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

ADVANCES IN GENDER RESEARCH

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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 though 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 Time*s 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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