8.8 Idiographic and Nomothetic Approaches to Psychological Investigation

AQA 7182 · about 50 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

1 Define the nomothetic approach to psychological investigation, and give one advantage of producing nomothetic knowledge for psychology as a science, in the context of studies of memory or behaviour.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 Behaviourist research that establishes stimulus-response laws from many laboratory trials is best described as idiographic or nomothetic? State the classification and one implication for generalisability.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 Identify one way researchers can combine idiographic and nomothetic methods within the same research programme and give a brief benefit of doing so, in the context of developing psychological theory.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

4 A psychologist publishes a large-scale experiment measuring reaction times from 500 participants and reports mean scores, standard deviations and a correlational analysis. Classify the approach used as idiographic or nomothetic, and justify your classification briefly with reference to the research features.

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

5 A clinical psychologist writes a detailed life history of one patient, including their family background, dreams and childhood memories, using interpretive qualitative analysis. Is this idiographic or nomothetic? Give one brief reason.

(Total for Question 5 is 2 marks)

6 Which named psychological approach is most closely associated with idiographic methods such as case studies and unstructured interviews? Give one reason why.

(Total for Question 6 is 3 marks)

7 Discuss the idiographic and nomothetic approaches to psychological investigation. In your answer include reference to their methods, strengths and limitations, and show how the two approaches could be combined usefully. Refer to psychological research or real-world applications where appropriate.

(Total for Question 7 is 16 marks)

8 Distinguish between idiographic and nomothetic aims in psychological investigation by giving two clear differences, each explained briefly, in the context of how data are collected and how findings are used.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

9 A researcher publishes a single-case experimental design where one participant's behaviour is measured repeatedly before and after an intervention, with detailed qualitative notes. Explain two strengths of this idiographic single-case approach for clinical practice.

(Total for Question 9 is 4 marks)

10 Explain one methodological limitation of nomothetic research that relies on averaging scores across large samples, particularly when applied to mental health diagnosis.

(Total for Question 10 is 3 marks)

Mark scheme · 8.8 Idiographic and Nomothetic Approaches to Psychological Investigation

Question 1

defines nomothetic approach as seeking general laws or generalisable findings across many people oe	**B1**
gives advantage such as enabling prediction and control, or statistical testing and replication oe	**B1**

Answer: Nomothetic: seeks general laws that apply across people. Advantage: allows prediction and control of behaviour because findings from large samples can be generalised and tested statistically.

Question 2

nomothetic cao	**B1**
implication: findings aim to be generalisable and predictive across individuals, though they may lose information about individual differences oe	**B1**

Answer: Nomothetic. Behaviourist studies aim to establish general stimulus-response laws that are generalisable across people, but this may sacrifice information about individual differences.

Question 3

identifies combination method such as using case studies to generate hypotheses then testing them in large samples, or embedding qualitative interviews within a quantitative study oe	**B1**
gives benefit, e.g. increases both depth and generalisability, improving theory development and ecological validity oe	**B1**

Answer: One way is to use case studies to generate hypotheses and then test those hypotheses with large-scale quantitative samples. The benefit is that theory gains both detailed, grounded insight and empirical generalisability.

Question 4

identifies nomothetic approach cao	**M1**
justifies by referring to large sample size and focus on summaries and statistics rather than individual detail oe	**A1**
may mention aim to establish general laws or predict behaviour across people oe	**A1**

Answer: Nomothetic. The study uses a large sample and statistical summaries and correlations to draw generalisable conclusions rather than in-depth accounts of individuals.

Question 5

idiographic cao	**B1**
reason: it focuses on the individual in depth using qualitative data, so it does not aim to produce general laws oe	**B1**

Answer: Idiographic, because it focuses on one person's detailed life history using qualitative, interpretive methods rather than seeking generalisable laws.

Question 6

identifies humanistic approach (or psychodynamic) as associated with idiographic methods oe	**M1**
explains reason, e.g. focus on subjective experience, uniqueness of the person, or holistic understanding oe	**A1**
example such as case-study use in understanding a client's personal meaning is acceptable oe	**A1**

Answer: Humanistic approach. It emphasises subjective, individual experience and personal meaning, so researchers use case studies and unstructured interviews to explore each person's unique perspective.

