

A-Level Psychology

Synoptic Links · Topic Map

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0)

Topic Map

27 entries

The synoptic threads for Paper 3 - how the topics, studies, approaches and debates connect across the whole course.

Cross-topic threads

Nature versus nurture runs through every topic

The same tension reappears wherever you look. Biological psychology leans on nature through twin concordance and the role of testosterone in aggression, while learning psychology leans on nurture through Bandura's modelling of the Bobo doll. Clinical psychology refuses to pick a side and settles on a diathesis–stress account of schizophrenia, where a genetic vulnerability only becomes illness once an environmental trigger is added. Use the debate to compare any pair of topics rather than treating it as a one-topic idea.

The same behaviour gets explained more than one way

Aggression is the clearest example. Social psychology traces it to obedience and situational pressure as in Milgram, learning psychology traces it to imitation of reinforced models, and biological psychology traces it to limbic activity and hormone levels. Addiction works the same way, sitting across a learning account of operant reinforcement and a biological account of dopamine reward pathways. Naming two competing explanations for one behaviour is a fast route to AO1 breadth and AO3 comparison.

Individual differences versus situational forces

Some explanations locate the cause inside the person and some locate it in the setting. Milgram showed situations push ordinary people into harmful obedience, while Adorno's authoritarian personality places the cause in a fixed disposition. The clinical and criminological topics inherit the same split, where one offender is explained by atavistic biology and another by a criminal subculture. Spotting whether an explanation is dispositional or situational lets you evaluate it against the opposite view.

Internal mental processes versus observable behaviour

Cognitive psychology treats the mind as an information processor and infers schema and reconstructive memory from behaviour, as in Bartlett's War of the Ghosts. Learning psychology deliberately ignores what happens inside the head and studies only the stimulus and the response. The contrast frames a whole-course argument about how much of behaviour can be understood without opening the black box of the mind.

Stability versus change across the lifespan

Several topics ask whether behaviour is fixed or shaped over time. The biological view of inherited temperament implies stability, whereas learning theory implies behaviour can be conditioned, extinguished and reshaped at any age. Therapies trade on this directly, since systematic desensitisation only works if a learned phobia can be unlearned. Use the thread to question how permanent any explanation really claims behaviour to be.

Reductionism in biological versus social explanations

Reductionism means breaking behaviour down to a simpler level, but topics reduce to different levels. Biological psychology reduces schizophrenia to dopamine and reduces aggression to brain structure, a low-level account. Social psychology reduces obedience to features of the situation such as proximity and authority, a higher-level account that is still a simplification. Comparing what each topic reduces to is more sophisticated than simply labelling both reductionist.

Cultural bias travels across the course

Many core studies were run in one culture and then over-generalised. Milgram's obedience work used American men, and Western diagnostic manuals are applied to behaviour that may be read differently elsewhere, raising imposed etic problems in clinical diagnosis. Cross-cultural replications, such as obedience studies abroad, test whether a finding is universal or local. Treat culture as an evaluation thread you can attach to almost any named study.

Comparing the approaches**How each approach explains aggression side by side**

The biological approach points to testosterone and limbic activity, the learning approach points to observation and vicarious reinforcement after Bandura, and the social approach points to deindividuation and obedience. Lining the three up on one behaviour shows their assumptions clearly and gives a ready-made compare-and-contrast paragraph for any synoptic question that names aggression.

Determinism sits differently in each approach

The biological approach is hard determinist because genes and neurochemistry are said to fix behaviour, the learning approach is environmentally determinist because conditioning history dictates responses, and the cognitive approach allows soft determinism where thought mediates the response. Mapping where each approach falls on the free will–determinism line turns an abstract debate into a concrete comparison of named approaches.

Each approach prefers a different research method

The biological approach favours scans and twin studies, the learning approach favours tightly controlled lab experiments such as the Bobo doll, the cognitive approach favours lab tasks measuring reaction time and recall, and the social approach often uses field and questionnaire methods. The method an approach chooses shapes the kind of evidence it can offer, so methodology itself becomes a basis for comparison.

Approaches disagree about how much the mind matters

Cognitive psychology makes mental representation central, learning psychology denies it any explanatory role, and social learning theory sits between the two by adding mediational processes such as attention and retention to a behaviourist base. Tracing how each approach treats internal processing shows social learning theory as a deliberate bridge rather than a separate island.

Therapies reveal each approach's assumptions

What an approach recommends as treatment exposes what it thinks causes disorder. Drug therapy follows the biological assumption that chemistry is the cause, systematic desensitisation follows the learning assumption that fear is conditioned, and cognitive behavioural therapy follows the assumption that faulty thinking maintains distress. Comparing treatments is therefore a sideways way of comparing the approaches behind them.

