

Oh the Places We'll Go! Where will Sandra Bem's Work Lead Us Next?

Clare M. Mehta¹ · Emily Keener²

Published online: 30 January 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2017

You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!
-Dr. Seuss

Sandra Bem's proposition that our culture's emphasis on a gender dichotomy has significant cognitive, psychological, and social consequences meaningfully shaped the field of psychology (Keener et al. 2017). As a feminist and social advocate, the promotion of gender equality was at the core of all of Bem's work and carried over into her own life (Carr et al. 2015). Bem also served as a model for scholar activism, moving theory and research on gender beyond academia to shape both political (e.g., social policy) and personal (e.g., parenting, romantic relationships) outcomes (Keener and Mehta 2017; Keener et al. 2017; Liben and Bigler 2016). In this way, the work of Sandra Bem laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist theory and research and has influenced the academic and personal lives of generations of gender scholars (Keener and Mehta 2017; Keener et al. 2017).

In our initial call for papers for the special issue commemorating Sandra Bem, we invited manuscript submissions that highlighted the past, present, and future of Bem's contribution to the study of gender. As we noted in our Introduction to the first special issue (Keener and Mehta 2017), we were overwhelmed with submissions and were heartened to see

how Bem's legacy lives on in the work of our colleagues. We also highlighted the past and present of gender scholarship, illustrating Bem's countless contributions to the field and how her work continues to inspire gender researchers today. In the present Introduction to the second special issue commemorating Bem, we highlight where Bem's work can take us by considering the future of gender scholarship.

The Places We'll Go!

Editing this special issue provided us with the opportunity to reflect not only on Bem's life and work but also on where our field is going. Our assessment of the future of gender is certainly not exhaustive, but in reviewing papers for the special issue, a number of themes emerged that highlighted the future of gender research. We review these themes and describe how the papers in this second special issue fit with them.

Complexity of Gender

For decades Bem proposed that gender researchers and activists should "turn down the volume" on gender, minimizing gender differences and promoting androgyny. However, in a later paper, Bem (1995) proposed doing the opposite. Specifically, Bem suggested turning up the volume on gender by creating so many gender categories that the categories themselves lose their meaning. We believe that Bem's proposal is slowly being realized and that this is evident in the explosion of categories that can be observed in much of the current gender scholarship. Specifically, researchers are increasingly recognizing that, to gain a more complete picture of gender, they need to broaden the scope of gender by embracing its complexities and moving beyond the gender binary (Keener 2015). This idea has even been embraced by

✉ Clare M. Mehta
mehtac@emmanuel.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, Emmanuel College and Division of Adolescent Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital, 400 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115, USA

² Department of Psychology, Slippery Rock University, 106 Central Loop, Slippery Rock, PA 16057, USA

mainstream (i.e., non-academic) culture and can be seen in the rise in popularity of models illustrating gender complexities, such as The Gender Unicorn (see Fig. 1).

Complex multidimensional definitions of gender make it impossible to continue to accept the traditional gender binary (male vs. female) as adequate. Simply identifying as either a male or female not only fails to accurately reflect the multidimensional nature of gender, but also ignores people's lived experience. Although gender researchers have generally accepted that gender is conceptually multidimensional, the majority of gender measures continue to embrace outdated and incomplete operationalizations of gender as a binary system. (See Liben and Bigler's 2002, OATS measure for an exception.) As we continue to unpack gender, it becomes more complicated. There is increasing evidence that biological sex itself lies on a continuum where chromosomes, hormones, and gender characteristics or expressions do not always correspond to the label given at birth (assigned natal sex; cf. Bem 1974; Eliot 2012; Lips 2014), and hormones, a component of biological sex, also vary according to context (van Anders et al. 2015).

