

Gender Bias in Psychological Theories



This activity will help you to:

- Identify gender biases in psychological theories
- Discuss the impact of biased research on society
- Critically assess gender-biased theories

Below are two examples of research that could be considered gender biased. Working in pairs or small groups, you need to do the following:

1. Identify aspects of the research that could be considered gender biased
2. Identify and explain the type of gender bias that is present
3. Suggest the impact that these research examples could have on society. You could look, for example, at how the research might uphold or reinforce gender stereotypes, or be used to disempower women in society.

Take notes on your ideas, and we will share ideas towards the end of the session.

The Psychodynamic View of Personality and Moral Development

Freud and many of his followers believed that biological differences between men and women had major consequences for psychological development. In their view, 'biology is destiny'. Freud believed that gender divergence begins at the onset of the phallic stage, where the girl realises that she has no penis, and starts to feel inferior to boys (penis envy). Penis envy becomes a major driving force in the girl's mental life, and needs to be successfully sublimated into a desire for a husband and children if it is not to become pathological. This view of gender divergence in personality development has implications for other aspects of development. For example, Freud's view of morality was that it was regulated by the superego, which is an internalisation of the same sex parent that regulates behaviour through the threat of punishment. In boys, immoral behaviour is regulated through the mechanism of castration anxiety – men obey the rules because of an unconscious fear that their father will take away their penis. In the Freudian view, the girl has already had to accept her castration as a *fait accompli*, which raises important questions about the relative moral strength of men and women.

The Biological View of Mental Illness

The biomedical view of mental illness, which approaches behavioural and psychological abnormality as a manifestation of underlying pathological processes on the biological level, dominates discussion of mental illness. In the biomedical view, illnesses such as depression can be explained in terms of chemical imbalances causing malfunction in parts of the brain associated with emotion. When explaining why twice as many women as men are diagnosed with depression, adherents of the biomedical view tend to suggest that this is due to hormonal differences, and point to the existence of, for example, post-natal depression to show how fluctuations in female sex hormones can lead to abnormalities of mood. Similarly, sex differences in hormonal processes can be used to explain the existence of disorders that are 'gender bound', such as pre-menstrual syndrome.