

**Essay Title:** Outline and evaluate the social learning approach in psychology. (16 marks)

Social learning theory (SLT) rests on the idea of observational learning: that learning occurs through the observation and imitation of behaviour performed by models in the social environment. Unlike the behaviourist approach from which it derives, SLT recognises the importance of cognitive processing of informational stimuli (mediational processes) and rejects the notion that learning is purely the outcome of a stimulus-response loop.

*An interesting and well-detailed introduction, using specialist terminology and providing an interesting comparison to behaviourism.*

As its name implies, learning is a social phenomenon. In order for it to take place, someone must model an attitude or behaviour in a context defined by four distinct characteristics: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. If these factors are implemented, imitation (i.e. copying of what has been observed) can take place; if the observed behaviour is rewarded, imitation is more likely. This learning from the observation of others' rewards is what Bandura called vicarious learning. There is also evidence (Shutts et al., 2010) to suggest that for children, the age and gender similarity to models is an important determinant of the likelihood of imitation. This cognitive appraisal process clearly distinguishes SLT from the more deterministic behaviourist approach.

*Excellent use of specialist terminology.*

*Evidence is used to support the outline and demonstrates excellent understanding.*

One strength of SLT is its plentiful research support. For example, Fox and Bailenson (2009) found that humans were more likely to imitate computer-generated 'virtual humans' who were similar to themselves; Rushton and Campbell (1977) found that same-sex modeling significantly increased the number of female observers who agreed to, and then actually did, donate blood; and Myers (2015) confirmed the importance of vicarious learning for the effectiveness of workplace teams. These studies demonstrate support for different aspects of SLT, including modelling and vicarious reinforcement, adding credibility to the key principles of this theory.

*An effective evaluation point drawing on multiple studies to support SLT. Further and specific elaboration could have explained how each of these studies support the theory in more detail.*

Another strength of SLT is its applicability to real-world issues. It has long been a feature in explanations of criminal behaviour (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and recent research has continued that focus (Akers, 1998). It has also been used to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of

advertising: Andsager et al. (2006) found that 'identification with a character or example may increase the likelihood that audiences will model behaviour presented in an anti-alcohol message'. Consequently, the principles of SLT can be used to provide a positive impact on promotional health campaigns, and indirectly help combat problem behaviours like alcoholism.

*An excellent evaluation point drawing on research support and highlighting the real-world application of SLT.*

However, one limitation of SLT revolves around the issue of causality: Do people learn behaviour from models, or do they seek out models who exhibit behaviour or attitudes they already favour? Siegel and McCormick (2006), for example, argue that young people who hold deviant values and attitudes are more likely to associate with similarly-inclined peers because they are more fun to be with, and thus the reinforcement of 'deviant' behaviour is a two-way process and not necessarily the result of SLT itself. Also, SLT struggles to explain complex behaviours like gender development. Children are exposed to a whole host of influences when growing up, and these different influences interact in a complex way. Consequently, it is difficult to distinguish behaviours that develop because of SLT from the many other factors that contribute to human behaviour, which poses an issue for the social learning explanation of behaviour.

*This evaluation point poses an interesting question and outlines research to demonstrate a limitation of SLT.*

*The evaluation is effectively developed to outline another limitation of SLT.*

[517 Words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark Band 4**

This is a well-structured and clear essay which provides an accurate and well-detailed account of SLT and a range of effective evaluation to critique this theory. The essay is clear, coherent and focused and specialist terminology is used throughout.