosexual) romantic relationships. In sum, the sex-linked pattern of conflict management is influenced by the developmental context and changes according to the demands present in the immediate social context (i.e., whether the conflict involves a same- vs. other-sex peer). Developmental life tasks, normative transitions, and broad motivational orientations likely influence gender expression across the lifespan – as well as across social contexts.

In short, we contend that providing the developmental context does not have to mean conducting longitudinal research or studying a topic in multiple age periods, but rather means considering more distal causes of behavior, such as developmental tasks, motives, and normative transitions. Although full consideration is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that, similar to gender, developmental factors are embedded in socio-historic context and thus change across historical time and culture, as well as developmental stage. Considering this type of information might help researchers better understand gender dynamics related to masculine or feminine identity or expression.

Additionally, showing that the expression of feminine or masculine characteristics or behaviors is not stable across the lifespan and is influenced by the developmental context (as well as the by the immediate social context and by the larger socio-historical context) builds on the work of Sandra Bem. First, demonstrating the developmental and social influences on gender shows that gender is not fixed or static, but rather is subject to change as demands in the social and developmental contexts change. The fact that gender roles are not static suggests that the gender inequality based on the assumption that gender is stable, and that therefore men and women are vastly different, can also change. Indeed, changing these assumptions and reducing gender inequality was the primary goal of Sandra Bem.

## **FEMINIST AND SOCIAL JUSTICE APPLICATIONS**

To conclude this chapter, we would like to highlight three areas which illustrate these intersections and Bem's positive influence on science and society: her emphasis on the consequences of gender polarization and an androcentric

culture, her theory of gender identity development, and her application of gender schema theory to inform parenting styles.

### *Gender Polarization and Androcentrism*

Bem's initial question of why gender appeared to be used as a primary, social category around which people were defined and differentiated in essentialist terms guided her life's work (e.g., [Golden & McHugh, 2017](#)). She coined the term "gender polarization" to describe how the world is typically divided into male and female and how this distinction is used to organize our understanding of most aspects of our lives (e.g., [Bem, 1993a](#)). Masculine qualities are ascribed to males and feminine qualities are ascribed to females (Bem & Bem, 1973). Additionally, she pointed out that these differences were often turned into inequalities creating an androcentric culture; maleness and masculine qualities were the standard, normal, and healthy, whereas femaleness and femininity were "other" and inferior (e.g., [Bem, 1981, 1993a](#)). The internalization of these gender stereotypes consequently maintains gender inequality in most aspects of social life, particularly with regards to the spheres of work and family ([Bem & Bem, 1973a](#)). [Bem and Bem \(1973b\)](#) found that the use of gendered language in job ads (e.g., pronouns, use of man or woman in job title) significantly affected participants' interests in the positions; for example, women were far less interested in applying for a job when the ad used male language than when the ad used female or gender-free language. The Bem's believed the gender polarized and androcentric socialization of girls and women affected their ability to see themselves as leaders or in other roles that were incompatible with the traditional roles of wife and mother ([Bem & Bem, 1973a](#)).

In confronting the dichotomous view of gender, [Bem \(1974\)](#) proposed that masculinity and femininity should be seen as independent constructs and that men and women could express any of the characteristics of either category. She maintained that researchers' focus on understanding sex differences was misguided because it automatically presumed sex (i.e., male vs. female) was a core, differentiating factor among people and ignored the influence of social context on gendered behavior ([Bem, 1993a, 1993b](#)). In reality, regardless of any average differences between women and men, there is always greater variation within the two groups than between them (e.g., [Bem & Bem, 1973a](#)). In fact, [Bem \(1993b\)](#) argued that psychology's relentless focus on determining "inner traits" and decontextualizing phenomena (e.g., gender, sexuality) "necessarily depoliticizes those phenomena and thereby functions as a collaborator in the social reproduction of the status quo and as an obstacle to social change" (p. 231). For example, she points out that whereas the theory of battered women's syndrome helped to identify some of the real emotional and psychological consequences for women, it also pathologizes abused women and does not critique



the social and institutional context surrounding them. Bem (1993a, 1993b) argued that researchers should attend to the social context and examine how an androcentric culture is maintained and leads to differences in male and female behavior to be judged as inequalities.

Early on, Bem (1974, 1975) emphasized the value of having access to *both* masculine and feminine characteristics (i.e., androgynous), suggesting that such individuals had more flexibility to adapt to any given situation. Her research showed that gender-typed people actively avoid gender atypical activities and are uncomfortable when having to engage in such tasks (Bem & Lenney, 1976). Bem and Lewis (1975) argued the behavioral flexibility of androgynous people meant that they were more mentally healthy, challenging the traditional notion that being gender-typed (i.e., masculine men and feminine women) predicted better psychological well-being (e.g., Golden & McHugh, 2017).

Although the concept of and focus on androgyny seemed to Bem, at first, to be liberating, she later realized that it was often viewed as determinative as masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1981, 1983); in the case of androgyny, it could become prescriptive to be *both* masculine and feminine. She began to talk more explicitly about the expression of such qualities being context dependent, rather than as static constructs (Bem, 1993a, 1993b).

