SimplyPsychology

A-LEVEL PSYCHOLOGY REVISION NOTES

Issues and Debates

AQA Psychology 7182 (A-level)

2025 specification · spec section 4.3.1 · Paper 3

Compiled by **Simply Psychology** · simplypsychology.org/issues-debates.html

Contents

How to use these notes. Issues and Debates is an **A-level only** topic, examined exclusively on **Paper 3**. The six bullets of the AQA 2025 specification are covered across the seven sections (Gender Bias and Cultural Bias are taught separately even though they share a spec bullet). Definitions of *alpha bias, beta bias, androcentrism, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, idiographic, nomothetic, reductionism* and *social sensitivity* follow AQA's 2025 *Subject specific vocabulary*. Each section ends with PEEL evaluation that you can deploy as ready-made paragraphs in 8-, 12- and 16-mark essay questions.

Note on the 2025 specification: The final bullet was reworded from "Ethical implications of research studies and theory, including reference to social sensitivity" to **"Social sensitivity in psychological research."** The substantive content is unchanged.

AQA 2025 SPECIFICATION — ISSUES AND DEBATES CONTENT

- **Gender and culture in Psychology** — universality and bias. Gender bias including **androcentrism** and **alpha and beta bias**; cultural bias, including **ethnocentrism** and **cultural relativism**.
- **Free will and determinism** — hard determinism and soft determinism; biological, environmental and psychic determinism. The scientific emphasis on causal explanations.
- **The nature–nurture debate** — the relative importance of heredity and environment in determining behaviour; the interactionist approach.
- **Holism and reductionism** — levels of explanation in Psychology. Biological reductionism and environmental (stimulus–response) reductionism.
- **Idiographic and nomothetic approaches** to psychological investigation.
- **Social sensitivity in psychological research.**

1 Gender Bias in Psychology

KEY TERMS

Universality — any characteristic of human behaviour that can be applied to all people, regardless of their differences in time, culture or gender. Bias, lack of validity and reliability issues all reduce the universality of psychological findings.

Gender bias — the differential treatment or representation of men and women in psychological research based on stereotypes rather than real differences.

Alpha bias (AQA) — a type of bias where *differences* between groups (e.g. men and women) are **exaggerated** or emphasised. This can reinforce stereotypes and lead to the devaluation of one group, typically women.

Beta bias (AQA) — a type of bias that *ignores* or *minimises* differences between groups. Beta bias can lead to androcentrism and ethnocentrism by treating findings from a dominant group (typically males) as universal.

Androcentrism (AQA) — a type of gender bias in which male experience or behaviour is treated as the standard for "normal" or desirable behaviour. Female behaviour is then judged abnormal by comparison. A consequence of beta bias.

Examples of Alpha Bias (Exaggerating Differences)

- **Freud's psychodynamic theory of moral development.** Because girls do not experience castration anxiety, Freud argued they have a weaker superego and are therefore "less moral" than boys — an exaggeration of difference that devalues women (Hoffman et al. found no such gender difference in moral reasoning).
- **Wilson's sociobiological theory of relationships.** Sexual promiscuity in men is portrayed as genetically driven, while promiscuous women are framed as going against their nature. This stereotypes and stigmatises women's sexual behaviour.
- **Cotton et al. — schizophrenia diagnosis.** Since the 1980s schizophrenia has been diagnosed more frequently in men than women, partly because women's symptoms are masked by better interpersonal functioning. Exaggerating gender differences in symptoms risks under-diagnosing women.

Examples of Beta Bias (Ignoring Differences)

- **Fight-or-flight research (Taylor 2000).** Early stress research used only male animals because female hormonal fluctuations were considered a confound. Findings were then generalised to women. Shelley Taylor (2000) found women show a distinct "**tend-and-befriend**" response — a real difference that beta-biased research had ignored for decades.
- **Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning.** Developed entirely on male American samples but applied to both sexes. Gilligan (1982) later argued women reason about morality differently (in terms of care and relationships) — another real difference erased by beta bias.

Androcentrism

Androcentrism is the consequence of beta bias: when male behaviour is treated as the universal standard, female behaviour is judged "abnormal" against it. Example: **premenstrual syndrome (PMS)** has been criticised as a social construction that pathologises female emotion, while male anger is often framed as a rational response to provocation (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008). Androcentrism produces a **"gender data gap"** in which products, policies and clinical guidelines are designed around the male norm — with adverse consequences for women.

