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Holism and reductionism AO1

Holism:

Reductionism:

Levels of explanation in psychology

Biological reductionism

Biological reductionism is based on the premise that we are biological organisms made up of physiological structures and processes. Thus, all behaviour is at some level biological and so can be explained through neurochemical, evolutionary or genetic influences. This is the assumption of the biological approach and has been successfully applied to a number of different topic areas in psychology. For example, the effects of psychoactive drugs on the brain have contributed much to our understanding of neural processes and the fact that it might be possible to explain serious mental disorders such as depression and schizophrenia at a biochemical level.

Environmental (stimulus-response) reductionism

The behaviourist approach is built on environmental reductionism. Behaviourists study observable behaviour only and in doing so break complex learning up into simple stimulus response links that can be measurable within a laboratory. Thus, the key unit of analysis occurs at the physical level – the behaviourists approach does not concern itself with cognitive processes of the mind that occur at the psychological level. The mind is regarded as a 'black box' and irrelevant to our understanding of behaviour.



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Holism and reductionism A03

Holism – FOR

P: One strength of holistic approaches in research is that it addresses an entire group at once.

E: For example, there are aspects of behaviour that only emerge within a group context and cannot be understood at the level of the individual group members e.g. the effects of conformity to social roles and the deindividuation of prisoners and guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment could not be understood by studying the PPs as individuals, it was the interaction between people and the behaviour of the group that was important.

E: This is a strength because holistic/same level explanations provide a more complete and global understanding of behaviour than the more reductionist approaches, which it can be assumed can be more easily generalised to wider societies and larger cultures.

L: As a result this provides support for the use of holistic methods within psychological research.

Holism – AGAINST

Reductionism – FOR

Reductionism – AGAINST

P: One weakness of the reductionist approach is that it oversimplifies complex phenomena.

E: For example, explanations that operate at the level of the gene, neurotransmitter or neuron do not include and analysis of the social context within which behaviour occurs – and this is where the behaviour in question may derive its meaning.

E: This is an issue because it tells us very little in reality about why we act a certain way. It can only ever form part of an explanation. For instance, the physiological processes involved in pointing one's finger will be the same regardless of the context. However an analysis of this will not tell us why the finger is pointed – to draw attention to some object or person, as an act of aggression, as part of a raised hand to answer a question in class etc.

L: This means that validity of reductionist research can be questioned, due to the lack of depth and full explanation.

