

**Discuss idiographic and nomothetic approaches to studying human behaviour (16 marks).**

**AO1**

Psychologists who take an idiographic approach focus on the individual and emphasise the unique personal experience of human nature. Methods of investigation include in-depth case studies, unstructured interviews and thematic analysis. An example of a famous study which took a nomothetic approach is that of HM which investigated memory. The idiographic approach does not seek to formulate laws or generalise results to others. Contrastingly, psychologists who take a nomothetic approach are concerned with establishing general laws, based on the study of large groups of people. Methods of investigation include experiments, correlational research and psychometric testing (personality). The nomothetic approach is the main approach in Psychology. Biological psychologists take a nomothetic approach when explaining psychological disorders, such as OCD and depression by pinpointing biological factors, such as neurotransmitters, that are responsible for such disorders.

**AO3**

😊 A strength of the idiographic approach in utilising the case study method is that it can be a powerful tool for evaluating psychological theories.

For example, the case study of HM exposed a limitation of the Multi-Store Model of Memory, by providing evidence that our LTM comprises of more than one type of LTM as he was able to gain new procedural memories but not new episodic or semantic memories.

This contradicted a central component of Atkinson and Shiffrin's model because the model suggests there is only one single unitary store of long-term memory which cannot be the case. This led to Tulving developing the three distinct types of LTM stores.

Consequently, a single case study can generate further research into a particular phenomenon e.g. memory, which can contribute to the development of new theories that further our understanding of human behaviour.

😞 A limitation of the idiographic approach is that it is less scientific than the nomothetic approach which for a discipline so dedicated to the application of its scientific understanding is a devastating limitation.

For example, the emphasis on in-depth data collection and the difficulties in arriving at justifiable generalisations contradicts the central purpose of any mature science which is to explain the most variations in the fewest possible terms, so that behaviour can be predicted

and ultimately controlled. Research practices that do not address these goals can seem scientifically pointless.

As a result, the idiographic approach is unable to produce general laws or predictions about human behaviour and that severely limits its usefulness as a source of practical knowledge about the diagnosis and treatment of psychological disorders.

😊 A strength of the nomothetic approach is that it is scientific as it makes use of experimental (quantitative) method and allows for replication to examine the reliability of findings.

For example, biological psychologists take a nomothetic approach when explaining obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and claim that OCD is caused by higher levels of dopamine and lower levels of serotonin. Drug therapies such as SSRIs are developed on the basis of nomothetic research to readdress the biological imbalance.

This scientific and quantifiable approach has helped the academic subject of Psychology establish itself as a scientific discipline and has led to the development of the scientific understanding of human behaviour.

Before Wundt, Psychology took more of an idiographic approach and made use of case studies. This was seen as a less credible way of understanding human behaviour and therefore the nomothetic approach has helped develop Psychology into the subject it is today.

😞 However, a limitation of the nomothetic approach is that it does not take account of individual differences as it creates universal rules about human behaviour.

For example, drug treatments are not successful for all patients, some psychologists argue that alternate treatments such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which are based on an idiographic approach are more suitable for treating individuals with conditions such as OCD and depression, as they seek to understand and explain the disorder from a patient's point of view.

As drug therapies are not effective for all people it shows that OCD and depression cannot purely be down to abnormal levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin for all people, else SSRIs would be 100% effective.

This shows that the nomothetic approach is limited in explaining human behaviour and that universal rules cannot be universally applied to all individuals.

Holt (1967) argues that the idiographic/nomothetic distinction is a false distinction. Many approaches in psychology take advantage of both approaches and therefore the two approaches can be viewed as complementary rather than contradictory.