



## Constructing gender in Childhood: living in a family or in an institution

## Construir el género en la Infancia: vivir en familia o en la institución

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### RESUMEN.

Esta investigación trata de dilucidar si la construcción social de género en la infancia institucionalizada se realiza de forma similar a la de la infancia que vive en familia. El estudio se lleva a cabo con una muestra de 50 personas, de las cuales, 20 son cuidadoras (Técnicos en educación Infantil) trabajadoras de un Centro de Acogida de Menores. La otra parte de la muestra corresponde a padres y madres de familias con hijos menores, de edades similares a los niños y niñas del centro de menores. El instrumento utilizado para la recogida de información es el Inventario de Roles Sexuales de Sandra Bem. Aunque los individuos de la muestra son adultos, el foco de atención está puesto en la infancia, por eso el propósito del inventario no es auto describir a la persona como se pretende en el original, sino trasladar la descripción a los niños y niñas. Los resultados apuntan a que los padres se aproximan a los modelos andróginos mientras que los técnicos de educación infantil, tienden hacia el femenino.

### PALABRAS CLAVE.

Igualdad de oportunidades, Infancia, Familia, Orfanato.

### ABSTRACT.

This investigation attempted to clarify whether the social construction of gender in a family is performed in a similar way to the social construction of gender in institutionalized childhood. The research was carried out among a sample group of 50 people; 20 of whom were caregivers who work in a foster home. The other members of the sample group belonged to families with young children who had similar ages to those of the children in the foster home in Cáceres. The instrument used for collecting information was the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Although the members of the sample group in this research are adults, the focus is on childhood. Accordingly, the purpose of the inventory was not to obtain a self-description of the person, as was intended in the original, but focused on the children. The results show that the parents are closer to the androgynous model, while the caregivers tend more towards the feminine one.



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**KEY WORDS.**

Equal opportunity; Childhood; Family; Residential Child Care

**Introduction.**

The social construction of gender has an influence on the process of building an identity in young children. The attitudes, beliefs and values of adults and caregivers involved in bringing up and educating children are important factors in the personal construction of gender.

On the basis of Sandra Bem's Sex Role Inventory, this study analyses whether it is possible to conclude that the upbringing that young children receive in institutional foster homes and the upbringing received in the family take gender equality into account. This study also analyses the different types of upbringing given to both genders, as well as the importance of social desirability when there are family bonds involved in the process.

The aim of this study is to determine whether social desirability, regarded as the 'right learning' for boys and the 'right learning' for girls, is more deeply rooted in the family or in institutions, and therefore whether we are able to conclude that identity processes (whether they are for boys or for girls) proceed along different paths depending on whether the children are growing up in a family or in an institution.

'The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) was designed to facilitate empirical research on psychological androgyny. For the past quarter of a century, the BSRI has endured as the instrument of choice among researchers investigating gender role orientation' (Hoffman and Borders, 2001, p.39).

Starr and Zurbruggen (2017) recommend the use, as frame of study, of gender schema theory developed by Sandra Bem due 'her development of gender schema theory was a major contribution to psychology and that its generative reach extended well beyond the boundaries of our field.' (p.13).

**Gender and sex.**

The environment instills the relationship between male and masculinity, between female and femininity. This is called sex-gender association. The two words have been used indistinctly, but they have separate meanings.

J. Money (1955) was the pioneer in consolidating a clear distinction between the terms sex and gender. But it was R. J. Stoller (1964) who pointed out the importance of the social component in the definition of gender. Both authors argue that sex has an equivalent in the biological and physiological features included in being a male or a female; and that gender is a social construction of masculinity and femininity features. Therefore sex is inherited, whereas gender is an achievement.

Many authors have expressed concern about this issue, trying to make a distinction between sex and gender. David Haig (2004) made a profound review of how the term gender has evolved, and its usage in the academic world, from its biological meaning, determined by physical body features, to the construction of gender based on the inclusion of feelings and social behaviour. According to Butler (2007), 'the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical





discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders' (p.6). She also emphasizes that, although the two sexes are morphologically binary, gender does not need to be, as we can have more than two genders.

