

Gender: cognitive theory

How do cognitive psychologists explain gender development?

When explaining how gender identity and roles develop, cognitive psychologists emphasise the role of **thinking processes**. They are interested in how children gather and make sense of information about gender and how their understanding of gender changes over time (a **developmental** perspective). Cognitive psychologists assume that changes in gender role behaviour reflect changes in how children understand and think about gender. These changes in understanding, in turn, reflect (1) the accumulation of **information** about gender gathered from the environment and (2) developmental changes in the child's **brain** that allow it to process information in more sophisticated ways.

Kohlberg (1966) puts forward a stage theory of gender development. His theory proposes that a child's understanding of gender moves forward in stages. At each successive stage, the child thinks in characteristic ways about gender. As the child moves through the stages its understanding of gender becomes more complex. The first stage is **gender identity**, which is usually reached by the age of 2 years. At this stage the child is able to correctly label its own sex. The second stage is **gender stability**, which is usually reached by the age of 4 years. At this stage the child realizes that gender remains the same across time. However, its understanding of gender is heavily influenced by external features like hair and clothing. A boy at this stage might say that if he put a dress on he would be a girl. It is not until the third stage, **gender constancy**, that the child starts to understand that gender is independent of external features. This stage is usually reached by the age of 7 years.

Kohlberg's theory suggests that gender development is driven primarily by **maturation**. That is, the stage the child is at determines how it processes information about gender and that children do not actively start processing gender information until they reach gender constancy. An alternative view, **gender schema theory**, suggests that children play a more active role in their own gender development from an earlier age. In cognitive psychology, a **schema** is a cognitive structure used to organise information about a particular type of object, person or situation. People make sense of new information by matching it to the schemas they have produced from past experience. Gender schema theory suggests that a child's gender development reflects the increasing complexity of the schemas it develops around maleness and femaleness. By about the age of two the child is able to label itself and others as female or male. This reflects the development of a basic gender schema. The child then starts to seek out information from its environment in order to increase its understanding of maleness and femaleness and thereby to guide its own behaviour. The child identifies activities and objects associated with its own gender and starts to ignore or reject those that do not fit in with this. At this early stage their understanding of gender is simplistic and quite **rigid** and this is reflected in their behaviour (e.g. a three year old girl may reject any object that isn't pink). As their gender schemas increase in complexity, however, the child becomes better at coping with ambiguity and their ideas about what is acceptable or appropriate start to relax somewhat.

How have cognitive psychologists studied gender development?

Cognitive psychologists need to be able to access children's thinking about behaviour. For this reason, much of their research has used interviews. They favour **structured interviews** because of the higher reliability associated with this. One such structured interview schedule is the Gender Concept Interview. This involves asking children questions about their own and others' gender (identity), what their gender was in the past or might be in the future (stability) and what their gender might be if they were to, for example, play with toys associated with the opposite sex (gender constancy). Slaby and Frey (1975) used this interview schedule and found that children fell into three distinct groups which reflected the stages of gender development described by Kohlberg.

Other cognitive psychologists favour **quasi-experimental** methods in their research. This involves comparing boys and girls or children of different ages in their performance of tasks that involve processing information about gender. These types of study are quasi-experimental because the 'IV's (gender and age) are not things that can really be manipulated by the researcher as a true IV must be (for example the researcher cannot randomly assign children to be male or female). This approach was taken by **Boston and Levy (1991)**, who compared girls' and boys' ability to assemble sequences of pictures in the correct order. The sequences showed activities that were 'typically' male or female. The children were better at sequencing the activities that corresponded stereotypically to their own gender. This suggests that they had a more developed understanding of activities that were relevant to them, which is consistent with gender schema theory.

Evaluation of the cognitive theory of gender

The cognitive approach to gender development has made a significant contribution to our understanding of how thinking about gender changes over time. However, its contribution has primarily been to **describe** the relevant processes rather than to explain them. Kohlberg's stages, for example, tell us how children are likely to think at different ages but relatively little about why gender thinking changes in this way. The reliance on **quasi experimental** methods is problematic for the same reason. Such studies can tell us *that* boys and girls think differently or that seven year-olds think differently from four year-olds but do not allow us not make causal inferences about *why*.

Cognitive developmental theory, with its focus on the individual, has allowed encouraged us to recognize the **active** role that children take in their own development. This is an advantage over social learning theory, which sees children more as **passive** recipients of influences form their environment. The down side of this is that the cognitive approach may underestimate or neglect the role of **external influences** on the child's development. However, in most respects the two theoretical approaches are compatible with each other and arguably have been moving towards each other for some time, to the extent that the line between the two has largely disappeared.

Although the cognitive approach leaves room for **biological influences** to play a role in gender development it has tended to neglect these. Consequently, there are aspects of gender development that the cognitive approach has difficulty explaining. These include some consistent gender differences. For example, most studies have found that boys' thinking about gender is more rigid than girls' but this is difficult to account for in the cognitive approach. Furthermore there are the universal features of gender role that are found in all cultures that suggest that some elements of gender are innate. These are most easily explained within a biological framework.