

Background

The social approach assumes that behaviour is influenced by our external environment and those people within it. It believes that our social context rather than individual characteristics changes and influences behaviour. It attempts to understand how the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others.

Evidence





Milgram (1963) demonstrated how the presence of an authority figure could influence individuals obedience levels. He found that 65% of participants would be prepared to administer a dangerous electric shock to another person just because an authority figure said so.

Sutherland (1939) defined the theory of differential association when helping explain criminal behaviour. This states that people commit crime because others they associate with are also committing crime.

Sherif (1954) studied the behaviour of two groups of boys at a summer camp and found that social identification can be established easily and the mere existence of different groups is sufficient to cause in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination.

Asch (1951) conducted a series of experiments to test majority influence and found that people are likely to conform to others in order to fit in with the group.

Evaluation

-  The social approach has useful practical applications as the theories and research have helped our understanding of many real life scenarios such as those in areas like obedience and conformity.
-  Some studies in the social approach are conducted in natural settings and therefore have high ecological validity.
-  In order to study real life social behaviour, some classic studies needed to break ethical guidelines.
-  Research that is conducted in the lab may use artificial tasks and therefore lacks mundane realism. There is also a greater risk of demand characteristics.