Evaluation

Strength — gender bias has real-world impact (application). A key reason to take gender bias seriously is its measurable real-world consequences. Caroline Criado-Perez's *Invisible Women* (2019) documents how androcentric medical research has produced car safety designs, drug dosages and CPR training built around male bodies — contributing to women being 47% more likely to be seriously injured in car crashes. This is important because it shows gender bias is not just an academic concern: it produces avoidable harm. This strengthens the case for routinely including and analysing female participants in research and policy.

Strength — feminist psychology offers a solution. A further strength is that the field has developed concrete strategies to address gender bias. Feminist psychology (Eagly 1978) argues that perceived gender differences are largely socially constructed and that research should explicitly examine context, power and gendered socialisation. Eagly noted that, while women may be less effective leaders *on average*, this is itself a product of socialisation — and the right response is to design leadership-training programmes for women rather than accept the difference as fixed. This is important because it shows gender bias can be reduced through reflexive research design rather than ignored.

Limitation — institutional sexism in research methods. A significant limitation is the continued under-representation of women among senior researchers. Fewer female academics means research questions are still framed around male concerns, perpetuating an androcentric agenda. Nicolson (1995) argued lab experiments can themselves be sexist — male researchers may behave more pleasantly to female participants (Rosenthal 1966), confounding gender differences with experimenter effects. This is important because if the methods are biased, the findings are too, regardless of intent. This calls for greater representation of women in senior research roles and active **reflexivity** — researchers acknowledging the influence of their own gender on their work.

Limitation — beta bias can also disadvantage women. A nuanced limitation is that even "equal treatment" (the avoidance of beta bias) can harm women. Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1988) argued that pretending men and women are the same can erase women's specific needs — for example, treating maternity leave as equivalent to paternity leave ignores the biological demands of pregnancy and childbirth. This is important because it shows the solution to gender bias is not simply "treat everyone the same"; it requires recognising real differences *where they exist* without exaggerating them.

Limitation — biological determinism risks. A further limitation is the risk that biological explanations of gender differences (e.g. hormonal accounts of aggression) can entrench essentialist thinking — the idea that gender roles are fixed by biology and cannot be changed. This is important because it can be used to justify discriminatory practices ("women just aren't suited to leadership"). This connects gender bias to broader issues-and-debates concerns about biological reductionism and free will / determinism (Sections 5 and 3).

Conclusion. Gender bias remains a serious issue in psychology, but it is increasingly recognised and addressed through feminist methodology, reflexivity, and explicit attention to sample composition. Both alpha and beta bias need to be avoided: the goal is universality with sensitivity to genuine difference, not erasure of difference and not exaggeration of it.

2 Cultural Bias in Psychology

KEY TERMS

Culture — the rules, customs, morals and ways of interacting that bind together members of a society.

Cultural bias — the tendency to judge all cultures and individuals in terms of one's own cultural assumptions, distorting interpretations and conclusions.

Ethnocentrism (AQA) — an issue of cultural bias in which one's own culture is treated as an idealised standard for behaviour. Other cultures are judged as deviations from that standard, often leading to stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

Cultural relativism (AQA) — understanding and explaining behaviour from the perspective of the culture in which it originates, rather than through the lens of another culture. Helps achieve cultural sensitivity and avoid ethnocentric bias.

Emic vs etic. An **emic** approach studies behaviour from within a single culture, identifying culturally unique features. An **etic** approach looks for universal features of behaviour across cultures. An **imposed etic** occurs when a researcher takes a measure or theory developed in one culture and assumes it applies to all — the most common form of cultural bias in psychology.

Alpha and Beta Bias Applied to Culture

Bias	What it does	Example
Alpha bias (exaggerates difference)	Assumes real and enduring differences between cultural groups, often along the individualist–collectivist divide.	Takano and Osaka (1999) reviewed 15 studies comparing the US and Japan on individualism–collectivism and found 14 of 15 did *not* support the supposed differences. The individualist–collectivist distinction may be overstated.
Beta bias (ignores difference)	Assumes findings from one culture apply universally and uses Western-developed measures across all cultures (imposed etic).	Western IQ tests treat intelligence as an individual property and have been applied across cultures; collectivist cultures see intelligence as a social, shared resource. Non-Western participants may then appear "less intelligent" — a measurement artefact, not a real difference.