This analysis is based on the social aspect in Sandra Bem's gender studies, in which she defines gender differences. In the opinion of University of Barcelona lecturer Maria Jayme (2002), a person's social adaptation is related to that person's degree of sexual typification. She proposes a society where differences based on gender would not exist, finding a substitute in the androgynous type, people capable of identifying with the classic features of masculinity-femininity without considering gender patterns. Androgynous behaviour is more flexible and also more psychologically adapted, in opposition to the sexually narrow contents typified by the pre-established gender model one belongs to (Jayme, 2002, p. 57).

### **Social construction of gender in early childhood.**

Despite its biological features, when a baby is born it is just a single human subject. As the days pass, his/her immediate environment connects him/her with what is socially desirable for each gender, whether it is a boy or a girl, assuming the attitudes typical of their own sex and behaving according to those designated patterns. Halim and Ruble (2010) give an example of this: 'Without much effort, one can easily imagine a young girl, at age 3 or 4, happily wearing a pink, frilly dress. She twirls, she dances, she skips in her dress, reveling in its femininity and flounce. In the same vein, with great ease one can imagine a small boy, a towel draped around his neck, his bony arms outstretched in fists. He imagines his muscles bulging and his strength abounding, running here and there in an attempt to fly off to combat unseen evil forces' (p. 495).

Now, we can determine the child's sex before birth, and it will undergo different kinds of socialization depending on its sex. The social roles will be given by society according to its sex. As the years go by, through different social interactions, the child will create a lifelong identity. This identity is shaped by what society, through the family and the school, its most important institutions, regards as good for each individual. In this respect Lamas (1959) argues that gender is defined by collective symbolic actions: society manufactures the idea of what men or women must be through this symbolic process (p. 158).

Rodríguez and Peña (2005) analysed the studies published by Connell (1995), Davies (1994, 1997, 2003), Davies and Banks (1992), Jones (1997), Renold (2004), Skelton (2001a, 2001b) and Swain (2000) in a review of models of construction of gender identity, and concluded that underlying feminist post-structuralism there is the idea that gender identity is a socially constructed phenomenon, constantly unfinished and subject to many varied influences in people's daily life interactions.

Stoller and Money wondered about the differences contained within the definitions of identity, finding the same dysfunctions, for instance, in cases of hermaphroditism. Their investigations led them to the conclusion that gender identities are more influenced by the identities and social roles assigned to children by their parents than by their biological and hormonal features.





### Who plays a role in gender construction.

The behaviour of adults changes when they are aware that their children belong to one sex or another. From childhood, social agents interacting with the baby start treating him/her differently with regard to its sex (Fernández, 1996, p. 135). Also, the power of what in society is regarded as 'right', 'desirable' or 'suitable' for each gender is a very strong force in the young child's construction of gender, as its adult role models are also influenced by these desirability patterns.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) pointed out the importance of the family in the early socialization of children. The family helps the child to become a person in a society. The construction of gender identity in early childhood happens in this early socialization process. Other research shows that parents have a key role in teaching children from 2 years of age what society regards as desirable for them. Above all, the studies by Fagot and Leinbach (1989) demonstrated that 'the parents of children who labeled gender early gave more attention, both positive and negative, when their children were playing with either male- or female-sex-typed toys regardless of sex of child' (p. 671).

Teachers of young children play an important part in attitudes to daily practice in the classroom. Young children are considered cognitively competent to understand discourse about difference and are helped to think of different ways of dealing with situations. For the same reason, gender issues must not be avoided. On the contrary, they must be discussed and thought about in the classroom. This opinion is also defended by Mindy Blaise.

'Instead of believing that young children are too naïve or incapable of understanding gender discourses, including heterosexuality, teachers might begin recognizing the various ways that children 'know' and 'do' gender in the classroom (...) Teachers can then intervene as they create opportunities in the curriculum to raise critical and hard questions about gender for children themselves to negotiate and struggle with' (M. Blaise, 2005, p. 104).

### Foster children.

With regard to foster children, at the end of the last century Arana and Carrasco (1980) said that Western societies are structured, positively and exclusively, on the basis of the family. Therefore, those lacking a family or not assisted by one become outsiders, especially in the case of children (p. 9). That is what is happening now, in a way.

The upbringing, in general, and the gender construction, in particular, of foster children are totally different from those of children who are brought up in a family. Despite the efforts to make institutional foster homes similar to a family environment, they never are. In fact, children in a foster home spend most of the day and do most of their activities in that foster home. This is a disadvantage, because it reduces the possibility of socialization in a variety of areas in contact with children who live in families.

