Social learning theory: outline and evaluate

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Outline what is meant by the term *identification* in relation to the social learning theory approach. [2 marks]

Identification is a psychological process whereby someone identifies with something from another person, typically a model of theirs, and then uses this in order to change their personality. For example, a little boy may identify with his older brother because they are both male, and so when he sees him stealing from a shop, he copies.

Explain one limitation of the social learning theory approach. [3 marks]

This approach is less determinist than the behaviourist approach. Reciprocal determination, introduced by Bandura, is the idea that we are not just influenced by environmental factors, however but merely influences and directs us to behave a certain way. This suggests that we have a sense of free will in our behaviour, and doesn't just stick to one theory as to why we behave the way that we do.

Outline and evaluate the social learning theory approach. Refer to the behaviourist approach as part of your evaluation.

Even though the social learning theory (SLT) does agree with the behaviourist theory – that most of our behaviour is learned through experience – Bandura also propose the idea that people can learn through different way, e. g. observation and imitation. Learning does occur through

classical and operant conditioning; however, we can also learn indirectly – through watching others and learning from mistakes.

Another word for this is vicarious reinforcement; learning through observing and imitating; indirectly. An individual observes the behaviour of someone and if the behaviour is received positively, they would learn that they can do that, and if it is received negatively, they will know to never do it. So, if someone is punished we learn not to copy the behaviour, and if someone is rewarded we know that we should or could repeat that behaviour!

A huge idea throughout the SLT approach is the role of mediational processes. This is the concept that mental processes effect our behaviour. These mental factors, or mediational processes, created by Bandura, are: attention – the extent to which we notice certain behaviours; retention – how well the behaviour is remembered; motor reproduction – the ability to perform the behaviour; and motivation – the will to perform the behaviour.

Identification is also a key concept in SLT. This is when people are more likely to imitate the behaviour of people we identify with. These are known as models. We can find models in people we find attractive, family, friends, and peers, and people of high status. If we see our model behaving in a certain way, we are more lily to copy it (imitate it).

One strength of the social learning theory is that it is less determinist than the behaviourist approach. Reciprocal determination, introduced by Bandura, is the idea that we are not just influenced by environmental factors, however but merely influences and directs us to behave a certain way. This suggests

that we have a sense of free will in our behaviour, and doesn't just stick to one theory as to why we behave the way that we do.

Another strength of this approach is that it explains cultural differences in behaviour. This theory can explain how people living in Nigeria behave differently to people living in England, for example, because it says our behaviour is through learning from those around us and the societies in which we live. This has been a useful concept in understanding why children from different countries act differently, for example how they come to understand their gender role.

A final strength of the social learning theory approach is that it shows the importance of cognitive factors in learning. Conditioning alone, whether it operant, classical, or both, cannot provide a good enough explanation for behaviour. Humans and animals alike learn and remember behaviours which they should do. For example, from a young child children learn from their older sibling's mistakes and therefore avoid doing that punished behaviour. Bandura observed a similar thing with his bobo doll, as when children were shown an adult hitting a bobo doll and getting away with it, they repeated the behaviour, however when they saw an adult getting in trouble for it, they didn't. Therefore, this is a strength because it provides a more comprehensive and detailed explanation of behaviour.

However, a weakness of the SLT approach is that it over-relies on evidence from lab studies. Many of the ideas that Bandura developed were all tested through lab studies, and not real life situations. Studies done in labs can often not be a true reflection of what the researcher is investigating because

of this. For example, the children in Bandura's bobo doll experiment may have understood that as they were not in a real-life situation – being shown a video of an aggressive adult, for example – they were supposed to copy the behaviours of the adult or they may have acted the way they thought they were supposed to. Therefore, the research may tell us little about how the children truly would have behaved.

A final evaluation point of this approach is the weakness that the SLT underestimates the influence of biological factors. Little reference to biological factors are mentioned by Bandura in this approach. However, we can see from his studies that biology does take a toll. For example, boys were found to be more aggressive towards the bobo doll, however we know that testosterone is a hormone found naturally in males, that makes them more aggressive by nature. Therefore, we cannot put down their behaviour entirely to learning, as biology must play a role in it.