Classic Examples of Cultural Bias

- **Ainsworth's Strange Situation.** Developed on US middle-class samples and used to assess attachment worldwide — a classic **imposed etic**. German infants were classified as "insecure-avoidant" because they showed little separation anxiety, but in German culture this reflects valued independence rather than insecurity. Japanese infants were over-classified as "insecure-resistant" because they are rarely separated from mothers, so the procedure provoked extreme distress.
- **Milgram's obedience study.** Originally conducted on 40 American men. Replications produced very different rates: Miranda et al. found over 90% obedience in Spanish students, while Kilham and Mann

found only 16% in Australian women. This shows obedience rates are not universal but culturally bound.

- **Diagnosis of schizophrenia.** Hearing voices is treated as a symptom of schizophrenia in Western psychiatry but is often a culturally valued spiritual experience in some African societies — applying Western diagnostic criteria universally is an example of beta bias with serious clinical consequences.

Reducing Cultural Bias

- **Cultural relativism** — interpret behaviour in its cultural context rather than against a Western "norm".
- **Indigenous psychologies** — develop theories and methods within each culture rather than importing them from the West (e.g. African-centred or Māori psychology).
- **Use indigenous researchers** in cross-cultural studies to combine etic comparison with emic understanding.
- **Reflexivity** — researchers explicitly acknowledge how their own culture shapes their assumptions, questions and interpretations.

Evaluation

Strength — increasing cross-cultural research. A genuine strength is that contemporary psychology is increasingly cross-cultural. International conferences, indigenous psychologies and global research collaborations are reducing the dominance of Western perspectives. Cole and Scribner's cross-cultural cognitive work and van Ijzendoorn's cross-cultural attachment meta-analyses are examples of researchers actively combatting ethnocentrism. This is important because it shows the field is capable of reform. This strengthens the validity of modern psychological theory by widening its evidence base.

Strength — some behaviours genuinely *are* universal. A further strength is that cross-cultural research has also identified genuine human universals. Ekman et al. (1972) found that basic facial expressions (anger, disgust, happiness) are recognised across cultures, and infant–caregiver interactional synchrony and reciprocity appear cross-culturally. This is important because identifying genuine universals helps psychology distinguish between culture-bound and species-general behaviours — the proper goal of an unbiased psychology. This supports a moderate **etic** approach that respects cultural variation.

Limitation — institutional Western dominance. A serious limitation is that psychology is still institutionally Western. Smith and Bond's (1998) survey of a European social-psychology textbook found 66% of cited studies were American, 32% European and only 2% from the rest of the world. Henrich et al. (2010) showed that 96% of behavioural-science participants are drawn from "**WEIRD**" populations — Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic — who are demographically a small minority of humanity. This is important because conclusions drawn from WEIRD samples are routinely treated as universal. This limits the external validity of large parts of the discipline.

Limitation — historical consequences of cultural bias. Cultural bias has had serious historical consequences. Early-20th-century US Army IQ tests showed lower scores for European immigrants and African Americans, results then used to justify restrictive immigration policy and racial segregation. This is important because socially sensitive research conducted without cultural awareness can be weaponised against the very groups it studies. This is an ethical issue (Section 7) as well as a methodological one — and a key reason why cultural reflexivity is now central to research ethics.

Limitation — the individualist–collectivist distinction may itself be biased. A further limitation is that the individualist–collectivist framework — often the main analytical tool used in cross-cultural psychology — may itself perpetuate alpha bias. Takano and Osaka's (1999) review showed the supposed US–Japan difference was much weaker than assumed, and globalisation is rapidly reducing whatever differences exist. This is important because using the framework uncritically can *create* the very stereotypes cross-cultural research is supposed to dismantle. This calls for more nuanced, sub-cultural analysis rather than broad cultural categories.

Conclusion. Cultural bias is one of the most significant issues facing psychology. While progress has been made through cross-cultural research, indigenous psychologies and reflexive methodology, the discipline remains overwhelmingly WEIRD-centric. A balanced approach — recognising genuine universals while respecting cultural specificity (cultural relativism with careful etic comparison) — offers the most defensible way forward.

3 Free Will and Determinism

KEY TERMS

Free will — the view that individuals have the power to make choices about their behaviour, unconstrained by internal or external forces. A central feature of the **humanistic approach**.

Determinism — the view that behaviour is caused by internal or external factors acting on the individual and beyond their control.

Hard determinism — all behaviour can in principle be predicted from prior causes; there is no genuine free will. Compatible with the behaviourist and biological approaches.

