

## Ideographic and Nomothetic Approaches

### **Ideographic and Nomothetic approaches AO1**

#### **The Ideographic Approach**

The ideographic approach in psychology attempts to describe the nature of the individual. People are studied as unique entities, each with their own subjective experiences, motivations and values. There may be no attempt made to compare these to a larger group, standard or norm.

The ideographic approach is generally associated with those methods in psychology that produce qualitative data, such as case studies, unstructured interviews and other self-report measures. This reflects one of the central aims of ideographic research: to describe the richness of human experience and gain insight into the person's unique way of viewing the world.

#### **The Nomothetic Approach**

The main aim of the nomothetic approach is to produce general laws of human behaviour. These provide a 'benchmark' against which people can be compared, classified and measured, and on the basis of which, likely future behaviour can be predicted and/or controlled.

The nomothetic approach is most closely aligned with those methods that would be regarded as 'scientific' within psychology such as experiments. These involve the study of large numbers of people in order to establish ways on which people are similar (which will, conversely, also inform us of the ways in which people are different from one another).

#### **Examples of the ideographic approach in psychology**

Of the approaches the approaches you have studied, humanistic psychology is probably the best example of the ideographic perspective. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow took a phenomenological approach to the study of human beings and were interested only in documenting the conscious experience of the individual or 'self'. In describing themselves as 'anti-scientific', humanistic psychologists were more concerned with investigating unique experience 'on its own merits' than producing general laws of behaviour.

The psychodynamic approach is often labelled 'ideographic' because of Sigmund Freud's use of the case study method when detailing the lives of his patients. However, Freud also assumed he had identified universal laws of behaviour and personality development (which is more akin to a nomothetic approach).

#### **Examples of the nomothetic approach in psychology**

The nomothetic approach tends to be a feature of those approaches that are reductionist, deterministic and employ scientific methods of investigation. Hypotheses are formulated, tested under controlled conditions and findings generated from large numbers of people (or animals) are analysed for their statistical significance.

Much of the research conducted by behaviourist, cognitive and biological psychologists would meet the criteria of the nomothetic approach. For example Skinner and the behaviourists studied the responses of hundreds of rats, cats and pigeons, etc., in order to develop the laws of learning; cognitive psychologists have been able to infer the structure and processes of human memory by measuring the performance of large samples of people in laboratory tests; biological psychologists have conducted brain scans on countless human brains in order to make generalisations about localisations of function. In each of these cases, hypotheses are rigorously tested, statistically analysed, and general laws and principles are proposed and developed. These are key features of the nomothetic approach.

### **Nomothetic vs Idiographic A03**

#### **Idiographic – FOR**

P: One strength of the idiographic approach is that it provides a global, whole account of the individual.

E: For example, a single case may generate hypothesis for further study such as in brain-damaged individuals, like HM, findings may reveal important insights about normal functioning which may contribute to our overall understanding.

E: This is a strength because it contributes to our overall understanding of issues, and complements the nomothetic approach by shedding further light on general laws, or indeed by challenging such laws.

L: As a result we can see that the use of idiographic approaches can be beneficial in understanding unique cases that cannot be understand on a bigger scale such as nomothetic approaches.

#### **Idiographic – AGAINST**

#### **Nomothetic – FOR**

#### **Nomothetic – AGAINST**

P: One weakness of the nomothetic approach is that they have been accused of 'losing the whole person'.

E: For example, knowing that there is 1% lifetime risk of developing schizophrenia tells us little about what life is like for someone who is suffering from the disorder.

E: This is a weakness because in its search for generalities, the nomothetic approach may sometimes overlook the richness of our human experience. For example, in lab studies involving tests of memory, PPs are treated as a series of scores rather than individual people with subjective experience of the situation (e.g. Jacobs Digit Span research).



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L: As a result, it can be argued that nomothetic approaches lack external validity and do not accurately reflect real life and individuals.