SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES:

Sex-role stereotypes are behaviours and characteristics deemed appropriate for either males or females, sex role beliefs are the characteristics and behaviours expected of a sex, these then become sex-role stereotypes when they are carried out by the majority of people as makes such stereotypical behaviour become the norm for the sexes, this then puts pressure on individuals to conform.

The sex-role stereotypical characteristics and behaviours are learnt at a young age when exposed to the attitudes and behaviours of adults, for example, the phrases they use such as ‘boys don’t cry’, as well as the way in which they handle girls (gently) and boys (roughly). Finally, the toys which adults buy children result in sex-role stereotypes, buying boys construction toys and weapons meanwhile buying girls dolls encouraging a domestic role. Consequently, suggesting that sex-role stereotypes are learnt through the socialisation process whereby one generation passes on their beliefs and attitudes onto another.

The pressure to conform to such sex-role stereotypes are enhanced by peers who ‘police’ behaviour, meeting any behaviour seen as inappropriate for their gender with hostility and pressure to conform. Further existence of sex-role stereotyping in childhood as during school gender appropriate subjects are encouraged for one sex over another, for example, home economics is encouraged for girls, while physics is deemed more appropriate for males. This expectation then continues into later life with gender appropriate careers. One influential source of such sex-role stereotypes is the media, whose portrayal of males and females can have consequences on both adults and children. Culture also plays vital role in socialising sex-role stereotypes with some characteristics being consistent across cultures (males aggression) however, many sex-role characteristics varying across cultures. For example, in Zulu it is normal that women would build the houses.

One evaluation point of sex-role stereotypes is the evidential support of the effect of sex-role stereotypes on career. Sood et al highlighted how 12% of primary school teachers and 3% of nursery teachers are male. This is likely to be due to the stereotypical characteristics of a male being threatening and intimidating, therefore unsuitable for a role in providing care. This is a strength of the theory of sex-role stereotypes as evidence suggests that such stereotypes can result in gender appropriate careers. However, due to the assumption gender appropriate careers society has placed significant restrictive barriers on individuals and what they can contribute to society. For example, males could make excellent primary school teachers providing a role model to boys, however due to sex role stereotypical characteristics of males there is limited ability for males to contribute to roles with negative consequences on society limiting the contributions individuals could make to society based on an unfair generalisation of characteristics. Despite recognising the effects of sex-role stereotypes, this does not limit its negative consequences due to the difficulty to break down such assumptions. Stereotypes overemphasis typical behaviours in one sex (women being emotional) while simultaneously undervaluing under stressing this behaviour in the alternative sex as ‘non-typical’. This is a weakness of sex-role stereotypes as the ‘typical’ differences become perceived as natural differences reinforcing sex-role stereotypes, making it increasingly difficult to break them down.

My second evaluation point of sex-role stereotypes is the support for parental influence on sex-role stereotypes. Smith and Lloyd found that parents treated boys much differently to girls, Smith and Lloyd conducted a study on 32 mothers seeing how they played with a child they were told the gender of, finding that they would give a boy a squeaky hammer to play with and encourage motor activity. This is a strength of the theory of sex-role stereotypes as it supports the influence of adults behaviours upon the development of sex-role stereotypes. Furthermore, the influence of culture on the learning process of sex-role stereotypes suggests that they are learnt as characteristics associated with as sex are learnt through the observation of a gender role model who is reinforced for gender appropriate behaviours. This is a strength as it supports that sex-role stereotypes are learnt as oppose to biologically inherited. On the other hand, other sources of sex-role stereotypes, other than culture and parental influence, is the media. Although its stereotypes have reduced, its influence remains subtle and consequential for children, as there remains significant negative partials of women stereotypical behaviours. This is a weakness of sex-role stereotypes as media continues to negatively maintain its mass influence.