

## Title: Gender

*Specification: Cognitive explanations of gender development: Kohlberg's theory, gender identity, gender stability and gender constancy; gender schema theory.*

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
1. Explain cognitive explanations of gender development: Kohlberg's theory <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Gender identity</li> <li>b. Gender stability</li> <li>c. Gender constancy</li> </ol>
2. Evaluate Kohlberg's theory
3. Outline and evaluate Gender Schema Theory

### 1. Cognitive Explanations of Gender Development

Cognitive explanations of gender development focus on how a child's **thinking** changes as they get older. These changes are universal meaning that all children go through them; psychologists refer to this as a **consequence of maturation**. Children discover they are male or female (much like they develop in other ways) and then they identify with members of their own sex.

### Kohlberg's Theory

**Lawrence Kohlberg** pioneered the **cognitive-developmental theory** in the 1960s. He believed that children go through three stages in the development of gender. The child's thinking becomes more complex, and their understanding becomes greater as they get older and move through the three stages.

<b>1. GENDER IDENTITY</b>	<b>Age 2-3</b>	The child recognises that they are a boy or a girl. However, they believe they can change (e.g. a little boy may say 'when I grow up I'll be a mummy').
<b>2. GENDER STABILITY</b>	<b>Age 4-5</b>	The child now realises that gender is fixed and remains stable over time (e.g. the little boy now realises he won't be a mummy). However, their understanding is heavily influenced by external factors such as clothes and hair.
<b>3. GENDER CONSTANCY</b>	<b>Age 6-7+</b>	The child understands that not only is gender stable but it is consistent over time and situations (e.g. men can have long hair, and girls can play rugby).

**Munroe et al. (1984)** studied children across cultures and found that children progress through the same stages, outlined by Kohlberg, in these cultures. Therefore, the sequence must be biologically driven and not down to cultural and social norms.

**Slaby and Frey (1975)** conducted research to test the accuracy of Kohlberg's theory. They interviewed 55 children aged between 2-5 years old. The children were asked questions to determine which stage of Kohlberg's theory they were at. In the first phase of the experiment, they were asked when shown a picture of a girl and boy, 'which one are you?' to demonstrate **gender identity**. Next, they were asked 'Were you a little boy or a little girl when you were a baby?' and 'When you grow up will you be a mummy or daddy?' to demonstrate **gender stability**. They found that children responded in line with what Kohlberg suggested: gender becomes stable around the age of 3 or 4 years old. For **gender constancy** they asked 'If you wore (insert opposite sex clothes), would you be a girl or a boy?' and 'Could you be an (insert opposite sex) if you wanted to be?'

After several weeks they went on to test Kohlberg's prediction that children at the gender constancy stage would pay more attention to the behaviour of same-sex models than children further down the stages. They showed the children a film, men on one side of the screen, women on the other, performing various activities. The children that were high in gender constancy showed a greater tendency to watch the same-sex model than those with low gender constancy, lending support to Kohlberg's stage theory and the idea that children at the third stage look to role models the same sex as themselves. Whyte (1998) suggested that children '**self-socialise**' and actively seek information rather than passively receiving it.

## Evaluation

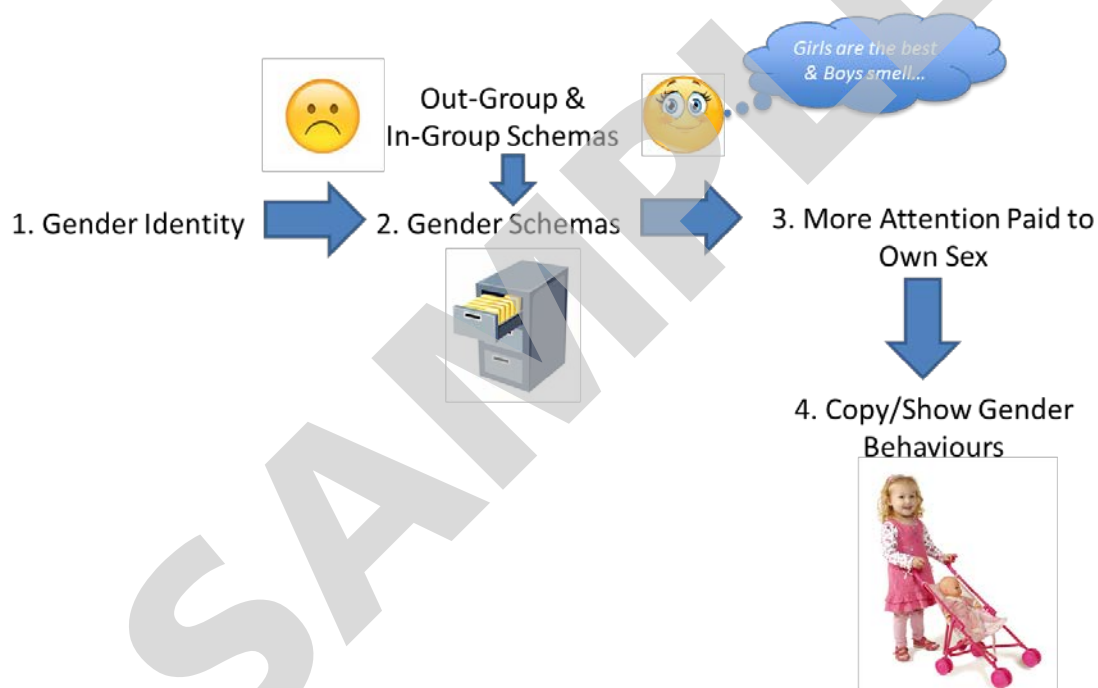
- Social Learning Theory (SLT) doesn't take into account what children think and how gender roles develop, so Kohlberg developed a theory that does consider this, believing that children take a more active role in their gender development. SLT states that children learn their gender identity through **sex-typing** (stereotyping according to what is typical for each sex) and **reinforcement**, learning through others. Kohlberg states that 'the child's sex-role concepts are the result of the child's active structuring of his own experience; they are not passive products of social training', suggesting that children play a part in deciding how they play and which activities they take part in, rather than it being forced upon them.
- Research evidence from **Munroe et al. (1984)** suggests that children do go through the three-stage process that Kohlberg outlined in his theory. This has implications: if children actively interact with the world around them to develop their gender identity that may influence parental and educational decisions and policies.
- Kohlberg's theory states that there will be no or very little gender role behaviour shown before a child reaches gender constancy (aged 6-7+). But it is found that even at a very young age children show preferences for stereotypical gender-specific toys (Huston, 1983). This shows that there are limitations to the theory.