The study carried out by Moreno, J. M., García-Baamonde, M. J., & Blázquez, M. A. & Julian, M. M. (2008) shows that children in foster home, in the Region of Extremadura, have more difficulties in their social and linguistic development. In a recent research, McCall, R. B., Muhamedrahimov, R. J., Groark, C. J., Palmov, O. I., Nikiforova, N. V., Salaway, J. L., (2016), have reviewed the investigations about institutionalized and post-institutionalized children and they are able to conclude 'rates of longer-term deficiencies and problems are a





joint function of age at adoption, severity of institutional environment, and type of family placement' (p. 256).

'To describe and understand the conditions for children's life in modern society one has to identify the institutional practices in which they participate, and the activities that dominate within the institutional practices, what demands the practices put on children, and what possibilities they give for activities and how children act in these activities' (Hedegaard, 2014, p. 193). There are various regulations intended to protect vulnerable children in Spain. The Civil Code covers the fostering of young children in Spain in Constitutional Law 1/1996 and Law 4/1994. The Autonomous Communities assume the responsibilities implied in these regulations and provide foster homes that act as a temporary alternative for the young children under their supervision. These foster homes provide a comprehensive education in order to achieve the right social integration of children.

### **Methodology.**

We used the original Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) by S. Bem (1974), translated into Spanish. We prefer this translation to Spanish adaptations such as the one made by García-Mina (1997) because of the time that has passed since their publication, and because it follows the criterion of translating from the original as applied by Vega (2007) in her adaptation of the BSRI for Argentinian teenagers.

The BSRI consists of 60 personality characteristics, 20 of which relate to 20 masculine features, 20 to feminine ones, and the other 20 are neutral, giving information about social desirability, in other words, about what societies establish as right, depending on the times. The items in the questionnaire are scored with a Likert-type scale, ranging from one to seven. The original instructions ask the informer to describe him/herself. In this case we asked the survey respondents to give answers about what they regard as desirable for children. Each survey respondent has given two answers, judging what is desirable for girls and boys respectively. There are precedents for this modification of the BSRI focus, in the study by Benz, Pfeiffer, and Newman (1981).

The investigation selected a sample of 50 people: 20 of them caregivers, childcare workers in a foster home for vulnerable children where 12 girls and 17 boys between the ages of 0 and 6 are now living.

The rest of the samples are parents with young children in the same age group, half women, and half men. This gender difference is necessary in order to have a male representation in the family items in the sample.

The foster children spend all day in the foster home and start their school activities there, while the ones living with their families study in six different schools which are geographically close to each other.

The median-split method was chosen to classify the subjects in the BSRI inventory. As Hoffman and Borders (2001) note, this method was adopted by Bem from 1977 onwards. The procedure consists in separating the subjects according to their score, above or below the median, in each dimension.

The BSRI classifies the subjects under evaluation into four categories. Feminine: describes typically feminine attributes, and includes subjects who obtain scores above the sample median on the femininity-expressiveness scale and scores below the median on the





masculinity-instrumentality scale. Masculine: describes subjects with typically masculine or agent attributes, and includes those who obtain scores above the sample median on the masculinity-instrumentality scale and scores below the median on the femininity-expressiveness scale. Androgynous: describes subjects with both feminine and masculine attributes, and includes those who obtain scores above the sample median on both scales. Undifferentiated: describes subjects with slight attributes from both genders, and includes those who obtain scores below the sample median on both scales.

### Results.

For the Masculine scale the mean was 4.95 and the standard deviation was 0.58 while for the Feminine scale the mean was 5.09 and the standard deviation was 0.56. The correlation between the Masculine and Feminine scales was very low ( $r=0.11$ ) and non-significant ( $p=0.252$ ), and it was in the range between 0.00 and 0.11 reported by Bem (1981). Cronbach's alphas were computed to assess internal consistency for the masculinity and femininity scales, and they were 0.75 and 0.73, respectively.