Approaches differ on whether behaviour is universal

The biological approach assumes shared physiology makes behaviour broadly universal across humans, while the learning and social approaches expect behaviour to vary because conditioning histories and social norms differ between cultures and individuals. This disagreement explains why biological findings are presented as general laws whereas social findings are hedged with cultural caveats.

Issues and debates in action**Socially sensitive research recurs across topics**

Findings that could harm a group appear throughout the course. Genetic explanations of criminality risk labelling families, and a biological account of addiction or schizophrenia can fuel stigma or be misused to argue offenders cannot change. The same caution applies whenever a study touches race, intelligence or criminal disposition, so flag social sensitivity wherever a finding has real-world consequences beyond the lab.

Ethics scale up from the individual to society

Ethical issues are not only about a single participant's protection from harm, as in Milgram, but also about wider social responsibility, as in how diagnostic or genetic findings are reported. Linking participant-level ethics to society-level consequences lets you build a developed ethics argument that crosses from social psychology into clinical and criminological territory.

Free will and determinism shape responsibility	The debate is not abstract once it reaches the courtroom. A hard biological account of offending implies a criminal could not have acted otherwise, which clashes with a legal system built on free will and blame. Connecting the criminological topic to the determinism debate shows why the philosophical question has practical stakes for sentencing and treatment.
Holism versus reductionism in explaining disorder	Schizophrenia is the model case. A purely biological dopamine account is reductionist and gives a clear drug target, while a diathesis–stress account is more holistic and weaves in family environment and stress. The two positions trade testable precision against real-world realism, a tension you can apply to addiction and depression as well as schizophrenia.
Psychology as science cuts across the topics	Some areas meet scientific standards more easily than others. Biological and cognitive work uses controlled, replicable, quantitative methods, whereas explanations relying on unobservable constructs are harder to falsify. Asking how scientific each topic is gives a consistent yardstick for evaluating the whole course rather than a single study.
Gender bias affects what counts as normal	Research samples and diagnostic norms have often centred on men, so Milgram's all-male sample limits generalisation and clinical criteria can pathologise behaviour that differs by gender. Treating androcentrism as a recurring flaw lets you evaluate sampling and diagnosis together rather than as separate complaints.
The ethics versus validity trade-off keeps returning	Tighter ethical control often costs realism, and greater realism often costs control. Milgram gained powerful, valid obedience data precisely by deceiving participants, the very thing that made the study ethically contested. Naming this trade-off turns a methods point into a debate point that applies wherever deception or distress raised the quality of the data.

Methods and evaluation threads

Validity of laboratory versus field studies	Lab work buys control at the cost of realism while field work buys realism at the cost of control. Milgram's lab obedience is high in internal validity but criticised for low mundane realism, whereas a field replication gains ecological validity but loses some control over extraneous variables. Weighing internal against ecological validity is a thread you can run through almost any pair of studies.
Classic and contemporary studies in dialogue	Each topic pairs an older classic with a newer contemporary study, and the pair is meant to be read together. A classic obedience or memory study sets up a question that the contemporary study revisits with modern method or ethics. Always ask what the contemporary study adds, challenges or updates rather than describing the two in isolation.
Reliability and replication build confidence	A finding only counts as secure once it repeats. Standardised procedures let obedience and conditioning studies be replicated and let researchers check inter-rater reliability in observations. Using replication as an evaluation move shows why a single striking result, however memorable, is not enough on its own to support an explanation.
Quantitative and qualitative data answer different questions	Numbers from experiments and scans give comparable, analysable data but can strip out meaning, while interviews and case studies in clinical psychology capture richness at the cost of generalisability. Recognising the trade-off lets you argue that combining the two, as mixed-method clinical work does, can offset the weaknesses of either alone.
Sampling shapes how far findings generalise	Many landmark studies used narrow samples, such as American male volunteers in obedience research or small clinical case series. A volunteer or opportunity sample limits the population the result can be extended to, so questioning the sample is a reliable way into AO3 for any named study across the course.
Inferential statistics decide what to trust	Across the topics, results are only accepted once a test shows the effect is unlikely to be chance, conventionally at the 5% level. A χ^2 test handles the frequency data common in social and criminological research, while tests of difference handle experimental scores. Linking the choice of test to the type of data is a synoptic skills point examiners reward.

**Operationalising variables
affects every experiment**

Turning a fuzzy concept into something measurable shapes what a study can show. Aggression measured as hits on a Bobo doll, obedience measured as the maximum shock given, and memory measured as items recalled are all narrow operational definitions that may miss the wider construct. Critiquing how a variable was operationalised is an evaluation move that transfers across topics.