## Gender Schema Theory

**Martin and Halverson (1983)** developed an alternative view, Gender Schema Theory (GST), which suggests that children play a more active role in their gender development from an earlier age. Kohlberg's theory states that a child must reach

gender constancy before they imitate **same-sex role models** whereas GST suggests that children aged around 2-3 years old (stage 1 gender identity) begin searching for rules or 'schema' with regards to the world around them. **Gender schemas** are a set of frameworks that outline how men and women should appropriately behave. Schemas help children to make sense of what is happening around them and the roles that men and women play. For example, boys see role models such as rugby players and the strength that they show is consistent with being a man, whereas girls may look to mummies and imitate this by playing with their dolls. The key is that children are not passive in this development: 'Gender schemas 'structure' experience by providing an organisation for processing social information' (Shaffer 1993).

GST outlines children's enhanced interest in their gender as '**in-group schemas**' and those they that have less interest in as '**out-group schemas**'. This is the first schema children develop. It allows the children to decide which toys/activities are suitable for boys and which are suitable for girls.



**Martin and Halveson (1983)** developed research to test their theory. They asked 5- and six-year-olds to look at pictures of children playing. Some were schema-consistent, e.g. a girl playing with a doll and some were schema-inconsistent, e.g. a girl playing with a toy gun. After a week, it was found that the children had switched the schema-inconsistent images around and remembered, for example, a boy playing with a toy gun rather than a girl. This lends support to the idea that children build gender schema as that is what their memories were based on.

Other research carried out is consistent with Martin and Halverson's findings. **Bradbard et al. (1986)** found that 4-9-year-old boys and girls would play with toys labelled as 'boy toys' or 'girl toys', despite the fact that the toys were gender neutral. Also, when the children were examined one week later, they still remembered the toys that were classed as 'boy' or 'girl' toys, showing that children actively seek the toys classed as 'in-group' above any others.

## Evaluation

- GST agrees with the SLT that children learn ‘appropriate’ patterns of behaviour by observation: that children look to role models to develop their gender identity. GST has also built upon **information processing theory**: how children select and organise gender-related information and how that is stored in the memory for the future. This shows the progression of theories and research, and as more is understood about humans we can develop our knowledge of gender development.
  
- The GST, along with social learning theory and Kohlberg’s theory, focusses on the child as an individual rather than as part of a social group. This perhaps could be viewed as too simplistic as other research shows how important social norms and culture are. It is likely that a child’s behaviours will be viewed in a biased or ethnocentric manner, i.e. from the cultural perspective of adults and other children; this will contribute to the shaping of both behaviour and identity
  
- It explains a lot about the way children view gender (and how as adults we still have slightly rigid thoughts on gender). Children have a strong in group/out group bias when confronted with information that may challenge expectations: for example, female boxers in the Olympics or male nurses. The theory is a good explanation of real life and the way children think.

## Possible Exam Questions

1. MCQ: Which stage comes first in Kohlberg’s theory? (1 mark)
  - a) Gender Stability
  - b) Gender Identity
  - c) Gender Constancy
  
2. RM: Describe two ethical issues of working with children. (4 marks)
  
3. Application: A group of 5 and 6-year-olds have been given some toys to play with. Some they have been told are ‘girl toys’, some ‘boy toys’ and some are gender neutral. Using your knowledge of Gender Schema Theory, explain what we may see happen in this situation. (4 marks)
  
4. Essay: Compare Kohlberg’s theory of gender development and Gender Schema Theory. (16 marks)
  
5. Essay: Outline and evaluate cognitive theories of gender development. (16 marks)