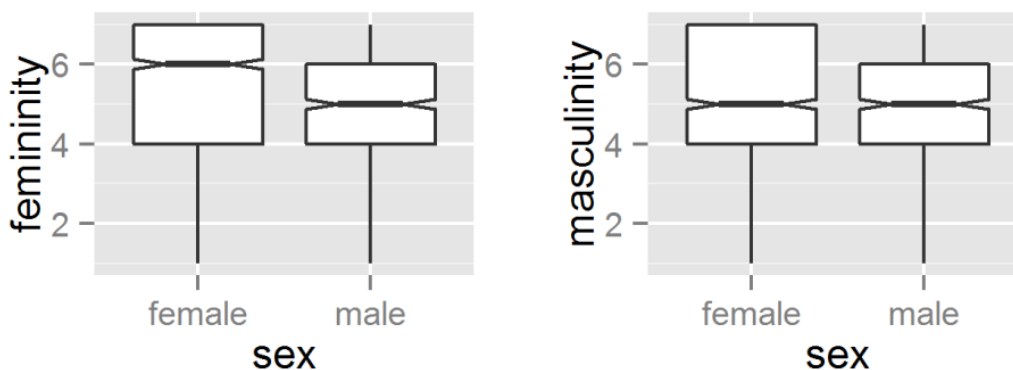


Figure 1: Scores by dimension and sex.

The sample median for the masculine dimension was five, and when a sex variable was introduced to compare the medians for men and women the Mann-Whitney U test did not find significant differences ( $p=0.266$ ). However, the sample median was six for the feminine dimension, finding significant differences between the median for men, five, and the median for women, which matched the sample median ( $p=0.000$ ).

The populations in the sample are not balanced, as there are 70 answers by women as opposed to 30 by men, and this has an influence on the sample median calculations in the feminine dimension. We made a post-stratification in the sample to recalculate the sample median in the feminine dimension.

Assuming a 50-50 distribution of sexes among the population, a weight of 50/70 was given to the women's answers, and 50/30 to the answers given by men, where five was the value of the weighted average sample median for the feminine dimension, correcting the first estimates. For this calculation we used the *cwhmisc* v. 5.0 package from the R statistical environment.





We conclude that both medians are five, and the information from each informer is classified with them, based on the median scores in each dimension.

So, from the data obtained in the questionnaires, by applying the selected method with regard to the sex variable we can see the degree of masculinity, femininity, androgyny (masculine and feminine features) or undifferentiatedness that the participants show as desirable, not for themselves, but for the young children who are in their care.

	Masculine		Feminine		Androgynous		Undifferentiated	
	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
<b>Mothers (n=15)</b>	3	1	2	4	6	7	4	3
<b>Fathers (n=15)</b>	5	1	3	3	3	6	4	5
<b>Caregivers (n=20)</b>	3	1	8	10	5	4	4	5

Table 1. BSRI classifications by type of informer and sex of child.

Table 1 summarizes the classification of the three types of informers, according to the BSRI. In the inculcation of gender attitudes, we see an important tendency towards femininity in the female caregivers, as 40 per cent of them choose answers corresponding to the feminine sex-type when they inform about what they regard as desirable for boys, and the group size increases to 50 per cent when they express what is desirable for girls. In contrast, for the feminine sex-type the scores of the parents are always less than half the scores of the caregivers. Comparing the distribution of the different types of parents when answering what is desirable for boys, the Fisher exact test shows that there are no significant differences ( $p=0.691$ ). There are also no significant differences in the distribution of the different sex-types of the parents when they answer about what is desirable for girls ( $p=0.892$ ).

As parents' sex is not a variable with an influence on the distribution of the various sex-types, we grouped fathers and mothers together into the category of parents. If we compare the distributions of the replies of parents and female caregivers when they answer about what is desirable for boys, we find that the proportions of feminine sex-type informers in parents (16.7 per cent) and caregivers (40 per cent) are statistically different ( $p=0.033$ ) when they are compared using the one-tail test. The feminine type score is also higher among the female caregivers (50 per cent) than among parents (23.3 per cent) when they answer about what is desirable for girls ( $p=0.026$ ).

The high degree of femininity in the foster home selected could be due to the high number of female employees working there. The female caregivers think that typical feminine features are more suitable for the upbringing of both sexes. In other words, they choose the social construction of gender based on femininity. Perhaps they consider that it is suitable for young children to express feelings and emotions. The high percentage of the androgynous sex-type among mothers indicates that they regard both types of features, feminine and masculine, as suitable. In other words, they are the group of informants that shows most equity in relation to gender.





## Discussion.

The social construction of gender is directly linked to the development of identity processes, and the expectations with regard to sex of those who care for them, whether they are parents or childcare workers, has an influence on this construction process.

According to the results, the boys and girls living in the foster home receive a more categorized education than those living with their families.