Soft determinism — behaviour has causes, but within the constraints of those causes humans can exercise meaningful choice. Compatible with the cognitive approach.

Three Types of Determinism

Type	Cause of behaviour	Example
Biological determinism	Internal biological factors — genes, neurochemistry, brain structure, hormones.	The MAOA-L "warrior" gene is associated with aggression; serotonin imbalances are linked to depression; the IGF2R gene has been associated with high intelligence (Hill et al. 1999).
Environmental determinism	External experiences — classical and operant conditioning, social learning.	Skinner argued all behaviour is shaped by reinforcement history; Watson and Rayner's Little Albert acquired a phobia through classical conditioning.
Psychic determinism	Unconscious drives and unresolved childhood conflicts (Freud).	Adult personality traits are determined by psychosexual fixations — e.g. an "anal-retentive" adult is fixated at the anal stage.

The Scientific Emphasis on Causal Explanations

Determinism is closely linked to the scientific approach. Science assumes events have causes, and the experimental method is designed to isolate them — manipulating an IV under controlled conditions to identify its causal effect on a DV. The more deterministic the assumption, the more "scientific" the approach appears. This is why behaviourism and biological psychology are often seen as the most scientifically credible approaches, while humanism (which emphasises free will) is often dismissed as unscientific.

Evaluation

Strength of determinism — consistent with science and produces effective treatments. A major strength of determinism is its compatibility with the scientific method and its *practical* outcomes. Identifying causal mechanisms has enabled treatments such as **SSRIs** for depression (based on serotonin deficiency), L-DOPA

for Parkinson's, and CBT for OCD (based on identified cognitive triggers). This is important because effective intervention requires identifying causes — pure free will offers no targets for treatment. This strengthens the case for at least *soft* determinism as a working assumption.

Strength of free will — face validity and good mental-health outcomes. A genuine strength of the free-will position is its face validity: in everyday life we experience ourselves as choosing, deliberating and acting on reasons. Roberts et al. (2000) found adolescents with an **internal locus of control** (a belief they shape their own outcomes) had significantly better mental health and lower rates of depression than those with an external locus. This is important because *believing* in free will appears to produce measurable wellbeing benefits, regardless of whether free will is metaphysically real. This supports continuing to treat individuals as agents responsible for their behaviour, particularly in clinical and educational contexts.

Limitation of determinism — the legal system rejects hard determinism. A significant limitation of hard determinism is its incompatibility with moral responsibility. The legal system holds adults accountable for their actions on the assumption they could have done otherwise. Stephen Mobley's defence team (1994) tried to argue his violence was caused by an MAOA gene; the court rejected the defence. This is important because if hard determinism were true, no one could be morally responsible for anything — undermining the entire concept of justice. This is why most psychologists endorse **soft determinism**: behaviour is caused but agents are still meaningfully responsible.

Limitation of free will — neuroscientific challenge (Libet 1983; Soon et al. 2008). A serious challenge to free will comes from neuroscience. Libet (1983) recorded brain activity in motor areas *before* participants consciously decided to move a finger; Soon et al. (2008) found activity in the prefrontal cortex up to 10 seconds before the conscious decision. This is important because it suggests that what we experience as "free choice" is actually a downstream report of an earlier unconscious neural process. This challenges the validity of free will as anything more than a subjective illusion, supporting at least a soft-deterministic position.

Limitation — determinism is unfalsifiable. A philosophical limitation is that determinism is essentially **unfalsifiable**: any apparent example of free will can be reinterpreted as the product of as-yet-unidentified causes. This is important because, by Popper's criterion, unfalsifiable claims fall outside science. This weakens hard determinism's claim to scientific status and creates space for a soft-deterministic position that takes free will seriously as a phenomenon to be explained.

Application — Issues and Debates (interactionism). The free-will–determinism debate links to nature–nurture (Section 4) and reductionism (Section 5). Most modern psychologists adopt an interactionist position — behaviour has biological, environmental and cognitive causes *and* humans exercise meaningful (if constrained) choice within those causes. This soft-deterministic interactionism is the dominant working position in clinical, educational and forensic psychology.

Conclusion. Hard determinism is compatible with science but incompatible with moral responsibility; pure free will is compatible with subjective experience but hard to reconcile with neuroscience. Soft determinism — the cognitive approach's position — best fits both the evidence and the everyday demands of psychology, ethics and law.

4 The Nature–Nurture Debate

KEY TERMS

Nature — any influence on behaviour that is biological / genetic: genes, neurochemistry, hormones, brain structure.

