

## Psychology Essay

### Discuss psychological research into the factors that influence gender roles (24 marks)

Numerous theories have been proposed in accounting for the development of gender roles in children. Three theories are; Cognitive, Social Learning Theory and Bio-psychological theories.

Kohlberg put forward a cognitive developmental theory of gender -role development, which is made up of three stages; Gender Identity, Gender Stability and Gender Constancy. Kohlberg believed that before children acquire gender roles they must realise that gender is fixed and superficial changes in appearance or activities do not alter gender. Slaby and Frey (1975) showed that 5yr old children, rating high on gender consistency, would pay more attention to a film on same sex models than children rated low. In addition, Ruble, Balaban and Cooper (1981) found that when preschoolers rated high or low on gender constancy watched television adverts in which toys were being represented as either suitable for girls or boys, the adverts had a greater effect on those rated high on gender constancy. However, the theory places too much importance in the role of cognitive factors. Huston (1985) found that the relationship between cognitions and gender and gender -typed attitudes and behaviour is not very strong and also that it is weaker in girls. Another cognitive theory, suggested by Martin and Halveson (1987) is Gender Schema Theory. This theory is similar to Kohlberg's although it also states that when children are represented with information to make it fit. Martin and Halveson showed 5-6 year olds pictures inconsistent with their schemas on that gender role behaviours and found that information was often misremembered a week later. Also, Brabard et al found that when they presented 4 - 9 year olds with neutral objects, which were labelled as either 'boy' or 'girl' objects, the children played with objects 'for' their gender and remembered after some time, which toys were for which gender. Therefore, according to cognitive theories, the factors that influence gender roles are the schemas those children develop on gender -typed behaviours. However, this theory fails to explain why gender schemas develop in the first place. Also, as Kohlberg's theory, this theory places too much emphasis on the role of the individual.

However, Freud proposed that gender development is not influenced by cognitive factors but rather by biological drives that interact with the environment. Freud suggested that gender identity is formed as a result of identification with the same sex parent during the phallic stage gender development. But, as Freud used case studies upon he based his assumptions, his finding cannot be generalised and so are lacking in ecological validity.

Social Learning Theorists, believe that the development of gender roles occurs as a result of a child's social experience. Hence, the main factor is the environment. This can happen in a number of ways, a few being: Direct Reinforcement, Vicarious Reinforcement and Counter -Stereotypes. Smith and Lloyd (1978) videotaped women playing with a 4-month-old baby. The baby

was dressed as either a boy or girl and introduced with an appropriate name. There were seven toys present; masculine, feminine or neutral. It was found that each woman's choice of toy varied with the perceived gender of infant. Also, Lamb and Roopnarine (1979) observed a group of nursery school children during playtime. They found that children reinforced peers for gender appropriate play and were quick to criticise gender inappropriate play. Williams et al recorded the effects of television in a town where television was being introduced for the first time. Behaviour was observed for a period of two years and it was found that children's gender role attitudes became more traditional and gender stereotyped. Cohen et al found that adults tended to remember information about a video about a librarian if it was consistent with their stereotype whereas inconsistent information was less well recalled. Jacklin and Maccoby (1978) found support for the existence of biological gender differences in a study where they introduced unfamiliar 2 year olds to each other and dressed them in neutral clothing. Interactions were most lively and positive with same gender pairs. However, Social Learning Theorists mistakenly assume that learning processes are the same at all ages. In addition, this approach portrays the child as a passive part of the process and therefore ignores factors such as individual motivation and self-regulation.

One factor, which all three theories have in common, is the observation, imitation or identification with other members of the same sex. The differences are in the way in which the learnt information affects a child's gender roles. For example, Freud proposed that a child acquires gender roles through identification with the same sex parent whereas Kohlberg believed that as a result of observing others, the child develops his/her own ideas about gender and gender roles.