A Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Bem Sex Role Inventory: Old Questions, New Answers

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LISREL analyses of data from a sample of 671 adults (90% Caucasian, 10% Black) evaluated (a) item factor structure of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), (b) second-order factor model for the item factors, and (c) structural equation models estimating age and gender differences in these factors. Seven first-order item factors were extracted and found to have equivalent factor loadings for males and females. Item factors were related to two second-order factors: Masculinity and Femininity. There were relatively small age and gender differences in the first- and second-order factors. There was a differential relationship between self-rated masculinity and femininity and the first-order BSRI item factors for males and females. Results suggest that the BSRI best assesses gender-related personality traits and represents only one component of the complex multidimensional construct of gender roles.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was originally developed as a self-report measure of the global constructs masculinity (M) and femininity (F) in order to identify gender-typed and nongender-typed (i.e., androgynous and cross-typed) individuals. The past 15 years has seen a proliferation of research questioning the conceptualization and measurement of gender role orientation (Ashmore, 1990; Ashmore & Del Boca, 1986; Bem, 1984;
Recent work has supported Constantinople's (1973) challenge to the bipolarity assumption of masculinity and femininity. There is a general consensus in the theoretical and empirical literature that argues that masculinity and femininity should be treated as correlated, but distinct constructs (see Marsh & Myers, 1986, for a review). Constantinople (1973) also argued for the inherent multidimensionality underlying masculinity and femininity. Similarly, Ashmore (1990) argues that Bem's procedure for gender role classification on the basis of M and F personality constructs does not capture the multidimensionality of the gender identity construct. Instead, M and F can be conceptualized as a profile of scores on gender-related personality attributes (Spence, 1984a). If so, then it would appear that the bulk of the items in the BSRI reflect two well-known dimensions of personality in the interpersonal domain: dominance (agency) and nurturance (communion; (see Wiggins, 1979; Wiggins & Pincus, 1992). Indeed, one could argue that the BSRI estimates these two personality dimensions and merely relabels them as masculinity and femininity.

However, a considerable number of exploratory factor analyses of the BSRI items have suggested that two factors are inadequate for representing its factor structure. Although a few studies have argued for a two-factor (M and F) solution (Bledsoe, 1983; Carlsson, 1981; Thompson & Melancon, 1986), they can be criticized for inadequate evaluation of alternative, more differentiated factor structures. Most studies have identified at least four major BSRI item factors: a bipolar M-F dimension (defined by the Masculinity and Femininity items alone), Interpersonal Sensitivity, Assertiveness, and Self-Sufficiency (Collins, Waters, & Waters, 1979; Gross, Batlis, Small, & Erdwins, 1979; Larsen & Seidman, 1986; Pedhazur & Tetenbaum, 1979; Ruch, 1984; Schmitt & Millard, 1988; Waters & Popovich, 1986; Waters, Waters, & Pincus, 1977). This solution thus breaks the M dimension into two factors: Assertiveness and Self-Sufficiency. Other studies have found two to seven additional factors including further subdivision of masculinity items to include factors of Leadership and Athletic/Competitive (Gaa, Liberman, & Edwards, 1979; Maznah & Choo, 1986; Sassenrath & Yonge, 1979) and multiple femininity subfactors, including Introversion and a differentiation of items loading on Interpersonal Sensitivity (Berzins, Welling, & Wetter, 1978; Feldman, Biringen, & Nash, 1981; Hiller & Philliber, 1985; Windle & Sinnott, 1985).

Comparisons of factor solutions across these studies is hampered by a number of issues. A major source of variation in the published literature is the large diversity in types of samples studied, including the age range of respondents, gender of respondents, and whether samples of males and females were analyzed in aggregated or separate models. A second issue