

Sample Answer:

The social learning theory proposes that we learn through observation, imitation, and modelling. This can be used to explain how gender related behaviours are learned. For instance, children may imitate the behaviour of the same-sex role model they are exposed to in their family. Girls may copy the behaviour they see their mothers display in the home. The social learning theory (SLT) draws attention to the influence of the environment in shaping gender development. Children are influenced by role models they see throughout their lives, and these can change over time. In early childhood they may copy the behaviour of their parents or siblings, but later in life they may be more influenced by their peers or people in the media. Vicarious reinforcement can also influence gender development, if children see someone else receiving reinforcement for gender-appropriate behaviour they are more likely to copy that behaviour themselves. Perry and **Bussey (1979)** showed that children learn gender roles through imitation when models act in sex-stereotyped ways and that they prefer to imitate same-sex behaviour (boys and fathers/ girls and mothers). This research shows, rather than being less inclined to imitate, children are selective and base their imitation on whether a behaviour is considered appropriate to their own gender. **Quiery (1988)** suggests parents, particularly fathers, behave differently towards their children based on gender and fathers appear to reinforce sex-typed behaviour more than mothers. This shows how experiences in our social environment may shape our gender development. The idea of gender socialisation in the social learning theory suggests that children are brought up to behave in gender stereotypical ways. **Fagot (1978)** observed children at home playing with parents and found that boys and girls were reinforced for different behaviours. Boys were positively reinforced for playing with male toys and were punished for playing with female toys such as dolls. This supports the claim that parents shape gender-appropriate behaviour, suggesting that girls are positively reinforced to take on female gender roles, whereas boys are positively reinforced to take on male gender roles. Moreover, in other social observations boys are encouraged to be more active during play, but this may be a consequence of the fact that they are naturally more active due to hormonal differences, so it may not be the result of differential reinforcement. This suggests that the social learning theory fails to account for biological influences on gender role behaviour. In addition, **Bussey and Bandura (1992)** found that young children disapprove of gender-inconsistent play. They showed that gender development is driven by self-regulatory mechanisms and social cognitive factors rather than just gender constancy (the understanding that gender remains the same). They observed that children as young as 2–4 years old engaged in gender stereotypical behaviours, with self-approval for same-sex behaviour and self-criticism for cross-sex behaviour emerging as they got older. This evidence offers support for the social learning theory as an explanation of gender development. However, it is believed that cognitive processes play a greater role in the learning of gender than the social learning theory allows. Bandura considered this in his explanation of mediational processes in social learning. **Bandura (1977)** suggested four cognitive processes which were central to social learning theory; attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. These mediational processes help to explain how children retain behaviour they have observed and reproduce it when they feel motivated to do so. However, the social learning theory has difficulty explaining how children's understanding of gender changes over time and it does not explain

how cultural influence can change behaviour over time. Some aspects of gender role behaviour are universal for all cultures; however, these social norms are subject to change over time. For example, **Hofstede (2001)** argues that in industrialised cultures the changing status and expectations of women are a function of their increasingly active role in the workplace and away from the domestic home. This has led to a breakdown of traditional gender stereotypical roles. Other explanations for gender development may be more appropriate for change over time.