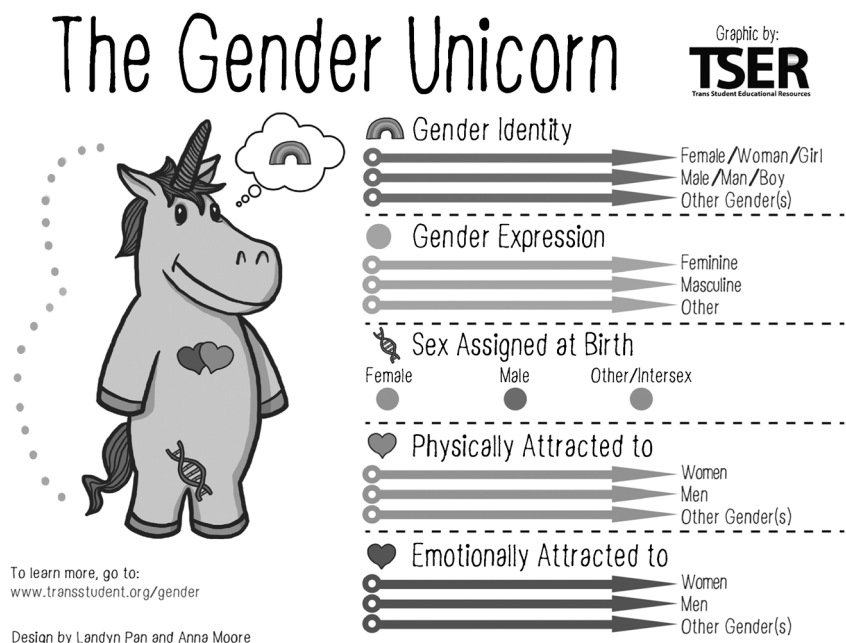
The complexity of gender and how it intersects with Bem's work is evident in the first paper in the current special issue. In their paper, Dean and Tate (2016, p. 8) describe how Bem's theory of androgyny served as a conceptual advance in psychology and suggest that Bem's work has been used as "a conceptual springboard" to the study of gender as a multidimensional or multifaceted construct. They also suggest that, although not explicit, Bem's work implies that gender has different layers or different aspects to it (even when Bem focused on just one of those aspects, namely, gender roles) and that her work highlighting the socially constructed nature

of gender roles served to "ultimately erode that [previously held] polarizing view of gender" (p. 5).

Carr et al. (2015) build on some of Dean and Tate's (2016) observations in their paper that highlights the theoretical intersections between Bem's scholarship and queer theory—a theory that emphasizes the multidimensional nature of gender and the inadequacies of the gender binary. Specifically, Balzar Carr et al. describe how Bem's work and queer theory align such that they both stress the need for gender scholars to (a) dismantle the sex/gender dichotomy (described in Bem's 1993, book, *Lenses of Gender* as the biological essentialism lens), (b) move beyond binaries of gender and sexuality (described by Bem 1993, as gender polarization), and (c) recognize how power and gender are interrelated (consistent with Bem's 1993, descriptions of androcentrism). Although there are a number of similarities between Bem's work and queer theory, the authors also note differences. Specifically Balzar Carr et al. state that whereas Bem's work "advocates for a plurality of gender that embraces same-gender loving people and genders that deviate from hegemonic masculinity and femininity" (p. 7), Bem's analyses of gender do not extend as far as those of queer theorists. Specifically, they note that Bem argued in her early work for the minimizing of gender identity whereas queer theorists argue that having a gender identity, minimized or not, is impossible because gender is fluid and contextual.

In their paper, Lemaster et al. (2015) also focused on gender as a multidimensional construct, considering it as such across the lifespan. Similar to work by Egan and Perry (2001) and Tate et al. (2014), Lemaster et al. suggest that:

Fig. 1 The Gender Unicorn infographic was created by Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER 2016)



gender is not just a person's report of whether they are male or female, but also includes other facets such as gender identification (i.e., sense of belonging to a larger gender group), gender typicality (i.e., feeling that one is a typical member of that group), and characteristics that correspond to stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine personality traits, among other aspects. (p. 2)

Intersectionality

In addition to considering the complex and multidimensional nature of gender, it is important to consider how other identities intersect with gender in complex ways. Specifically, intersectionality theory draws our attention to the ways in which social class, race/ethnicity, age, ability status, and other identities intersect with gender to provide an array of gender experiences so rich, intricate, and complicated that researchers have suggested that we use the metaphor of the kaleidoscope to consider intersecting identities (Keener 2015; Lips 2006), recognizing that “each turn produces different patterns and no single element dominates” (Gunew 1991, p. 34).

In this special issue, Bailey and LaFrance's (2016) paper highlights the importance of intersectionality. In their study, Bailey and LaFrance asked participants to select typical representations of humanity from a set of Black and White male and female faces. Specifically, they asked participants to nominate three typical faces to represent mankind, human, or man or woman (binary terms) and then select the best representation from among the three. Bailey and LaFrance found that participants' selections overrepresented both White faces and male faces. Additionally, when asked to select a face that best represented mankind, participants who scored higher on gender polarization were more likely to select men than they were to select women. When participants were asked to choose a single face, the majority of participants, and in particular White participants, selected a White face, as well as a male, rather than a female, face. People also selected more men in the mankind and humankind conditions in comparison to the man/woman condition, which was the only condition that reduced androcentric choices.

