Discuss using psychological research the nature and extent of gender bias in psychology.

3 mark question - What is meant by the term ‘gender bias’?

Gender bias is the practice of psychology routinely and persistently operating for the benefit of one gender in relation to the other. Examples include Alpha Bias which is where differences between men and women are exaggerated, leading to gender stereotypes, whereas Beta Bias ignores important gender differences meaning that ‘female psychology’ is not adequately reported. Such biases exist because of androcentric standards females are judged against. It includes varieties of gender bias such as theoretical, reporting, researcher and methodological bias.

22 mark essay:

Major theories of development are frequently characterised by a gender bias resulting from a ‘male as norm’ perspective. In recent years however there has been a lot of interest in women-centred psychology to counteract androcentric bias. Feminist research methods have been used to restore the balance from methods biased towards men. It could be said that routinely psychology is persistently operated for the benefit of one gender in relation to the other. Maccoby and Jacklin’s (1974) review of research identified four real differences between girls and boys: girls have greater verbal ability than boys, boys have greater visual and spatial abilities than girls, boys have greater arithmetical ability than girls (but only at adolescence), and finally girls are less aggressive than boys. Possibly implying that any other differences are cases of alpha bias (exaggeration of differences).

An example of alpha bias is Freud’s theory of psychosexual development as he viewed femininity as failed masculinity. He claimed ‘we must not allow ourselves to regard the two sexes as equal in position and worth’. Josselson pointed out ‘classical psychoanalytic theory is grounded in the genetic inferiority of women and deduces their moral inferiority as well’. Freud believed that women must be morally inferior to men as they cannot undergo the same Oedipus conflict due to an absence of a penis (castration anxiety), and because the superego develops from Oedipus conflict, women must therefore be morally inferior.

An example of beta bias is Kohlberg (1963) theory of moral reasoning which had androcentric bias for two reasons – the dilemmas used to assess moral reasoning were based on the male perspective (justice orientation) and the developmental scale was based on research with males, but the study went on to apply the findings to both men and women assuming there is universal relevance. The beta bias in the theory produced evidence of a difference which may not exist, and the end result is the women’s perspective is devalued. Gilligan (1982) criticised of Kohlberg’s study, as it involved boys and men only,