AQA Psychology A-Level

Topic 8: Issues and Debates in Psychology

Example Essay

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Discuss idiographic and nomothetic approaches to research in psychology. (16 Marks)

The idiographic approach is a method of investigating behaviour that focuses on individuals rather than groups. It aims to understand the unique experiences and characteristics of a person rather than producing general laws of behaviour. As a result, findings are not usually generalised to the wider population. The idiographic approach tends to use qualitative methods of data collection, such as unstructured interviews, diary entries, personal accounts, observations and case studies, as these provide rich and detailed information about an individual's experiences. AO1

An example of this would be the case of HM, a man who suffered from severe epilepsy. In an attempt to treat his condition, he underwent surgery that resulted in him losing the part of his brain responsible for the formation of long-term memories- the hippocampus. Sigmund Freud employed the use of the idiographic approach, he looked at case studies such as Dora and that of Little Hans (1905). Freud used the latter case study as the foundation of his Oedipus Complex and Feminine Oedipus attitude explanations for the development of gender identity in children. This shows that although the findings obtained using idiographic approaches cannot be generalised, they can be used as a basis for theories. AO1

The idiographic approach has its strengths in that it uses qualitative methods of data collection. This is beneficial as the more in-depth data provides more detailed accounts of experience which may be used to support/challenge existing theories or lead to theories being developed. An example of this is HM, whose case study demonstrated that different types of long term memory are associated with different regions of the brain. This led to further research on both memory and localisation. AO3

That being said, theories developed from case studies may struggle to be generalised beyond the individual, reducing the ecological validity of these findings. As a result, generalisations cannot be made without further examples, meaning that the idiographic approach alone cannot be used to improve the scientific credibility of psychology. AO3

The nomothetic approach conversely, seeks to formulate general rules of behaviour by focusing on a large group of people- then allowing generalisations to be made. Unlike the idiographic approach, the nomothetic approach uses quantitative methods of data collection. The nomothetic approach is associated with the scientific method, such as laboratory experiments and controlled observations. AO3
Excellent comparative link between the first and second half of the essay.

This is a strength of the nomothetic approach, as its highly scientific nature means that results attained are objective and reliable as the conditions used to attain them are standardised and have a high degree of control. As a result of this, the findings have scientific credibility and can be used to prove theories proposed by psychologists. AO3

Despite this, idiographic and nomothetic approaches could be used to complement each other. Millon and Davis (1996) suggest that research should start with a nomothetic approach, and once general laws have been established, researchers can then use a more idiographic approach. Doing this allows research to have the reliability given by nomothetic approaches, and the more detailed findings attained by employing an idiographic approach.
AO3

Teacher's Comment:
Nicely synthesised conclusion and persuasively argued.
Level 4
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