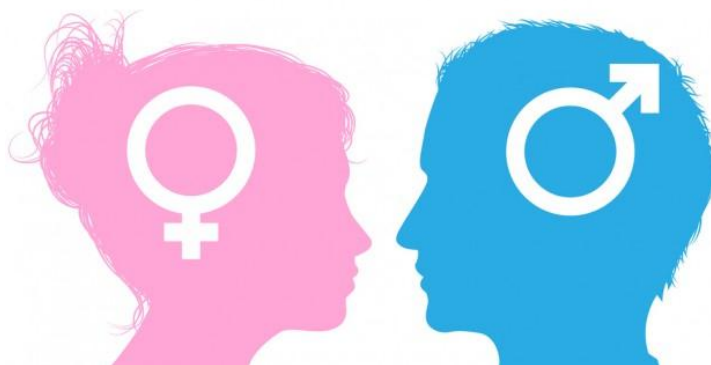


Introduction to Psychology – Gender

Theory

If I ask ‘Who are you?’ one of your first answers is likely to be ‘a boy/man’ or ‘a girl/woman’. Gender is a key aspect of who we think we are. Psychologists distinguish between sex and gender. Sex is a biological fact – whether the person is a genetic male or a genetic female. Gender refers to the psychological characteristics associated with being a male or female. Your gender identity is a fundamental part of your self-



concept. Gender identity generates gender behaviour – behaving like a boy or man or like a girl or woman. But, such behaviour depends on our knowledge of gender roles. A gender role is a set of expectations that prescribe how males and females should think, act and feel. Psychologists have investigated how children develop their sense of gender identity and their knowledge of gender roles. There are various approaches to explaining gender development, and gender development is likely to be a mix of the effects of socialisation (the influence of your parents, peer groups, culture), the changes in the way children think (psychologists call this cognitive development), and biological factors (genetics, evolutionary factors, hormones, neurochemistry). One approach is to focus on how gender identity and gender roles are learned. This involves the influence of culture (cultural ideas about masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness), the direct influence of parents and the influence of peers and other groups (e.g. the media – a potent source of indirect reinforcement through the models and stereotypes it provides). Children learn gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate behaviour through the application for reward and punishment, and through the role models that males and females provide. Parents may encourage or discourage gender appropriate or inappropriate behaviours by the rewards and punishments they provide. For example, parents may encourage more traditional female behaviour in their daughter by saying ‘You do look pretty when you wear that dress’, or discourage similar behaviour in their sons by saying ‘You look like a girl in that shirt’. Much of this direct reinforcement is unconscious – parents do not realise that they are doing it.

Study

Smith and Lloyd (1978) investigated whether parents reinforce gender-appropriate behaviour but not gender inappropriate behaviour. Their ‘baby x’ experiments involved dressing 4-month old babies in unisex snowsuits and giving them names that were sometimes in line with their true gender and sometimes not. At other times they presented them in clothing that is associated with a particular gender (i.e. blue for a boy, pink for a girl). They videotaped women playing with them. When women played with them, they treated them according to the gender they believed them to be. Seven toys were present in the room – a squeaky hammer and a stuffed rabbit in trousers (male); a doll and a squeaky Bambi (female), and a squeaky pig, a ball and a rattle (neutral). They found that adults selected gender-appropriate toys for them to play with (e.g. a doll for girls, or a squeaky hammer for boys), depending on the perceived gender of the infant. They also responded more actively when a ‘boy’ showed increased motor activity, and tended to soothe and calm a ‘girl’ when she became more active.

In another study, Beverly Fagot (1978) studied parent-child interactions of 24 two-parent families. Each family had a single child aged between 20 and 24 months, and 12 families had boys and 12 families had girls. The families were from white, middle-class backgrounds. The researchers conducted a series of five one-hour long observations of the parents and child playing together. The parents were aware that they were being observed, but did not know that gender was the topic of interest. The findings were:

Girls were encouraged to: ask for help when it was needed, follow and stay near to a parent, dance, take an interest in girls' clothes for dressing up, play with dolls. They were also encouraged to help their parents with household chores.

Girls were discouraged from: running around, jumping, climbing and generally being too active, being aggressive, playing rough games, manipulating and exploring objects

Boys were encouraged to: play with and explore toys such as trucks, building blocks, and things which encouraged strength and muscle building

Boys were discouraged from: playing with dolls, asking for assistance, and anything the parents thought was feminine.

Parents didn't encourage and discourage their children equally, though. Boys were more actively discouraged from playing feminine roles than girls were for playing masculine roles, and fathers were more discouraging than mothers when their sons played with feminine toys. The girls were also encouraged to remain in close proximity to their parents.