Nurture — any influence on behaviour that is environmental: pre-natal environment, parenting, peers, schooling, culture, life events.

Heredity — the genetic transmission of traits from parents to offspring. The **heritability coefficient** quantifies the proportion of variation in a trait attributable to genetic differences (e.g. ~0.5 for intelligence — Plomin et al. 1994).

The interactionist approach — the position that nature and nurture interact so intimately that it is meaningless to separate them. The dominant modern view.

Examples of Nature Influences

- **Twin studies — schizophrenia.** Concordance rates: ~40% for MZ (identical) twins vs ~7% for DZ (fraternal) twins. The genetic contribution is clear — but the fact that MZ concordance is well below 100% shows nurture also matters.
- **Evolutionary explanations.** Bowlby argued attachment is an innate adaptation: infants are biologically prepared to form bonds because attached infants survive to reproduce.
- **Genetic explanations of intelligence.** Heritability coefficient around 0.5 (Plomin) — half of population variance in IQ is attributable to genetic variation.

Examples of Nurture Influences

- **Behaviourism (Skinner; Watson).** All behaviour is the result of conditioning. Watson famously claimed he could turn any healthy infant into "doctor, lawyer, artist or thief" through environment alone.
- **Social learning theory (Bandura).** Aggression is learned by observing and imitating models. The biological capacity for aggression exists, but its *expression* is shaped by environment.
- **Double-bind theory of schizophrenia (Bateson 1956).** Schizophrenia develops in children exposed to repeated contradictory communications from caregivers — purely environmental.

The Interactionist Approach

Modern psychology overwhelmingly endorses an interactionist position: nature and nurture work together. Three key concepts illustrate this:

1. **The diathesis–stress model.** Disorders such as schizophrenia and depression require *both* a genetic vulnerability (diathesis) *and* an environmental stressor. Tienari et al. (2004) studied 303 adopted children:

of those with high genetic risk, 11 developed schizophrenia — but *only* when raised in adoptive families with poor communication. High-risk children in healthy families did not develop the disorder.

2. **Epigenetics.** Life experiences (diet, stress, smoking, trauma) leave chemical "tags" (e.g. DNA methylation) on genes that switch them on or off without changing the DNA sequence. These tags can be inherited by offspring, meaning a grandparent's experiences can shape their grandchildren's behaviour. Caspi et al. (2002) showed that men with the low-activity MAOA gene were more likely to be aggressive only if they had also experienced childhood maltreatment.
3. **Constructivism / niche-picking (Plomin).** Genetically influenced traits lead individuals to select environments that reinforce those traits — a naturally aggressive child seeks out aggressive peer groups, which amplifies the genetic tendency. Nature shapes nurture, which then shapes nature further.

Evaluation

Strength — strong support for the interactionist position (Tienari et al. 2004). A major strength of the interactionist approach is direct evidence from adoption studies. Tienari et al.'s long-term Finnish adoption study found that genetic high-risk Finnish children only developed schizophrenia when raised in disturbed adoptive families — neither genes nor environment alone was sufficient. This is important because it demonstrates the diathesis–stress model with rare methodological rigour, controlling for the gene-environment correlation that confounds within-family studies. This strengthens the validity of interactionism as the correct framework for explaining complex behaviours.

Strength — neuroplasticity shows nurture changes nature (Maguire et al. 2000). A further strength of interactionism comes from neuroscience. Maguire et al. (2000) found London taxi drivers had significantly enlarged posterior hippocampi compared to controls — with the size correlated to years of experience. This is important because it shows the environment (years of spatial navigation training) physically reshapes biological structures, blurring the nature–nurture distinction. This supports an interactionist position over either pure-nature or pure-nurture accounts.

Limitation — extreme positions still influential and harmful. A significant limitation is that extreme positions persist in popular thinking and policy. Strong nativism ("born that way") is often used to justify discrimination or fatalism; strong empiricism ("any child can be anything") underestimates real biological constraints. This is important because both extremes produce poor predictions and harmful applications. This is an issues-and-debates concern — psychological findings need to be communicated in interactionist terms to avoid socially-sensitive misuse (see Section 7).

Limitation — heritability coefficients are routinely misinterpreted. A further limitation is that heritability coefficients are widely misunderstood. A heritability of 0.5 for IQ does *not* mean 50% of an individual's intelligence is due to genes — it means 50% of the *population variation* is attributable to genetic differences *in that population, in that environment*. Changing the environment can change heritability dramatically. This is important because misreading heritability as "50% genetic destiny" leads to deterministic and discriminatory conclusions about individuals. This is a methodological issue that limits the public communication of behavioural-genetic research.

