Define and Evaluate the Social Learning Theory.

The key assumption of the Social Learning Theory is that all behaviour is environmentally determined and learnt by watching role models and imitating behaviour through vicarious reinforcement. For social learning theory to take place, someone must model the attitude or behaviour to be learned. Children observe this and reproduce it through imitation. Behaviour is only imitated if it has been noticed and remembered, and if the observer is able to reproduce it and has the will to perform it – meaning that they expect positive consequences more than negative. Vicarious reinforcement is where individuals learn about the consequences (rewards/punishments) of an action and adjust their subsequent behaviour accordingly. They do this by developing hypotheses and forming mental representations of behaviour most likely to succeed in situations and use these as guides for future behaviour. Identification (the ability to relate to a model) is also important as it means the observer feels they are similar enough to experience the same outcomes.

The psychologist, Bandura, carried out a study where an equal number of children observed either aggressive or non-aggressive models interacting with a Bobo doll and were then tested for imitative behaviour. Bandura found that children who had observed the aggressive model reproduced the model’s physically and verbally aggressive behaviour. Children who had observed the non-aggressive model exhibited virtually no aggression. Children also showed increased aggression when they saw their model rewarded for aggressive acts.

A strength of the SLT is that it has useful applications. The findings have been applied to increase understanding of human behaviour (e.g., criminal behaviour). Akers suggests that someone is more likely to be involved in criminal behaviour if they are exposed to models who commit criminal behaviour, especially if they identify with the model and expect positive outcomes. Ulrich found that the strongest cause of violent behaviour in adolescence is an association with delinquent peer groups as they modelled behaviour that was rewarded.

A weakness of the SLT is that the cause of delinquency may not be social learning because of exposure to deviant role models, but having deviant attitudes before association with delinquent peers. This means that blaming increased criminal behaviour on increased time spent with deviant people is not certain, especially as children are exposed to many different influences including genetic predisposition. Researchers have suggested that adolescents who have deviant values look for people with similar values, as they are more impetuous and therefore more likely to see the behaviour they enjoy as ‘fun’.

A strength of the SLT is that there is evidence that supports the idea that identification leads to more learning (as they can visualise themselves having the same experience), compared to a model who is not similar to the observer. Fox and Bailenson found evidence for this by using similar/dissimilar computer-generated virtual humans of participants; they were either exercising or loitering. Those who saw their virtual exercising did more exercise in the 24 hours after than people who saw a dissimilar model or their model not exercising.