

A-Level Psychology

Approaches and Debates · Evaluation (AO3) Bank

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0)

Evaluation (AO3) Bank

33 entries

Ready-made AO3 evaluation points and developed chains to lift your essay marks - drop these into any 16-marker.

Issues and debates

Reductionism	Biological explanations are reductionist because they break complex behaviour down to a single level such as neurotransmitters or genes; for example, explaining depression purely by low serotonin ignores how unemployment or bereavement triggers an episode, so a treatment that only corrects brain chemistry may relieve symptoms without addressing the real cause and the relapse rate stays high.
Holism	Holistic explanations argue behaviour can only be understood by looking at the whole person and system at once, which is intuitively appealing for messy real-world problems; however, studying every social, cognitive and biological factor together makes it almost impossible to isolate one cause, so holism gains realism but loses the testable precision that lets us design clear interventions.
Free will	The humanistic approach assumes people exercise free will and actively choose their own behaviour, which fits everyday experience of making decisions and matches the legal system's view that we are responsible for our actions; this gives the approach face validity, although critics note that a sense of choice could itself be an illusion produced by the brain.
Determinism	Many approaches are deterministic because they claim behaviour is caused by forces beyond the person's control, such as conditioning or genes; this is a strength because it lets psychology predict and treat behaviour scientifically, yet a hard-determinist stance is uncomfortable in court because it implies an offender could not have acted otherwise and should not be blamed.
Nature vs nurture	Twin studies showing higher concordance for a trait in identical than non-identical twins suggest a strong genetic component, but because identical twins are usually raised in very similar environments the higher concordance could reflect shared nurture rather than shared DNA; this confound means heritability estimates should be read as the upper limit of nature's influence, not a fixed figure.
Interactionism	The diathesis–stress model resolves the nature vs nurture debate by arguing a genetic vulnerability only becomes a disorder when an environmental trigger is present; this is more useful than picking one side because it explains why two people with the same genes can have different outcomes, and it points to prevention by reducing the stressors that switch the vulnerability on.
Psychology as a science	Approaches that use controlled lab experiments, operational definitions and replication can claim scientific status because their findings are objective and falsifiable; however, concepts such as the unconscious mind cannot be directly observed or tested, so where a theory relies on unmeasurable constructs its scientific credibility is weakened and it sits closer to interpretation than to evidence.
Ethics - protection from harm	Studies that induce stress, obedience or learned helplessness risk lasting psychological harm to participants, which breaches the duty to protect them; even where the findings are valuable, the cost–benefit balance matters because if the distress outlasts the debrief the research is hard to justify, and modern ethics committees would now block designs that earlier studies used freely.

Ethics - socially sensitive research	Research linking genes or ethnicity to intelligence or criminality is socially sensitive because the conclusions can be used to justify discrimination regardless of the researcher's intent; this matters because the findings escape the lab into policy and the media, so psychologists carry a wider responsibility to consider how results will be applied before publishing them.
Cultural bias	Theories built on samples from Western, individualist cultures may not generalise to collectivist cultures where the self is defined through the group; treating Western behaviour as the norm and other patterns as deviations is an imposed etic that produces culturally biased conclusions, so claims of universal human behaviour should be checked against cross-cultural replications before they are trusted.
Gender bias	Research conducted mainly by and on men can produce androcentric theories that present male behaviour as the standard and female behaviour as a deviation from it; this beta bias minimises real differences and the resulting conclusions can disadvantage women, so the gender make-up of the sample and the researchers is a genuine threat to the validity of any general claim.
Social control	Behaviourist techniques such as token economies and aversion therapy can be used to shape behaviour, which raises the worry that psychology becomes a tool of social control imposed on people who cannot consent, such as prisoners or psychiatric patients; the same knowledge that helps one person can be used to manage another against their interests, so the power it grants must be scrutinised.
Use in society	Psychological research earns its place when it produces practical benefits, such as therapies, eyewitness guidelines or classroom strategies; this real-world usefulness is a strong defence of an approach because it shows the theory works beyond the lab, although a treatment that manages symptoms without curing the condition delivers a more limited benefit than it first appears.
Idiographic approach	The idiographic approach studies the individual in depth through case studies and unstructured interviews, giving a rich and detailed picture that a questionnaire would miss; the weakness is that conclusions drawn from one person cannot be generalised and the lack of a comparison group makes it hard to know what is typical, so depth is bought at the price of breadth.
Nomothetic approach	The nomothetic approach seeks general laws by testing large samples and using statistics, which allows prediction and makes the findings replicable and scientific; however, averaging across many people can lose sight of the individual, so a law that holds for the group may say little about why one particular person behaves the way they do.

