

Outline and evaluate one or more social psychological theories of aggression (8 and 16 marks)



One social psychological theory of aggression is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT). This theory states that we learn aggressive behaviour by observing others acting aggressively and therefore it is controlled by environmental influences. There may be a role for biological factors as they may create a potential for aggression however it is the expression of it that is learnt depending on circumstances. People also learn under what circumstances they will be rewarded for aggression (vicarious reinforcement). The 4 main processes are attention, retention, reproduction and motivation.

Bandura's Bobo doll studies provides supporting evidence. This is because when showing children an adult acting aggressively towards the doll, they showed a far greater number of aggressive actions than if the adult ignored the doll. This was particularly so if the adult was reinforced for the aggression, demonstrating the importance of vicarious learning.

However, the study has several issues. Firstly it does not show real-life aggression as only a doll was used and the children could have been influenced by demand characteristics by knowing what was expected; bobo doll's are meant to be punched. It also only used upper-class white children and so cannot be generalised to the wider population of people. These confounding factors will reduce the study's internal validity and affect the extent to which it can back up the theory.

In addition, the theory can be classed as reductionist. This is because not everyone reacts in the same way when exposed to aggressive stimuli and because it ignores biological factors when they too have been found to be extremely influencing, such as mirror neurones which only seem to fire when presented with social learning opportunities. This would suggest biological and environmental factors interact more than SLT is claiming, and so it is not a holistic account.

However, the theory can account for cultural differences. For example, among the !Kung San tribe, aggression is rare. SLT can explain this as children in this tribe are not punished nor rewarded when they're aggressive and the parents are never seen fighting so there is no direct reinforcement or motivation for aggression. This would provide the theory with supporting evidence.

The theory has also shown to provide a long term effect with over 40% of a model's acts being able to be reproduced up to 8 months after the showing of just a 10 minute video.

A second theory is deindividuation. This is the process of decreased self-assessment in situations where identification is hard. It's believed that anonymity and shared responsibility leads to the loss of inhibitions and the takeover of a "collective mind". The theory has been heavily investigated by Zimbardo, especially in his Stanford Prison Study. He found that when deindividuating students and placing them as guards or prisoners, they all showed a lowered sense of identity and more anti-social behaviours.

A study by Deiner supports the theory. He found that trick-or-treaters were more likely to perform anti-social behaviours when in large groups and wearing costumes. This was a naturalistic observation and so was high in ecological validity. However, he only used children and did not directly measure aggression so the support it provides may have reduced validity.

Deindividuation also cannot explain individual differences and why not all crowds are aggressive, for example the Hindu Mala festival, or why the people who were deindividuated in Gergen's darkened room study did not act aggressively. This ultimately affects the theory's generalisability.

It has, however, been found to have real-life applications. This is due to a study by Mann who used deindividuation to explain the "baiting crowd". In 10 out of 21 cases of suicides analysed, a mob had formed and encouraged the person to jump. Mann concluded that the bigger the group, the darker it was and the further away

they were, the more likely they were to encourage the 'jumper'. This could be because they were deindividuated and so felt lower senses of individuality and decreased responsibility.

Lastly, there is the issue of determinism. The theory suggests that it's the presence of the group that determines aggression. It fails to appreciate the cognitive abilities a person has to evaluate the situation and decide, using free will, whether aggression would be appropriate or not.