In the paper by Carr et al. (2015), the issue of Bem and intersectionality is also raised. Specifically, the authors note that although Bem was not explicitly intersectional in her theories or research (the authors suggest this may be because discussions of intersectionality had not infiltrated mainstream psychology when Bem was actively writing and researching), “Bem was a pioneer of the gender and sexuality intersection, and she deftly analyzed the manner in which one's sexual orientation affected their gender privilege and oppression” (p. 9). This suggests that although Bem may not have included analyses of social class, age, race/ethnicity, and ability status

in her study of gender, her work may have presaged intersectionality. Dean and Tate (2016) also note how some research based on Bem's work has failed to take into account intersectionality, and they challenge those of us influenced by Bem to more broadly consider gender roles across sexual orientations and ethnicities.

Developmental Approach

Almost 20 years ago, Eckes and Trautner (2000) called for a developmental social psychology. Specifically, Eckes and Trautner suggested that social psychologists consider development or change over time and that developmental psychologists consider the social context. We believe, and have argued elsewhere (Keener 2015; Keener et al. 2017) that gender is a developmental phenomenon. Consequently, in order to have a complete picture of gender and its related variables, psychologists need to consider the developmental context. This can be done in a number of ways. More complicated approaches include utilizing longitudinal designs (see Bukowski et al. 2016; Fleming et al. 2016) or examining a topic area across the lifespan (see Lemaster et al. 2015). Other, simpler approaches include considering the developmental stage of the target research population and reflecting on the potential distal causes of gender-typed behavior, such as salient age/developmental stage-related life tasks and motives (see Lemaster et al. 2015; Mehta et al. 2016).

According to Keener et al. (2017), using college student samples is no reason to neglect the developmental context. Mehta et al. (2016) paper illustrates this point. In their investigation of associations between gender segregation and two conceptualizations of gender identity in college students, Mehta et al. consider the developmental context. Specifically, they note that college is an important time to study gender identity and friendships because of the salience of both friendships and identity development during this period of the lifespan. They also note how the developmental context of their participants (i.e., a residential college campus) may influence the variables of interest.

Another example of including the development context can be seen in Lemaster et al. (2015) article. Lemaster et al. investigated multidimensional gender development using a cross-sectional lifespan sample. They highlight the importance of including the developmental context in gender research by explicitly noting that:

Our life-span approach emphasizes that gender development is a lifelong process. Across many cultures, gender is a salient social category that children internalize and use as a central aspect of how they define themselves....Although a large body of research examines gender development in childhood and adolescence..., the idea that gender development continues

across the life span has received far less attention. . . . we detail how dimensions of gender, such as gender identification, gender typicality, and gender-stereotyped personality traits may differ across three age groups: young, middle-aged, and older adults.” (p. 2)

In their study, Lemaster et al. found that gender typicality and androgyny differ between young, middle-aged, and older adults and that androgyny and stereotypically masculine traits are tied to marital relationship roles in older adult men. By looking across age groups and considering developmental roles, we believe that Lemaster et al. begin to answer Eckes and Trautner’s (2000) call, clearly illuminating a path for future research for gender scholars.

New Measures and Applications

Another way in which we can see Bem’s influence on future directions of gender scholarship is in the application of Bem’s work to the development of new gender measures and new fields. Fleming et al. (2016) developed a measurement technique for assessing behavioral expressions of gender using The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health dataset. The technique assesses gender expression by measuring the degree to which a person’s behaviors are similar or dissimilar to the behaviors reported by others of the same gender in the same dataset. As the authors explain, this technique builds on the BSRI, but assesses *doing* gender rather than *having* gender. This measurement technique can be used in any data set with a diverse set of behavioral questions.