Limitation — epigenetics adds further complexity. A more recent limitation is that epigenetics shows the nature–nurture interaction is even more complex than originally proposed. Environmental factors affect not just *this* individual but their descendants. This is important because it means even the "nature" side of the debate is partly the product of ancestors' "nurture", undermining the meaningfulness of the original dichotomy. This further supports replacing nature-vs-nurture with a fully integrated developmental-systems framework.

Conclusion. The nature–nurture debate has, for working psychologists, largely been resolved in favour of an interactionist approach. Diathesis–stress, epigenetics, niche-picking and neuroplasticity all show that nature and nurture co-construct behaviour. The remaining task is to translate this interactionism into the public communication of psychology to avoid deterministic misuse.

5 Holism and Reductionism

KEY TERMS

Holism — explaining a behaviour by treating it as an integrated whole, not as a collection of parts. The Gestalt principle: "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Associated with the humanistic approach.

Reductionism (AQA) — explaining complex behaviour by breaking it into smaller, simpler components. Implies that complex phenomena are best understood at a lower level of explanation.

Levels of explanation — the same behaviour can be described at different levels: socio-cultural → psychological → physical → physiological → neurochemical. Reductionism prefers lower levels; holism prefers higher.

Levels of Explanation — Example (OCD)

Level	Explanation of OCD
Socio-cultural	OCD behaviours such as repeated hand-washing are seen as abnormal because they deviate from socially acceptable norms.
Psychological	OCD is explained as obsessive irrational thoughts and compensatory compulsive behaviours (the cognitive approach).
Physical / behavioural	Compulsions are reinforced by the temporary anxiety relief they produce (operant conditioning).
Physiological	Abnormal activity in the orbitofrontal cortex and basal ganglia "worry circuit" produces intrusive thoughts.
Neurochemical	Low serotonin levels disrupt mood and impulse control, producing OCD symptoms.

Types of Reductionism

- **Biological reductionism** — explains behaviour in terms of genes, neurochemistry, neurons and brain structures. Example: depression as a serotonin deficiency. Characteristic of the **biological approach**.
- **Environmental (stimulus–response) reductionism** — explains behaviour as simple stimulus–response associations learned through conditioning. Example: phobias as conditioned responses (Watson and Rayner's Little Albert). Characteristic of the **behaviourist approach**.

Evaluation

Strength of reductionism — scientific credibility. A major strength of reductionism is its compatibility with the scientific method. Smaller, simpler variables (a neurotransmitter level, a stimulus–response link) can be operationalised, manipulated and measured under controlled lab conditions, allowing causal inferences. This is

important because it gives psychology the methodological rigour that distinguishes it from anecdote. This strengthens psychology's status as a science and underlies its credibility in medical and policy contexts.

Strength of reductionism — practical applications (SSRIs). A further strength is the development of effective treatments. Biological reductionism has produced **SSRIs** for depression, antipsychotics for schizophrenia and L-DOPA for Parkinson's. Environmental reductionism has produced behavioural treatments such as systematic desensitisation and token economies. This is important because reductionist interventions deliver measurable improvements in quality of life and reduce the economic burden of mental illness. This supports continued use of reductionist methods at least for treatment-focused research.

Limitation of reductionism — loses meaning and context. A serious limitation of reductionism is that it strips behaviour of its meaning. Speaking is reducible to vocal-cord vibrations, but the same vibrations can be a joke, a warning or a declaration of love — and reductionism cannot capture the difference. This is important because much of what psychology aims to explain (love, identity, mental disorder) depends on meaning and social context. This limits reductionism's ability to fully explain higher-order human behaviour and supports the need for holistic complements.

Strength of holism — captures emergent and social behaviour. A genuine strength of holism is that some phenomena only make sense at the group or whole-person level. Zimbardo's prison-experiment behaviour (conformity, deindividuation) cannot be explained by examining individual prisoners or guards in isolation — the dynamic emerges from the situation as a whole. Humanistic approaches similarly insist on treating clients as whole people, not collections of symptoms. This is important because emergent phenomena are real and require holistic methods to study. This strengthens the case for holistic methods in social and clinical psychology.