Foster homes tend to value the usually recognized feminine type as more suitable for both sexes: 40% for boys and 50 per cent for girls. This could be explained by one factor: all the caregivers in the foster home in Cáceres are women. Although there is social pressure towards gender differentiation, they advocate a move to a more equal education, and to achieve this they find the feminine model more useful than the masculine one, specially when considering the children's young age, at a time when there is less repression related to non-desirable behaviour with regard to sex.

In the correlations established among the different types of characteristics, the most prominent features for boys and girls were sincerity, veracity, understanding and being friendly and sensitive towards others. These features, emphasized by the caregivers in this study, are important not only in relation to gender, but also as part of educative objectives that would contribute to an adequate interrelationship among the children and facilitate communal living in the institution.

The parent group showed the highest tendency towards the androgynous type. They regard both feminine and masculine features as suitable for the construction of gender in boys (30%) and girls (43 per cent). This is important because they are valuing features that were traditionally differentiated, assigned to each child on the basis of its sex, showing that there is an evolution towards more equal education.

When we split up fathers and mothers with regard to girls, we see that both have a tendency towards the androgynous sex-type, with similar percentages, 46.6 per cent of mothers, and 40 per cent of fathers. However, there is a difference with regard to boys, with 40 per cent of mothers and only 20 per cent of fathers in this group. It looks as if there is a desire to break away from traditional models, and mothers are bolder than fathers on this issue, as the latter's preference drops to half when referring to what is desirable for boys.

With regard to the masculine dimension, the fathers give more value to being Self-reliant ( $MN=6.43$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ), significantly matching this item with others such as: Defends own beliefs ( $r=0.569$ ), Independent ( $r=0.326$ ), Assertive ( $r=0.257$ ), Analytical ( $r=0.275$ ), Willing to take risks ( $r=0.259$ ), Makes decisions easily ( $r=0.389$ ), Willing to take a stand ( $r=0.416$ ). The second most important masculine item was being Self-sufficient ( $MN=6.35$ ,  $SD=0.90$ ). This results shows that fathers have a preference towards personality features that express security and firmness in personal development.

The parents' tendency towards the feminine and undifferentiated models is balanced between fathers and mothers, in what they see as desirable for both girls and boys. However, with regard to the masculine model, we see that only 6.7 per cent of the parents think this model is suitable for girls, whereas 20 per cent of the mothers and 33 per cent of the fathers regard it as desirable for boys.







The data show that there is higher agreement among the parents about what is desirable for girls than about what is desirable for boys.

Being Self-reliant ( $MN=6.60$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ) and being Self-sufficient ( $MN=6.27$ ,  $SD=0.96$ ) are the features most valued by the mothers and caregivers, respectively. There is a significant correlation ( $r=0.429$ ) between these two items (in both groups). The Self-sufficient item correlates with the following items: Defends own beliefs ( $r=0.573$ ), Independent ( $r=0.617$ ), Assertive ( $r=0.447$ ), Strong Personality ( $r=0.446$ ), Energetic ( $r=0.533$ ), Analytical ( $r=0.492$ ), Willing to take risks ( $r=0.495$ ), Makes decisions easily ( $r=0.387$ ), Willing to take a stand ( $r=0.834$ ) and Competitive ( $r=0.358$ ).

In the fathers sample, when they answer about what is desirable for girls the Self-sufficient feature does not correlate with any other in the masculine dimension, and when they answer about the desirability of self-sufficiency in boys this item only correlates with being Independent ( $r=0.537$ ).

### Conclusion.

This study is an approach to education and the importance of gender for learners and teachers, and the vital and emotional relationship between them.

McCall, R. B., Muhamedrahimov, R. J., Groark, C. J., Palmov, O. I., Nikiforova, N. V., Salaway, J. L., (2016), in their study of Russian Baby Homes, pointed out, 'the results suggest that improving the quality of caregiver-child interactions within an institution can have some persistent benefits over several years in children transitioned to families' (p. 267) Reflecting on the data analysed may pave the way for further research about education and social desirability for both sexes. Analysing the factors that stop equal opportunities for the best development of childhood and describing the attitudes of adults to the educative process is an attempt to raise awareness about their effect on what is desirable for childhood, as this knowledge can help to suggest more effective means to eradicate the barriers in early childhood that stop equal opportunities and results in everyone's individual and social development.

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