



LEARNING AS AN EXPLANATION FOR GENDER DEVELOPMENT

Operant conditioning and social learning theory as explanations of gender development

The Learning Approach uses both *operant conditioning* and *social learning theory* to help explain gender behaviour and the way it is learnt. You should also be able to compare the explanations of gender development of this approach to the Biological Approach and the Psychodynamic Approach.

Operant conditioning

This explanation uses the principles of **shaping** (shaping behaviour) due to reinforcements and punishments. The ways in which babies are treated, in fact from the very moment they are born, differs: boys are treated as strong and big, whereas girls are treated as delicate and pretty.

The study by **Smith and Lloyd (1978)** set in a doctor's surgery used the scenario of a mother being asked to look after a baby for a short time whilst the mother's baby went to see the doctor. The baby would be dressed "wrongly" and the babysitting mother would always offer a hammer more often to a baby "boy" than a baby "girl".

The principles of operant conditioning suggest that behaviour is reinforced with rewards. Boys are more likely to be rewarded for showing male behaviour, and girls for female behaviour, and this may be with attention or a different type of direct reward. Children are also punished sometimes for showing inappropriate gender-specific behaviour. So gender behaviour is learned through punishments and reinforcements. The development of the gender behaviour is shaped by continually reinforcing desired behaviours and punishing undesired behaviours.

Social learning theory

This explanation uses the principles of social learning theory, specifically, **vicarious reinforcement** and **observational learning**. At a young age, children would have to identify with one gender to adopt vicarious learning, which is unlikely, and so gender behaviour can be adopted by children at an older age. The study of **Bandura, Ross and Ross (see 5.6 Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961)** for more) showed that boys are more likely to imitate the behaviour of males, and girls are more likely to copy females.

There are two important issues in observational learning:

1. **relevance** – behaviour that is seen as *relevant* is likely to be imitated, such as gender behaviour
2. **identification** – the learning will only occur if the learner *identifies* with the model, which social learning theory suggests happens when the individual finds some similarity between themselves and the model, such as gender

Evaluation of the learning explanations for gender development:

- ✓ The learning can be observed, and indeed, observations have been carried out to show that boys are more likely to imitate male models and girls are more likely to imitate female models
- ✓ Animal studies show that learning explanations can also explain animal behaviour and that such explanations are reliable
- ✗ Learning theories suggest that gender behaviour is learned through observation and reinforcement, which if true would mean that the way in which gender behaviour is developed would show variation over different cultures, who all have different customs – but in reality, there are many similarities in the way gender development takes place, such as when children undergo gender identification
- ✗ There are gender differences in newborn babies which cannot be explained by learning theories, and so there are still some elements which have to consider other explanations for gender development

Note: As part of the course, you are expected to know the explanations for gender development of each of the three approaches from this second unit. The following page covers a brief outline of all three (Psychodynamic Approach, Biological Approach and Learning Approach) explanations for gender behaviour and development. However, you must also be able to compare any combination of the approaches, so also included on the next page is a comparison of each pair of approaches and their explanations.

How the Psychodynamic Approach explains gender development...

Freud explained that boys identify with their fathers and take on their behaviours and moral codes, in order to resolve the Oedipus complex, because their feelings for their mothers produce guilt, and only by 'becoming' their fathers can they resolve this guilt. Girls identify with their mothers to avoid feelings of guilt (although in a slightly different way). Therefore, Freud explains gender behaviour by stating from the age of around four or five children identify with their same-sex parents and take on their behaviour

How the Biological Approach explains gender development...

This approach uses genes and hormones to explain gender behaviour. Boys have the chromosomal pair XY and girls have XX, which leads to developmental differences of the foetus, such as the levels of hormones produced and the type of genitalia developed. There are also brain structure and function differences between males and females. The approach takes on board not only nature, but also nurture – i.e. how these things interact with the environment. For example, male babies are more assertive and restless, whereas female babies are more cooperative

How the Learning Approach explains gender development...

Social learning theory explains that a combination of operant conditioning and observational (and vicarious) learning lead to gender development. For example, conditioning suggests an explanation in the treatment of babies based on their sex. They are rewarded and punished for their gender-specific behaviour. Observational learning has also been seen, where a male baby is more likely to imitate their mother and a female more likely to imitate their mother

A comparison of the *psychodynamic* and *biological* approaches

Similarities between the approaches...

- ❖ they both examine biological features (e.g. id, ego and superego in the psychodynamic and genes and hormones in the biological)
- ❖ both consider environmental influences (e.g. parents and society in developing superego and issues like abuse in brain development)
- ❖ both have case studies (e.g. Little Hans in the psychodynamic and Brenda in the biological)

Differences between the approaches...

- ❖ the psychodynamic focuses on mental aspects, the biological focuses on physiological aspects
- ❖ the psychodynamic looks at gender development, the biological looks at sex assignment
- ❖ the psychodynamic does not use scientific measures (e.g. superego), the biological does use scientific measures (e.g. chromosomes)

A comparison of the *psychodynamic* and *learning* approaches

Similarities between the approaches...

- ❖ they both look at behavioural development according to norms (e.g. same-sex parent behaviour in psychodynamic and reinforcement in learning)
- ❖ they both use the concept of identification (e.g. same-sex parent identification in psychodynamic and learning as well)
- ❖ neither approach focuses on biological aspects

Differences between the approaches...

- ❖ the psychodynamic allows for biological explanations as well, the learning says only environment affects behaviour after birth
- ❖ the psychodynamic is mainly nature, the learning is mainly nurture
- ❖ the psychodynamic doesn't use scientific measures, whereas the learning does

A comparison of the *biological* and *learning* approaches

Similarities between the approaches...

- ❖ they both use scientific research methods, favouring experiments rather than observations, and look for cause-and-effect relationships
- ❖ they both heavily rely on animal studies to find cause-and-effect relationships (e.g. mice in the biological and rats in the learning)

Differences between the approaches...

- ❖ the biological considers mainly nature and biology, the learning considers only nurture and environment after birth
- ❖ the biological looks at sex assignment (biological makeup), the learning looks at behaviour development (connected with upbringing)
- ❖ the biological uses case studies, the learning mainly uses observations and very few case studies