Question 7

Level 4 Knowledge of idiographic and nomothetic approaches is accurate and detailed. Discussion evaluates strengths and limitations of both approaches thoroughly, with a clear, balanced judgement. There is effective and sustained application to research examples or practical contexts. The response is coherent, well organised and uses appropriate psychological terminology.	**13-16**
Level 3 Knowledge is generally accurate with some detail. Discussion includes evaluation of both approaches and is mostly balanced, though some points may be less developed. Application to research or practice is present but may not be consistently integrated. The response is mostly clear and organised and uses psychological terminology appropriately.	**9-12**
Level 2 Knowledge of the approaches is present but limited or partially inaccurate. Discussion and evaluation are superficial or one-sided. Application is attempted but may be brief or loosely connected. The answer shows limited organisation and inconsistent use of psychological terminology.	**5-8**
Level 1 Knowledge is minimal and largely inaccurate or fragmentary. Evaluation is minimal or absent. Little or no application to research or practice. The answer lacks structure and academic terminology.	**1-4**
Level 0 No creditable content.	**0**

Indicative content:

- AO1: Idiographic approach defined, studies individuals in depth, typical methods include case studies, unstructured interviews and thematic qualitative analysis.
- AO1: Nomothetic approach defined, seeks general laws and patterns across groups, typical methods include experiments, large-scale surveys and statistical analysis.
- AO1: Examples: Freud's case-study work such as Little Hans as idiographic illustration; behaviourist lab experiments or large-scale cognitive memory studies as nomothetic examples.
- AO3: Strengths of idiographic approach: rich qualitative data, detailed understanding for clinical application, can generate new hypotheses and reveal rare phenomena.
- AO3: Limitations of idiographic approach: limited generalisability, subjectivity and researcher bias, difficulties with replication and falsifiability when aiming for scientific claims.
- AO3: Strengths of nomothetic approach: ability to produce generalisable laws, prediction and control, statistical testing and replication supporting scientific status.
- AO3: Limitations of nomothetic approach: may overlook individual differences and context, reduction of complex human experience to averages, potential loss of ecological or clinical validity.
- AO3: Ethical and practical considerations: idiographic methods are useful in therapy but raise issues about confidentiality and interpretation; nomothetic research may neglect minority experiences when shaping policy or diagnosis.
- AO3: Combining approaches: using idiographic case studies to generate hypotheses that are then tested nomothetically; embedding qualitative measures within quantitative designs to add depth to general findings.
- AO2: Application to practice: clinical psychology benefits from idiographic depth for treatment planning, while public health and educational policy rely on nomothetic generalisability for interventions.
- AO3: Evaluation and judgement: discuss which approach is more appropriate depending on research aim, and argue for complementarity rather than exclusivity, giving examples and a reasoned conclusion.

Question 8

difference 1 stated: idiographic uses qualitative, in-depth data; nomothetic uses quantitative, large-sample data oe	**M1**
explains implication for data collection and analysis, e.g. idiographic yields rich subjective detail while nomothetic yields statistics/averages oe	**A1**
difference 2 stated: idiographic aims to understand individuals, nomothetic aims to produce general laws/predictions oe	**M1**
explains implication for use of findings, e.g. idiographic findings inform case-based understanding and therapy, nomothetic findings inform general theories and predictions oe	**A1**

Answer: Difference 1: idiographic uses qualitative, in-depth methods and yields rich subjective detail, whereas nomothetic uses quantitative, large-sample methods producing statistics and averages. Difference 2: idiographic aims to understand the unique individual for case-based insight, nomothetic aims to produce general laws that allow prediction and control across people.

Question 9

identifies strength 1: provides detailed, context-rich information about the individual oe	**M1**
explains why this helps clinical practice, e.g. allows therapy to be tailored and progress to be tracked for that person oe	**A1**
identifies strength 2: can reveal rare or atypical phenomena that larger studies might miss oe	**M1**
explains why this matters, e.g. informing hypotheses for further research and highlighting unique treatment needs oe	**A1**

Answer: Strength 1: gives rich, context-specific detail about the individual, allowing treatment to be tailored and progress to be closely monitored. Strength 2: can reveal unusual or rare patterns that larger nomothetic studies would miss, generating hypotheses and showing special clinical needs.

Question 10

identifies limitation: averaging can mask individual variation or subgroups oe	**M1**
explains consequence for mental health diagnosis, e.g. diagnostic criteria based on averages may not fit some individuals, leading to misdiagnosis or poor treatment matching oe	**A1**
may mention ecological or clinical validity loss as relevant consequence oe	**A1**

Answer: Averaging across large samples can mask important individual differences or subgroups. For mental health diagnosis this means criteria or treatment recommendations based on averages may not fit some individuals, risking misdiagnosis or ineffective therapy and reducing clinical validity.