Chardonnay's answer

(a) One assumption of the developmental approach is that as we get older, we change and develop in terms of the way we think (cognitive), and also in terms of emotions, attachment patterns and learning.

(b) The developmental approach would understand conservation in terms of a stage theory of cognitive development. The ability of a child to conserve or not would depend upon which stage he or she is in, as the particular stage is characterised by a whole way of thinking. Thus, according to Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development, the pre-operational stage child cannot conserve because they lack certain logical ‘operations’ – they cannot easily mentally reverse what they have seen, or understand that an increase in the height of the jar might be compensated for a decrease in the breadth of the jar. However, children in the concrete operational stage do have these logical operations and so can conserve. Therefore, the ability to conserve is a good indicator of which stage a child is in.

(c) One ethical issue is harm. Although there is not too much harm here – they are not being shown anything particularly distressing – one has to be really careful with children. For example, in this study, it might be that by asking children the same question twice in the standard judgement condition (and them giving the wrong answer) might somehow make them later feel either tricked or even confused.

Another ethical issue is consent and this is particularly problematic for children. According to the BPS Code, an adult responsible for the child, in loco parentis, such as a teacher can make the decision and consent for them to be in the study. However, this may not fully resolve the issue. Teachers may agree to something that the parent may not (because they do not know and understand the child so well). So, in a way, this is unfair consent. Also, should a child be consulted in some way? Therefore, while the guidelines give some way to reduce the issue, it might not always be completely possible to resolve the issue of consent here.

(d) One strength of the developmental approach is that the knowledge gained from research can be used to influence children for the better and make their lives (and even possibly society?) better. For example, knowledge gained from Samuel and Bryant's and Piaget's work can help influence how a curriculum is designed so that children can benefit most from their education – we can know at what age it is appropriate to teach which concepts and ideas as well as how to teach them, because children of certain ages may not be able to grasp some things according to Piaget. Samuel and Bryant's study helps revise these ideas of when children are ready for what curriculum because it tells us that if information is presented to them in a certain way, and they are questioned in a way which doesn't mislead them, they are more cognitively advanced than Piaget believed. Of course, it is not psychologists’ jobs to make these changes, but evidence from the studies might help shape educationalists’ decisions.

Another strength of the developmental approach is that it crosses lots of the divides in psychology. For example, Samuel and Bryant is in the cognitive tradition of psychology as it focuses on how children's minds and logic develop. Freud is psychoanalytic – his interpretation of Hans' phobia is based upon his psychosexual stage theory which describes the development of the id, ego and superego as well as subconscious conflicts and focuses of sexual pleasure at different stages. Therefore, Freud's perspective is very different to that of Samuel and Bryant. Lastly, the Bandura study is basically from the behaviourists’ tradition, which looks at how behaviour is learnt and at the external forces for learning. Therefore, one strength of the developmental approach in crossing all these divides of perspectives, is that it can give a well-rounded and full understanding of children's behaviour.

One weakness of the developmental approach is that it is very difficult to use valid methods which do not compromise the validity of the research. This is because research on children has to be designed very very carefully as they are much more susceptible to the influence of unusual situations or even perhaps demand characteristics. Samuel and Bryant's study shows just how much children are influenced by poor study design because when they changed Piaget's original two-question method to just one-question, many more children could conserve. This shows that children are easily influenced by extraneous variables and this undermines the validity of the study. Samuel and Bryant shows Piaget's failing but also shows how easy it is for researchers to unwittingly create a procedure which undermines the validity of research. Therefore, it is really important for researchers to very carefully design studies with children so that they get results which are valid and measure what they intended to measure.

Another weakness of the developmental approach is that, in reality, it focuses too much on children. Although there are some good reasons why the vast majority of developmental research has taken place on children (because, for example, it is the fastest period of development, and it is when maybe humans are most susceptible to influencing factors), the developmental approach has really neglected processes of change in adulthood. The over-focus on children seems to imply that once we get to adulthood, nothing happens, we are stuck as who we are with whatever flaws and weaknesses. Piaget's theory of cognitive development stops at around 15, and Freud's stage theory stops at the end of adolescence. This all seems to imply that there is no mechanism of change after that. Of course, humans do continue to change and develop after the age of 21, both cognitively and emotionally. Therefore, there should be more lifespan research and developmental theories should try to take more account of changes in adulthood.