

Gender differences in personality



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With relevant theory and research evidence, critically discuss the view that there are gender differences in personality

One's sex, or biological reproductive chances, can be seen as a discrete component to one's gender, or their psychological perception of themselves used for identification (Phares, 1991). These perceptions of gender differences can be extremely influential from an early age, as seen in Rubin, Provenzano and Luria (1974) study examining the gender-role stereotype labels parents place on their children from a young age. Girls were described as 'cute' or 'sweet' whereas boys were described as 'stronger', both gender specific traits, even though the babies were almost identical in weight, height and activity. Gender differences can be predominantly seen in personality and have been apparent since ancient civilizations. Monuments would depict essentially feminine or masculine characteristics, females were originally viewed as 'incomplete' or imperfect males, and these ideologies persisted for years with reinforcement from philosophers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (Friedman & Schustack, 2009). Personality, defined by Holt (2012), is the 'distinct and enduring way in which we perceive and behave in life situations'. The view of differences in personality gender traits can confirm the defined enduring nature, with the female assuming an expressive role, directed towards nurturing and caring tendencies. The male takes on an instrumental role, exerting dominance and competitiveness (Parsons, 1955). However, it is reasonable to question and explore how these gender differences can be measured, the theories behind them and whether female and male traits can really be distinguished into two separate categories in today's society.

The Five Factor Model (McCrae and Costa, 2003) is a trait approach that has attempted to identify and measure gender personality traits. They distinguish women as scoring higher in neuroticism and agreeableness, whereas men scored higher on some aspects of openness and extraversion, such as openness to ideas and excitement seeking. However neither gender scored significantly on conscientiousness (Chapman, Duberstein, Sörensen & Lyness, 2007). Other trait approaches have endeavoured to classify masculine and feminine traits as multi-dimensional and overlapping. For example the Bem Sex Role Inventory classifies individuals to feminine, masculine, undifferentiated and androgynous (expressing both female and male traits) categories (Bem, 1974). Sexual behaviour and emotion has also been studied to a great extent to help further differentiate between gender differences in personality. Schmitt, Shackelford and Buss (2001) stated that men prefer short-term sexual relations with many partners, compared to women who prefer one stable partner over a long period of time. This can be seen in Clark and Hatfield (1989) findings where 3 out of 4 male students would enthusiastically agree to a one night stand compared to none of the women accepting the offer. Holt et al (2012) also state that when looking for a partner, men would seek a younger woman, whereas women prefer older and 'well to do' men. These are all gender specific differences in personality that can be explained by gender difference theories.

Firstly, biological effects on sex have been suggested to have a major influence on gender personality and behaviour. In terms of genetic influence, the prenatal stage of foetus development can be manipulated to affect gender-specific traits when born, such as higher levels of aggression.

Parsons (1980) exposed animal male and female embryos to androgens, the male hormone, during early prenatal development. After birth, both sexes produced higher levels of aggressive play compared to animals not exposed, which suggests the presence of male hormones had an influence on the physical development and personality of the foetus. This supports the idea that aggression can be seen to be predominantly a 'male trait' in Reinisch and Sanders (1986) findings. Male and female participants were asked to rate themselves on their physical and verbal aggression. Even though both sexes reported similar verbal aggression, males reported much higher demonstrations of physical aggression. However, this is not always the case, as Feshbach (1969) work describes, females largely exclude and reject newcomers compared to males, which is a form of indirect aggression, suggesting the cognitive intent of the aggression presented by females may be further internalised, compared to the outward aggressive display by males. This biological view to gender differences in personality can be related to the evolutionary perspective that males and females are genetically adapted for successful reproduction and preservation of their genes. Evolutionary pressures led to natural selection that created fundamentally different gender roles to promote survival (Shaffer, 2009). Males needed to seek as many partners as possible to 'spread' their gene, whilst females needed to avoid wasting their short reproductive opportunities by finding a mate that will protect and provide. This in turn created the gender roles seen today including masculine traits in their personality such as competitiveness, assertiveness and aggression, compared to feminine traits such as nurturing, kindness and gentleness (Geary, 1999). Furthermore, Buss (1995) describes male superiority in visual

spatial performance as skills gained from natural selection due to their advantage for hunting, killing and providing for the family. The evolutionary theory can be seen in sex differences in the personality trait jealousy, for example Buss, Larsen, Western and Semmelroth (1992) found that men portray more jealousy over the idea of their partner sleeping with another male, compared to women who present more jealousy over the idea of their partner being in love with another woman. Males don't want the risk of providing resources for a child that may not be theirs, whilst women don't want their mate to abandon them and leave them with nothing. However, these evolutionary differences in gender personality are not always consistent. Buss (2003) found that some women instead like to engage in casual sex with multiple partners because experience has resulted in securing better genes and better resources. This consistency between both sexes therefore leads to question whether females and males really do have specific differences, and suggests socialisation and learned experiences may have more of an impact on gender differences than biology.

