

(a) Describe one theory of the development of gender

(b) Assess the extent to which this theory is supported by research evidence

Whereas sexual identity is one way of referring to biological status as male or female, gender identity is a different way of classifying ourselves and others as boy, girl, male or female. Sexual and gender identities should correspond for most people but not all, for example transsexuals.

Social learning theory (SLT) assumes that one reason why girls and boys learn to behave differently is that they are treated differently by their parents and others. This assumption is supported by Rubin *et al.*'s (1974) 'Baby X' study, which demonstrated that when informed of a child's biological sex, parents and others often react to it differently, according to their gender-role expectations. As a result, girls and boys are often given different toys, have their rooms decorated differently and are even spoken about in different terms.

More recently, however, Karraker *et al.* (1995) found that this strong sex-typing of infants at birth has declined and that there was no difference between mothers and fathers in this respect. Yet a consistent and persistent finding is that fathers treat their children in a more gendered way than mothers (Maccoby, 1990). Fathers appear to interact in a more instrumental and achievement-oriented way and give more attention to their sons, while mothers attend equally to sons and daughters (Quiery, 1998).

SLT emphasises the role of observational learning and reinforcement. By observing others behaving in particular ways and then imitating that behaviour, children receive reinforcement from 'significant others' for behaviours considered to be sex-appropriate (Bandura, 1977).

Sear *et al.*'s (1957) research supports SLT, as they found parents allowed sons, compared with daughters, to be more aggressive in their relationships with other children and their parents. Although parents believe they respond in the same way to aggressive acts committed by boys and girls, they actually intervene far more frequently and quickly when girls behave aggressively (Huston, 1983). Bandura *et al.* (1961, 1963) found boys were more likely to imitate aggressive male models than girls. Children are more likely to imitate a same-sex model than an opposite-sex model, even if the behaviour is sex-inappropriate. There also appears to be much evidence to suggest that gender-role stereotypes are portrayed by the media, as well as by parents and teachers (Wober *et al.*, 1987). Furthermore, children categorised as 'heavy viewers of TV' hold stronger stereotyped beliefs than lighter viewers (Gunter, 1986)

However, Maccoby & Jacklin (1974) argue that there are no consistent differences in the extent to which boys and girls are reinforced for aggressiveness or autonomy. In fact, there seems to be uniformity in the sexes' socialisation, which is supported by Lytton *et al.* (1991). Bandura's research is often cited as evidence to support imitation and modelling, yet much of the evidence is inconclusive. Some studies have even failed to find that children are more likely to imitate same-sex models than opposite-sex models. Maccoby & Jacklin (1974) have instead shown that children prefer to imitate behaviour that's 'appropriate' to their own sex regardless of the model.

Hetherington (1967) suggests that although modelling plays an important role in children's socialisation, there is no consistent preference for the same-sex parent's behaviour. Instead, children prefer to model the behaviour of those with whom they have the most contact (usually the mother). There is also no significant correlation between the extent to which parents engage in sex-typed behaviours and the strength of sex-typing in their children (Smith & Daghli, 1977). Yet a father's attitude towards sex roles, either sex-typed or egalitarian, has been found to correlate with four-year-olds' perceptions of sex roles (Quiery, 1998).

There is also the argument that the fundamental principles underlying SLT are overly simplistic. For instance, does viewing TV impact upon a passively receptive child audience with messages about sex-role stereotyping? Gunter & McAleer (1997) found that children respond selectively to particular characters and that their perceptions, memories and understanding of what they've seen may be mediated by the dispositions they bring with them to the viewing situation. While 'heavy' TV viewers might hold more stereotyped beliefs than other children, no precise measures were taken of the programmes they actually watched.

Other evidence to contradict the SLT was found by Saby & Frey (1975). Their research supports Kohlberg's belief that a child's understanding of gender identity is the cause of imitation of same-sex models, rather than an effect. Children actively construct their gender-role knowledge through purposeful monitoring of the social environment. They engage in self-socialisation, rather than passively receiving information (Whyte, 1998).

To conclude, there are many theories concerning gender identity and there is much research to support and contradict these theories. To reduce the explanation for gender identity to just one theory would be to over-simplify an obviously complicated process. Therefore, the explanations should perhaps be seen as complementary as they all give an insight into the development of gender identity.