The special issue also includes new applications of Bem’s theory of androgyny. In their paper, Pauletti et al. (2016) investigate whether a new conceptualization of androgyny is associated with self-esteem, lower peer-reported internalizing symptoms, less felt pressure for gender differentiation, and fewer sexist beliefs. The authors measure androgyny with a newly developed measure of felt other-gender typicality that they used alongside Egan and Perry’s (2001) felt same-gender typicality. Using these two measures together as a measure of androgyny, they found that, in line with Bem’s theorizing, androgynous preadolescents and early adolescents who reported high other- and same-gender typicality reported high self-esteem and little felt pressure to be gender typical. Androgynous early adolescents, (but not preadolescents) had fewer perceived internalizing problems, and androgynous boys in both age groups reported fewer sexist beliefs. The authors suggest that one reason why Bem may not have found wide support for her belief that androgynous people are better adjusted and less gender-polarized may be because of the measures she and others used. They suggest that the development of new measures that are “not tethered to specific, concrete gender-typed referents. . . . can be applied across different

cultures, ages, and times in history” (p. 13) may ultimately lead to the support of Bem’s early theorizing about androgyny.

Like Pauletti et al. (2016), Bukowski et al. (2016) use a new and creative way to assess androgyny. Bukowski et al. investigated the links between well-being and androgyny in friendships, operationally defined as liking same- and other-gender peers and being liked by same- and other-gender peers. Consistent with Bem’s theory on androgyny, Bukowski et al. found that children with androgynous friendships reported greater well-being than did children with primarily same-sex friendships or children who reported little affiliation with those of either gender. Because Bukowski et al.’s study design was short-term longitudinal, the authors were able to assess the directionality of the relationship. In doing so, they found that androgyny in friendships both predicted and was predicted by well-being. The authors note that:

Bem. . . herself was open-minded about alternative approaches to the measurement of androgyny. She realized that this construct could be relevant to a broad array of experiences related to masculinity and femininity, such as experiences with members of one’s own gender and the other gender. (p. 2)

We see the continued relevance in of the construct of androgyny in both the papers written by Bukowski et al. and Pauletti et al.

Finally, other ways in which we can see the influence of Bem in the future study of gender are in the application of Bem’s work to new fields to better understand underlying mechanisms of observed gender differences and to understand within gender variations. In their paper, Yang and Merrill (2016) apply Bem’s work to the study of wayfinding, also known as navigation, to account for commonly found and reported gender differences in this cognitive (and traditionally masculine) behavior. Specifically, Yang and Merrill examined how utilizing a multidimensional assessment of gender-typed characteristics (i.e., personality vs. cognitive characteristics) allowed for greater specificity in predicting wayfinding. More specifically, they examined whether endorsements of cognitive aspects of femininity and masculinity and of masculine and feminine personality characteristics relate to wayfinding in college students. The authors found that for both men and women greater endorsement of masculine cognitive characteristics predicted greater use of wayfinding strategies. Similarly, for both men and women, higher masculine cognitive characteristics predicted better wayfinding competence, and higher feminine personality characteristics predicted poorer wayfinding competence. However, higher endorsement of feminine cognitive characteristics predicted better wayfinding competence for men but not for women. Findings from their study show how Bem’s

work is being built upon and applied to better understand the role of gender in predicting behavior in a variety of domains.

Interestingly, Fleming et al. (2016) envision their measurement technique for assessing the degree to which girls and women and boys and men behave like their same-gender peers and apply it in the same way that Yang and Merrill (2016) did in their study on wayfinding. Specifically, Fleming et al. note that their behavioral assessment could be used to understand why some men smoke whereas others do not, or whether women who behave similarly to men might smoke at similar rates to men. Whereas Yang and Merrill attempted to account for gender differences by focusing on various aspects of *having* gender (i.e., endorsement of gender-typed characteristics), Fleming and colleagues suggest that utilizing assessments of *doing* gender (i.e., behaving similarly to same-gender peers) might also be important for identifying underlying mechanisms that explain observed gender differences between men and women, as well as within-gender variability in a variety of domains. As researchers continue to grapple with increasingly complex understandings of gender, new assessment tools and applications will likely continue to be developed.

Summary

Bem's ideas have had a far-reaching influence in terms of how we think about and study gender. Bem's work continues to appeal to and inspire 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., Carr et al. 2015). Although Sandra Bem may not be with us today, we believe that these special issues in her honor prove that her legacy lives on. As the study of gender continues to develop in its complexity and its breadth, we believe that Bem's work will surely be the foundation on which we build. We have been humbled and honored to edit these special as a tribute to her, and we hope that other scholars, like us, will continue to be inspired by her work for generations to come.