The Behaviourist approach to gender differences suggests that social learning has created gender-typed personality characteristics. Through operant learning, modelling, observation and classical learning, children develop gender-typed traits that can be used for identification and as a primary socialiser (Bandura & Bussey, 2004). For example Henley (1977) describes operant conditioning in a little girl called Jenny. Her mother tells Jenny off for dirtying her party clothes, and praises her for showing passive and gentle characteristics, which are all reinforcements. Moreover, Peter's father wrestles with Peter, watches football games with him and promotes

more aggressive behaviour, teaching and confirming to Peter that these are the traits a male should portray. Repetti (1984) further explains how these gender traits are reflected in the types of toys children are given to play with. Girls were found to be given female orientated toys such as dolls, whereas boys were given masculine toys such as cars or guns, reflecting the gender-typed personality traits. Also, Maccoby and Wilson (1957) studied the orientation towards same-sex role models in children. They found after the children had watched a film presenting interactions between opposite sex characters, the children recalled more information about the character that mirrored their own sex. The children's memories had a 'sex-linked' quality. However, it could be suggested that socialisation is not a successful theory in determining gender differences in personality. Friedman and Schustack (2009) describe the David Reimer case, where a child, who was born a boy, was brought up and socialised to be a girl after a circumcision went wrong. David was given hormones and was taught to be caring, nurturing and take on a feminine role. However when David reached his teenage years he returned to his male identity, after what he described as an unhappy and 'misleading' childhood. Money and Ehrhardt (1972) insist that socialisation is still primary to gender assignment, as their research findings of androgenized girls suggest that before 18 months of age, it is possible to bring up a child as the opposite gender because the child hasn't 'internalised' the gender at that age. However 'failure' to correctly socialise gender can still be seen today. Friedman & Schustack (2009) outline Dr. Joan Roughgarden case. She was born a boy and lived 52 years of her life as one. She was socialised to be masculine and had the biological make up of a boy, despite always seeing herself as a girl, and consequently ended up

having a sex change. These findings suggest that human gender personality cannot solely be reliant on socialisation, however they do suggest that there still are differences within gender traits and socialisation advocates what traits each gender 'should' portray.

The significance of different gender traits in gender socialisation is part of the explanation for gender schemas incorporated in the cognitive approach to gender differences. The gender schema theory suggests that culture and socialisation provide organised mental structures that help understanding of the way in which a male or female should behave and think (Bem, 1981).

Gender schemas act as cognitive filters to help humans depict gender relevant material, and to use it in everyday life. For example Deaux and Major (1987) describe these cognitive filters being activated by each gender as females enter a beauty salon and males enter a car repair shop. Again, gender differences can be seen to be realistic and apparent. Nevertheless, the theories above do not explain concisely why there are female and male traits in personality. An Integrative theory could be used to see how biology, social-learning and cognitive developmental can overlap and contribute equally to gender differences. This theory suggests that different processes are important at different stages of development. As Halpern (1997) suggests, the prenatal stage consists of biological gender processes developing physically. Birth to three years consists largely of social learning about gender differences and gender schema comes in at three to six years of age. This theory shows a dynamic and interpretive way in which gender traits can be developed and distinguished.

On the other hand, all these theories do not take in to account cross cultural differences, individual findings and the growing concept that gender differences all together may be disappearing. Sue and Sue (1999) suggest that African American families, compared to white American families, are observed to be matriarchal, where the mother of the family is the head decision maker. These findings suggest that what would be considered as ‘masculine’ traits can be seen presented in women. Mead (1935) observed differences between two New Guinea people, where in one group, both sexes would display certain considered ‘female traits’ of nurturing and caring, and both sexes of the other group would display certain male trait characteristics such as aggressiveness. These trait findings are opposite to what would be expected to be found in western culture and can suggest that gender traits are not as specific and defined as first thought. Research also suggests that social-class can affect the flexibility and ‘acceptable’ gender traits presented by men and women. For example Shaffer (2009) states that people from middle-class background have overall more acceptable views of gender trait presentation in men and women. They may feel more flexible to the idea of a male demonstrating a nurturing role, and a woman being the sole bread winner of the family, than working-class people. This can be seen as a typically modern idea, and can suggest that women and male gender personality traits are swapping, in terms of the roles they take on. This can therefore suggest that male and female gender personality traits are not so specific, but are only presented by the certain sex at certain times. This idea can be seen in Weisner and Wilson-Mitchell (1990) study where children raised in ‘countercultural’ homes, instead of traditionally at home with a mother and father, are seen to present an equal amount of male and female

traits, and are less gender-stereotyped. However, these children are still very aware of the traditional gender traits and the differences between them. Finally, this is not to suggest that cultural differences don't mirror typical western views of gender trait differences. Williams and Best (1990) carried out a longitudinal study over 30 different countries where they found overlapping traits most common found in both women and men, such as aggression and nurturing tendencies.

Overall, gender differences in personality are both clearly affected by biological and behavioural influences. Males are born with an evolutionary inclination to behave aggressively, and this behaviour is encouraged by socialisation from parents and other role models. This can be seen in female evolutionary inclinations to nurture and protect their children, and socialisation such as being encouraged to play with dolls and care for them promotes these gender traits. Generally, gender traits in personality present more similarities between females and males than they do differences, but this does not mean they do not exist and are not portrayed differently over cultures and social classes. The way gender traits in personality are measured can determine to what extent male and females differ, but with modern ideas becoming the forefront of gender trait presentation, the distinguishing of gender differences in personality may be swapping over, becoming narrower, and becoming far less defined.