**Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the social psychology approach using one of the studies listed below as an example.**    [10]

**e.g. using Milgram, 1963 (Obedience)**

One of the debates in psychology is whether an individual's behaviour is a result of their personality or their environment. The social approach believes that behaviour is primarily caused by the social environment (the presence and influence of other people). Social psychology (or the social approach) is interested in studying individuals in a social context, such as family, friends, institutions, and wider society. Social behaviour may involve activity within a group or between groups.

One strength of the social approach is the contributions it makes about understanding social behaviour. Social psychology has useful applications because it can explain and even offer solutions to problems in the real world. For example, Milgram’s (1963) shock experiment identifies many situational factors which can lead to obedience. It has been very influential in showing us how we respond to authority figures, helping to explain events such as the holocaust where normal people obeyed horrific orders, and it has been replicated around the world. However we do have to recognise that studies which measure social behaviour may be specific to the time they were done. For example obedience rates in the 1960s might be different to obedience rates in the present day. These studies may also be culturally biased, although Milgram’s study has been widely replicated, some cross-cultural variation has been found, and the social approach ignores this in its explanations.

A main strength of social psychology is the attempt to use real life situations when studying behaviour. Because social psychology is interested in human interaction this is best studied in real situations such as field experiments. Milgram’s study was not a field experiment, and so will lack some ecological validity, as participants may behave differently in the real world to in the unusual experimental situation. However, Milgram’s participants did seem to believe that the experiment was real, as they displayed some extreme stress reactions during the test, and this shows how the approach can be very informative if it can produce realistic situations.

A problem which arises when studying social behaviour relates to ethics. It is difficult to study social behaviour without negatively affecting the participants in the study. Nowadays psychologists have strict ethical guidelines which they should follow when conducting studies. The Milgram study is often criticised for the way in which participants may have been harmed in the study. For example it can be argued that Milgram did not take adequate measures to protect his participants from the stress and emotional conflict they experienced. However, the ethical guidelines that psychologists nowadays must follow were not introduced when Milgram carried out his study and Milgram did not expect the results that he found, so perhaps he cannot be blamed for all of the harm that was caused.

 A further problem with the social approach is related to the representativeness of the samples used. The social approach attempts to make generalisations about social behaviour but often the samples used are very restricted. The Milgram study was carried out on male participants and therefore we would have to be careful generalising these findings to females. Furthermore it used a self-selected sampling technique which may mean that participants who volunteer may not be representative of the target population for a number of reasons. For example, they be more obedient, more motivated to take part in studies and so on.

One final criticism of the approach is that it is reductionist, in that it only focuses on one narrow explanation for a behaviour, and ignores other useful explanations. The social approach looks at social influences, but by doing so it ignores the effects of things such as culture, individual differences and biology. For example, the people taking the Milgram test may have been biologically more aggressive people due to their genetics, or perhaps they could have been in very emotional states due to receiving bad news. The social approach would not look at these factors and so would conclude that the behaviour observed is entirely due to the social situation. This may not be a valid conclusion to make.