

Cognitive explanations of gender development - Kohlberg's theory, gender identity, gender stability and gender constancy

Cognitive theories emphasise the role of thinking or cognition in the development of gender.

The work of Lawrence Kohlberg is based on the idea of development proposed by Jean Piaget. This states that as the brain develops through childhood, so does the ability of the child to think in more complex and abstract ways.

Kohlberg's theory (1966) suggests that a child's understanding of gender develops with age (due to maturation). As part of the theory, Kohlberg identified three stages in gender development: gender identity; gender stability; and gender constancy.

Gender identity (labelling) – this is the first stage in Kohlberg's cognitive explanation of gender development. A child typically reaches the gender identity stage by the age of 2, when they recognise that they are male or female and can correctly label their own and other peoples' gender. Children base these judgements on outward appearance only: hairstyle, clothing, etc. Children also lack realisation that gender is fixed, so a little boy might think that he will grow up to be a 'mummy'.

Gender stability – this is the second stage and occurs at around 4 years old and continues until a child is approximately 7. In this stage, children recognise that gender is consistent over time, and that boys grow into men, and girls grow into women. However, they still fail to understand that gender is also consistent across situations and therefore believe that if a man wears a dress, he becomes a woman.

Gender constancy – this is the third and final stage which begins at around six or seven years old, when a child starts to understand that gender remains the same across situations (e.g. if a man puts on a dress, he is still a man). Kohlberg claimed that it is only when children have reached the gender consistency stage that they begin to learn about gender-appropriate behaviours.

Slaby & Frey (1975) measured the time children spent looking at males and females on a gender stereotypical video. They found children with high gender constancy spent longer watching same-sex role models. This suggests knowledge of gender precedes the watching of same-sex role models behaviour.

Munroe et al (1984) found cross-cultural support for Kohlberg and suggesting that, as he predicted, the stages were universal and developed independently of culture.

However, Serbin (2001) claims that Kohlberg may have underestimated the age at which children are aware of gender appropriate behaviour and it could be as early as 18 months.