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

References

- Bailey, A. H., & LaFrance, M. (2016). Who counts as human? Antecedents to androcentric behavior. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0648-4. Advance online publication.
- Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 42, 155–162. doi:10.1037/h0036215.
- Bem, S. L. (1993). *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bem, S. L. (1995). Dismantling gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality: Should we turn the volume down or up? *The Journal of Sex Research*, 32, 329–334. doi:10.1080/00224499509551806.
- Bukowski, W. M., Panarello, B., & Santo, J. B. (2016). Androgyny in liking and in being liked are antecedent to well-being in preadolescent boys and girls. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0638-6. Advance online publication.
- Carr, B., Ben Hagai, E., & Zurbriggen, E. L. (2015). Queering Bem: Theoretical intersections between Sandra Bem's scholarship and queer theory. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0546-1. Advance online publication.
- Dean, M. L., & Tate, C. C. (2016). Extending the legacy of Sandra Bem: Psychological androgyny as a touchstone conceptual advance for the study of gender in psychological science. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0713-z. Advance online publication.
- Eckes, T., & Trautner, H. M. (2000). The developmental social psychology of gender: An integrative framework. In T. Eckes & H. M. Trautner (Eds.), *The developmental social psychology of gender* (pp. 3–32). London: Sage Publications.
- Egan, S. K., & Perry, D. G. (2001). Gender identity: A multidimensional analysis with implications for psychosocial adjustment. *Developmental Psychology*, 37, 451–463. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.37.4.451.
- Eliot, L. (2012). *Pink brain, blue brain: How small differences grow into troublesome gaps-and what we can do about it*. London: Oneworld Publications.
- Fleming, P. J., Harris, K. M., & Halpern, C. T. (2016). Description and evaluation of a measurement technique for assessment of performing gender. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0657-3. Advance online publication.
- Gunew, S. (1991). Margins: Acting like a (foreign) woman. *Hecate*, 17, 31–35.
- Keener, E. (2015). The complexity of gender: It is all that and more...in sum, it is complicated. *Sex Roles*, 73, 481–489. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0542-5.
- Keener, E., & Mehta, C. M. (2017). Sandra Bem: Revolutionary and generative feminist psychologist. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0686-y.
- Keener, E., Mehta, C. M., & Smirles, K. E. (2017). Contextualizing Bem: The developmental social psychology of masculinity and femininity. In M. Kohlman & D. Krieg (Eds.), *The legacy of Sandra L. Bem: Discourses on gender and sexual inequality*. Bingley: Emerald. Manuscript accepted for publication.
- Lemaster, P., Delaney, R., & Strough, J. (2015). Crossover, degendering, or...? A multidimensional approach to life-span gender development. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0563-0. Advance online publication.
- Liben, L. S., & Bigler, R. S. (2002). The developmental course of gender differentiation: Conceptualizing, measuring, and evaluating constructs and pathways. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 67, 1–147. doi:10.1111/1540-5834.t01-1-00187.
- Liben, L. S., & Bigler, R. S. (2016). Understanding and undermining the development of gender dichotomies: The legacy of Sandra Lipsitz Bem. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0519-4. Advance online publication.
- Lips, H. M. (2006). *A new psychology of women: Gender, culture, and ethnicity*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Lips, H. (2014). *Gender: The basics*. New York: Routledge.
- Mehta, C. M., Hojjat, M., Smith, K. R., & Ayotte, B. (2016). Associations between gender segregation and gender-typed traits in college students. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0685-z. Advance online publication.
- Pauletti, R. E., Menon, M., Cooper, P., Aults, C. D., & Perry, D. (2016). Psychological androgyny and children's mental health: A new look

- with new measures. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0627-9. Advance online publication.
- Tate, C. C., Youssef, C. P., & Bettergarcia, J. N. (2014). Integrating the study of transgender spectrum and cisgender experiences of self-categorization from a personality perspective. *Review of General Psychology, 18*, 302–312. doi:10.1037/gpr0000019.
- Trans Student Educational Resources. (2016). *The gender unicorn*. Retrieved from <http://www.transstudent.org/gender>. Accessed 1 Jan 2017.
- van Anders, S. M., Steiger, J., & Goldey, K. L. (2015). Effects of gendered behavior on testosterone in women and men. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 112*, 13805–13810. doi:10.1073/pnas.1509591112.
- Yang, Y., & Merrill, E. C. (2016). Cognitive personality characteristics of masculinity and femininity predict wayfinding competence and strategies of men and women. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0626-x. Advance online publication.