Limitation of holism — lacks empirical rigour. A serious limitation of holism is the difficulty of operationalising whole-person, multi-level concepts. Humanistic concepts such as "self-actualisation" or "congruence" resist precise measurement, making the humanistic approach difficult to test scientifically. This is important because untestable concepts cannot accumulate cumulative evidence in the way reductionist hypotheses can. This limits holism's contribution to scientific psychology, even though it may be valuable for therapy and personal growth.

Limitation — the right level depends on the question (interactionism). A balanced limitation of *both* positions is that the appropriate level of explanation depends on the question being asked. Drug treatment for depression requires biological reductionism; understanding the lived experience of depression requires holism. This is important because privileging either position dogmatically constrains research unnecessarily. This supports an interactionist position — **levels of explanation should be combined**, not ranked.

Conclusion. Reductionism gives psychology scientific rigour and effective interventions; holism captures emergent and meaning-laden phenomena. The mature position is interactionism: choose the level of explanation appropriate to the question, and triangulate findings across levels where possible. This is the position now adopted across most of contemporary psychology.

6 Idiographic and Nomothetic Approaches

KEY TERMS (AQA)

Idiographic approach — the study of human behaviour by focusing on individuals and the uniqueness of their experiences. Favours qualitative data, avoids universal generalisations. Example: humanistic psychology.

Nomothetic approach — seeks to identify universal patterns of behaviour and establish general laws. Favours quantitative methods, large samples and statistical analysis. Examples: the behaviourist, cognitive, psychodynamic and biological approaches.

The Idiographic Approach

Idiographic research focuses on the *individual* rather than the population. It typically uses qualitative methods — case studies, unstructured interviews, self-report diaries — to capture the subjective texture of a single person's experience.

- **Humanistic psychology** (Rogers, Maslow) treats every client as a unique whole and uses phenomenological methods to access their experience.
- **Freud's case studies** (Little Hans, Anna O) used in-depth interviews of single individuals to develop psychodynamic theory.
- **Case studies in cognitive neuroscience** — HM (memory), Phineas Gage (personality), Clive Wearing (amnesia) — produced rich qualitative data that has reshaped whole research fields.

The Nomothetic Approach

Nomothetic research aims to discover general laws of behaviour by studying large samples under controlled conditions. Radford and Kirby identify three nomothetic activities:

1. **Classifying** people into groups (e.g. DSM diagnostic categories).
2. **Establishing principles** of behaviour applicable to people in general (e.g. Asch's conformity findings).
3. **Establishing dimensions** along which people can be measured (e.g. IQ, the Big Five personality traits).

- **Behaviourists** use lab experiments to identify universal stimulus–response laws.
- **Cognitive psychologists** use brain-imaging (EEG, fMRI, PET) to identify common mental processes across people.
- **Biological psychologists** use brain scans and twin studies to identify universal neural and genetic mechanisms — e.g. Tulving's PET work showed semantic memory is recalled from the left prefrontal cortex and episodic memory from the right prefrontal cortex.

Evaluation

Strength of idiographic — rich, in-depth, theory-generating. A major strength of the idiographic approach is the depth and richness of data it produces. Case studies of HM and Clive Wearing have transformed our understanding of memory, demonstrating dissociations between STM and LTM and between episodic and procedural memory. This is important because such single-case findings can falsify universal theories (e.g. HM's intact procedural memory showed memory is not unitary) and generate new hypotheses for nomothetic research to test. This strengthens the idiographic approach as a generator of theory, even if it cannot establish general laws on its own.

Strength of nomothetic — scientific rigour and prediction. A major strength of the nomothetic approach is its scientific credibility. Large samples, standardised procedures, operationalised variables and statistical analysis allow reliable, replicable conclusions to be drawn. Established norms (e.g. mean IQ = 100, normal distributions for height and weight) act as baselines against which individuals can be assessed. This is important because reliable measurement underlies effective diagnosis, intervention and policy. This strengthens psychology's status as a science.

Limitation of idiographic — limited generalisability. A significant limitation of the idiographic approach is the difficulty of generalising from single cases. HM's brain was unusual; the Czech-twins case is unique; humanistic accounts of self-actualisation rest on the experiences of small clinical samples. This is important because findings that cannot generalise cannot support universal claims about human behaviour. This limits the contribution of pure idiographic research to scientific psychology and supports its use as a complement, not a replacement, for nomothetic methods.