Evaluating the evidence

Internal validity	An experiment has internal validity only if the change in the dependent variable was genuinely caused by the independent variable rather than by a confounding variable; if extraneous factors such as demand characteristics or the time of testing differed between conditions, any difference could be down to those instead, so well-controlled studies support causal claims far more strongly than poorly controlled ones.
Ecological validity	Findings from an artificial lab task may not transfer to everyday life because the setting and the materials are unlike anything the person normally meets; for example, recalling lists of digits tells us little about how memory works in a busy classroom, so lab results need supporting field evidence before we treat them as a description of real behaviour.
Reliability	A measure is reliable if it gives consistent results when repeated, which can be checked through test-retest or inter-rater agreement; this matters because an inconsistent measure could not have detected a real effect even if one existed, so demonstrating high reliability is a precondition for taking any positive finding seriously rather than a separate bonus.
Generalisability - sample	Conclusions can only be applied to the wider population if the sample represents it, so a study using only undergraduates or only one age group has limited reach; the narrower and more self-selected the sample, the greater the risk that the result is a quirk of that group, which is why replication across diverse samples strengthens a claim far more than a single large study.

Population validity	Even a large sample can lack population validity if it is drawn from one culture, gender or era, because the behaviour measured may be specific to that context rather than universal; this is a real limitation because psychology aims at general claims about people, so a finding from one narrow population should be presented as provisional until it is tested more widely.
Quantitative data	Quantitative data are easy to analyse statistically and compare objectively, which makes patterns and significance clear and reduces the role of the researcher's opinion; the trade-off is that numbers strip out the meaning and context behind a behaviour, so a study rich in figures may still fail to explain why people acted as they did.
Qualitative data	Qualitative data capture the depth, meaning and context of behaviour that a rating scale would flatten, which is valuable for exploring experiences such as living with a disorder; however, interpreting open-ended responses is subjective and hard to replicate, so the richness gained has to be weighed against lower reliability when judging how far the conclusions can be trusted.
Sampling bias	Volunteer and opportunity samples are convenient but they tend to attract a particular kind of person, such as the more motivated or more available, which skews the results before the study even begins; because this bias is built into who took part, it cannot be fixed by analysis afterwards, so the sampling method is a key check on whether a finding can be believed.
Demand characteristics	Participants who guess the aim of a study may change their behaviour to help or hinder the researcher, which threatens validity because the data then reflect the guess rather than the variable under test; using a single-blind design or a cover story reduces this, so a study that controlled for demand characteristics gives more convincing evidence than one that left participants free to second-guess it.
Investigator effects	A researcher's expectations can unintentionally leak into how they ask questions or score responses, nudging participants toward the predicted result; this is a problem because it inflates support for the hypothesis without any real effect being present, so double-blind procedures and standardised scripts matter for trusting that the outcome was not shaped by the person running the study.
Correlation is not causation	A correlation shows that two variables change together but cannot show that one causes the other, because a third variable might drive both or the direction of cause could be reversed; this matters whenever a study reports a relationship rather than manipulating a variable, so correlational findings can suggest a link worth testing but should never be presented as proof of cause.
Ethics of the evidence	If key support for an approach comes from studies that deceived participants or withheld the right to withdraw, the value of that evidence is compromised because it was gathered in a way the discipline now rejects; this weakens the approach not only morally but practically, since modern ethics committees would not allow the studies to be replicated to confirm the findings.

Comparing the approaches

Application - therapies	Approaches can be compared by how effective their treatments are: the biological approach offers drug therapy that works fast but treats symptoms, while the cognitive approach offers therapy that targets the faulty thinking behind a disorder and so may reduce relapse; comparing the two shows that the most useful approach depends on whether speed of relief or lasting change is the priority.
Scientific credibility	The behaviourist and biological approaches score highly on scientific status because they study observable, measurable variables under controlled conditions, whereas the psychodynamic approach relies on unconscious processes that cannot be directly tested; comparing them shows that the more an approach commits to falsifiable methods, the stronger its claim to be a science, even if it explains less of the inner life.

Determinism vs free will	The approaches differ sharply on free will: behaviourism and the biological approach are largely deterministic, treating behaviour as the product of conditioning or biology, while the humanistic approach insists on self-determination; this comparison matters because an approach's stance on free will shapes whether it sees the person as responsible for their behaviour or as a product of forces they cannot control.
Level of explanation	Approaches can be ranked by how reductionist they are, from the biological approach reducing behaviour to neurons, through behaviourism reducing it to stimulus and response, up to the holistic humanistic approach treating the whole person; comparing the levels shows that lower levels gain testable precision while higher levels gain realism, so the best account often combines explanations rather than choosing one.
Nature vs nurture stance	The approaches sit at different points on the nature–nurture spectrum: the biological approach emphasises genes and physiology, behaviourism emphasises learning from the environment, and the cognitive approach treats the mind as shaped by both; comparing them highlights that no single approach captures the full picture, which is why an interactionist account that blends nature and nurture is usually the most convincing.
Complementary explanations	Rather than competing, approaches can be compared as complementary layers of one explanation: biology may supply a vulnerability, cognition the distorted thinking and the environment the trigger; recognising this is a strength of modern psychology because combining approaches explains more of a complex behaviour than any single perspective can on its own.