

With reference to psychological theories and/or research, discuss the view that these offer a gender-biased view of human behaviour.

Gender bias is a distorted view or misconceived perception of characteristics that are not representative of either one of the genders. The preordained expectations of these (usually non-existent) gender specific characteristics are often evident in psychological theories and research. This then produces and reinforces gender stereotypes.

There are two main particular types of gender bias that have been identified as contributing to gender stereotypes. Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) bias exaggerates or underplays differences of one gender compared with the other e.g. men are aggressive and women are not. Beta ( $\beta$ ) bias ignores and minimises differences between men and women. They do this by either ignoring certain aspects of (usually women's) life experiences or presuming that male findings can be generalised across both genders.

Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development claimed the moral reasoning standards of men were much more sophisticated than women's, who scored significantly lower than males on his classification. This is an example of  $\alpha$  bias as women are undervalued as they are displayed as being inferior in their moral development.

Gilligan was the main critique of Kohlberg's findings. She believed women were not inferior in their skills of moral reasoning but that his criteria were not relevant to women. While men base their moral reasoning on what is just and right, she claimed, women have a different moral voice based on an ethic of care and responsibility. However, this is also an expression of  $\alpha$  bias as differences are accentuated, but women are elevated instead of undervalued.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory stated that the way in which young males identify with their father causes the development of a strong super-ego and high moral standards. Girls do not experience such an intense relationship with their father and consequently do not develop a strong super-ego. Women therefore have impaired moral reasoning skills that are inferior to men's.

Freud's theory is an example of androcentric bias as it is wholly male orientated. This theory was strongly criticised by Friedan (1965) for its sexism. She claimed that the sexism expressed was culture-bound. By this it was meant that Freud was constrained to write from the perspective of his own culture, believing women to be inferior to men.

Research has now shown that gender stereotypes are unfounded and totally misleading. Maccoby and Jacklin analysed 1500 different previously completed studies and found the only variants to be verbal ability (girls exceeding), visio-spatial ability and aggressiveness (boys exceeding in both). They concluded that gender stereotypes were cultural myths and perpetuated by our expectations.

Worrel and Remer (1992) constructed various points to consider when planning a research study as ways towards the elimination of future bias (specifically gender bias). They believed the key to this was reflexivity (and flexibility). All aspects of the proposed study should be considered from different points of view (e.g. women are not suited to lab experiments). They believed this would ensure fairness to both genders. So, steps are being made with the aim to reduce the amount of gender bias present in research. However, it will take considerably more to annul gender stereotypes entirely.