

Cognitive explanations of gender development - Martin and Halverson's gender schema theory

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

Unlike Kohlberg's theory (1966) which argues children must reach a deep understanding of gender constancy (age 6-7yrs) before changing their behaviour, Martin and Halverson argue that basic gender identity (age 2-3 yrs) is sufficient for gender-specific behaviour to be seen.

According to Martin & Halverson (1981) once a child has established gender identity around the age of 2-3 years, they begin to search the environment for information that encourages the development of gender schema. A schema is a mental representation learned through experience which is stored in memory. Young children will often have schemas for boys and different schemas for girls. A gender schema also contains ideas about what is appropriate behaviour for males and females, and this can influence children's behaviour.

Gender schema theory suggests that children acquire an understanding of gender development through experience with the world around them. According to Bem (1981) gender schema begins to develop around 2 years old when a child learns that the categories of male and female exist. As the child experiences more about gender the schema develops.

Children also develop in-group and out-group schemas based on gender. Their own perception is based on what they understand to be appropriate for their gender, and they then categorise others as like them (in-group) or not (out-group). As children develop gender schemas, they learn to make associations between what is male and what is female, and will categorise objects, toys and activities based on what they think is gender appropriate. A gender schema is, therefore, a generalised representation of everything we know in relation to gender and stereotypically gender appropriate behaviour.

Martin & Halverson (1981): Gender Schema Theory

The gender schema theory suggests that children play a more active role in their own gender development from an earlier age. It also suggests that children around the age of 2-3 years develop schemas for physical differences between the sexes, which leads the child to developing gender specific characteristics and a gender awareness. They subsequently develop strong gender stereotypes associated with these categories and as children grow, knowledge and understanding of gender schema comes from watching the behaviour and attitudes of others. However, as children learn the more subtle differences between males and females they tend to focus mainly on their own gender. At around 5 years old, gender roles become more rigid, and the child will identify activities and objects associated with their own gender and tend to ignore those that do not fit this schema.

According to the gender schema theory in-group and out-group schemas become strengthened as children's knowledge and expectations of gender develops. By the age of 7, a child's view of what is gender appropriate behaviour is more flexible, and children will pay more attention to same-sex role models. This is an important part establishing a self-identity. According to the gender schema theory, by adolescence the rules associated with gender schema are more flexible and gender appropriate behaviour can be overridden by personal preferences.

Campbell (2004) carried out a longitudinal study of 56 children at 27 and 39 months. The children were asked to point to a girl or a boy, and gender specific toys or activities. It was found that 53% of 2-year-olds could carry out the gender labelling task and by the age of 3 years, 94% could. In addition, at the age of 2, 20% of children could stereotype toys and this increased to 51% by the time they were 3. Campbell (2004) concluded that gender schemas develop rapidly between the ages of 2-3 years.

One advantage of the gender schema theory over Kohlberg's theory is the inclusion of social and cultural influences on the development of gender.