Later in her career, Bem (1995) started to see her original goal of eliminating the meaningfulness of the male-female dichotomy as unattainable because gender stereotypes were so deeply embedded in our culture and our psyche. So, she then proposed that, rather than eliminating gendered categories, we should expand them to include more fluid intersections between sex, gender, and sexual orientation. This perspective is shared by contemporary queer theorists who want to move away from essentializing gender categories and concentrate on their social construction because binary categories simply serve to perpetuate sexism and heterosexism (Balzer et al., 2015). Bem's insistence on working toward an egalitarian society guided her lifetime of theories, research, and social activism. Similarly, she often integrated social, developmental, and cognitive psychological theories as she considered ways that psychology could understand gender inequalities and contribute toward eliminating them (Golden & McHugh, 2017).

### *Construction of Gender Identity: Gender Schemas*

Bem (1981) noted that many existing psychological theories (psychoanalytic, social learning, cognitive-developmental) viewed gender-typed (i.e., masculine males, feminine females) behavior as "normal" and often portrayed child development as a passive process. She argued that children were active agents of their gender development (Liben & Bigler, 2017). Bem (1981, 1983) proposed gender schema theory to explain how the culture's emphasis on gender

polarization leads to the internalization of such messages through cognitive processing. As people interact with their social world, they organize the information into categories through a network of associations (Bem, 1981). Schemas subsequently lead to assumptions and predictions about the social world that lead the person to identify and assimilate new information in terms of its relevance to existing schemas (Bem, 1983). Bem (1981) argued that children develop an understanding of gender from their social environment. Because the culture places such a high functional value on the category of gender, children assimilate their gender schema with their own self-schema and evaluate themselves based upon these expectations. Cultural expectations, then, become self-fulfilling prophesies (Bem, 1981). Consequently, gender inequality remains the status quo, perpetuated by people's internalization of cultural norms that affect their perceptions of themselves and others.

Bem's transition from focusing on an ideal of androgyny to that of being gender aschematic to achieve an egalitarian society was based in her desire to demonstrate that masculinity and femininity are social constructs of a larger cultural schema, which affect socialization, perceptions, and behavior within a given social context.

### *Parenting: Raising Gender Aschematic Children*

Bem (1983, 1998) began thinking about feminist child-rearing after reading Kohlberg's (1966) cognitive-developmental theory and the suggestion that gendered categories are inevitable and inflexible at the early stages of development. As a feminist psychologist, passionate about eliminating gender inequality, Bem long argued that it was the child's environment that established socially constructed gender norms (Liben & Bigler, 2017). Bem (1983) then applied gender schema theory to provide guidance to parents on how to raise gender aschematic children as a step toward dismantling the gender dichotomy and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes.

Bem (1983) contended that parents cannot ignore gender (e.g., be "gender blind") in raising their children because society will teach them about the distinctions. Instead, parents should "inoculate" their children against processing based upon the traditional gender dichotomy. Specifically, Bem suggested that the goal for raising gender aschematic children should be to "retard their gender education while simultaneously advancing their sex education," (Bem, 1998, p. 108). First, she advised parents to teach their children about sex differences that are not based upon socially constructed norms. She suggested parents focus only on the things that truly differentiate women and men — anatomy and reproduction (Bem, 1983). Second, they needed to establish as gender-neutral or as gender-inclusive social context as possible. For example, parents needed to eliminate gender stereotyping from their own behavior

(e.g., distribution of household chores) and provide or create media that is not gender-typed (Bem, 1983). Third, parents needed to help their children “look at cultural lenses rather than through them” (Bem, 1993a, p. 2). By this, Bem meant that parents had to help their child create schemata allowing them to be critical thinkers and to not passively accept the traditional gendered messages from the culture (Bem, 1983). This included teaching children that there is variability among people in their beliefs and behavior, but not all views are equally valid. Bem practiced what she preached and documented how her husband, Daryl, and she raised their own children in her book *An Unconventional Family* (Bem, 1998). Her work eventually led researchers to develop formal interventions aimed at reducing children’s gender stereotyping through exposure to counter-stereotypic messages (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 1990). Contemporary research and the growth in the number of publications aimed at raising children who were free from the impending pressure of gender stereotypes and an androcentric culture (e.g., Brown, 2014) illustrate Bem’s profound influence and carry on her mission to eliminate gender inequality.

In sum, Bem’s ideas had far-reaching effects on science and public policy (Golden & McHugh, 2017). Her overarching value of gender egalitarianism informed her scholarship, her relationships, and her parenting, which subsequently affected the field of gender research, public policy in the workplace, and parenting practices. Bem’s work continues to be appealing to feminists who believe that gender is a social construction, which has created and perpetuated social inequality through prescriptive standards for women and men (e.g., Balzer et al., 2015). Her views that gender schemas affect the perceptions and choices that people make in their lives and that gendered behavior can vary based upon the demands of a given social context have inspired a generation of researchers who continue to explore the development of gender schemas and the contextual expression of gender (e.g., Keener & Strough, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

One of the centralizing themes of Bem’s (1993) life and work was the promotion of gender equality. Many of her ideas about how to achieve gender equality surrounded the idea of gender neutrality or the idea that gender is only one of many traits varying among people and that it need not be the most central feature or primary factor organizing most aspects of life. Bem’s work was appealing to many feminists because it was consistent with the idea that various expressions of gender could vary within and not just between men and women. Just as Bem’s work was appealing to many feminists, we believe that research and theory on the developmental and contextual specificity of gender also demonstrate that there is freedom in the expression of gender. The work we reviewed here similarly contends that it is not that men and women are vastly

different or confined to specific roles, but rather that different aspects of social situations elicit specific behaviors in ways that interact with developmental factors, which for various reasons (e.g., see Bem, 1981; gender schema theory) often align with gender. As such, we continue to be inspired by the social justice aspects of Bem's life and work.

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