Limitation of idiographic — researcher bias and subjectivity. A further limitation is the subjectivity of idiographic methods. Case studies, unstructured interviews and qualitative analysis depend heavily on the researcher's interpretation, making findings vulnerable to **researcher bias** and difficult to replicate. Freud's interpretations of Little Hans, in particular, have been criticised for reflecting Freud's pre-existing theory rather than the case data. This is important because it limits the reliability and falsifiability of idiographic conclusions, weakening their scientific status.

Limitation of nomothetic — "loses the whole person". A significant limitation of the nomothetic approach is that, by focusing on averages and laws, it can lose sight of the individual. Knowing that 1 in 100 people will develop schizophrenia tells us nothing about a specific patient's experience or what treatment will work for them. This is important because clinical psychology requires individualised understanding alongside population-level data. This limits the nomothetic approach as a sole methodology and supports the use of idiographic methods in clinical practice.

Strength — the approaches are complementary (Milton and Davis 1996). A balanced strength of the debate is that the two approaches are best seen as complementary. Millon and Davis (1996) recommend starting with nomothetic research to identify general principles, then switching to idiographic methods to understand individual variation and refine theory. Cognitive neuroscience already does this — combining large fMRI samples (nomothetic) with rich single-patient case studies (idiographic). This is important because the most powerful research designs use both: nomothetic for breadth, idiographic for depth.

Conclusion. The idiographic vs nomothetic debate is, in mature psychology, a false dichotomy. Idiographic methods generate hypotheses and capture meaning; nomothetic methods establish reliable patterns and enable prediction. The best psychology uses both, choosing the approach to suit the research question.

7 Social Sensitivity in Psychological Research

SOCIAL SENSITIVITY — AQA DEFINITION

Socially sensitive research is research that has potentially negative implications and consequences for certain social groups. A lack of social sensitivity in research design, participant selection, analysis or communication of findings can amplify prejudice and lead to discriminatory policies. AQA identifies attachment, psychopathology and relationships as particularly socially sensitive areas.

Sieber and Stanley (1988) — Four Aspects of Socially Sensitive Research

Sieber and Stanley defined socially sensitive research as "studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research". They identified four points at which ethical considerations arise:

1. **The research question** — does framing the question reinforce stereotypes (e.g. "Are women less intelligent than men?")?
2. **Methodology used** — does the methodology protect anonymity and avoid harm to participants from sensitive groups?
3. **Institutional context** — how will the research be used by the funder, government or commercial sponsor?
4. **Interpretation and application of findings** — how will the findings be communicated, and what social policies might result?

BPS Ethical Principles (Relevant to Social Sensitivity)

The four primary BPS principles — **respect, competence, responsibility** and **integrity** — extend beyond individual participants to the wider social groups represented by the research. Specific issues include privacy, confidentiality, valid methodology, informed consent, equitable treatment, scientific freedom, and the risk–benefit ratio.

Examples of Socially Sensitive Research

- **Bowlby's maternal-deprivation theory.** Used by the World Health Organisation in the 1950s to argue that mothers should not work outside the home during a child's first years. This contributed to childcare and parental-leave policy that disadvantaged women, and arguably continues to fuel guilt among working mothers.
- **Burt's intelligence research (fraudulent).** Cyril Burt's twin studies on heritability of IQ were used to justify the 11+ exam in the UK, segregating children by "natural intelligence" at age 11. His data were later shown to be fabricated — yet the 11+ remains in some areas of the UK.

- **US Army IQ tests (1917).** Used to argue that southern and eastern European immigrants were less intelligent than northern Europeans, contributing to the racist 1924 US Immigration Act and to the eugenics movement.
- **Eugenics and forced sterilisation.** Throughout the 1920s–1970s, US states sterilised tens of thousands of "feeble-minded" citizens — including the disabled, mentally ill and drug addicts — on the basis of psychometric research.
- **Research on the heritability of homosexuality.** Whether findings support innate ("born this way") or environmental causes has been used both to support and to oppose gay rights — a classic socially sensitive area.

Evaluation

Strength — socially sensitive research has positive social impact. A major strength of engaging in socially sensitive research is its potential to challenge prejudice and improve lives. Scarr (1988) argued that avoiding socially sensitive topics would itself be unethical, because it would leave dominant assumptions unchallenged. Research on the heritability of sexual orientation, on the equal cognitive abilities of women, and on the cultural specificity of "abnormality" has been used to support equal rights, marriage equality and anti-discrimination law. This is important because psychology's role in advancing social justice depends on willingness to engage with controversy. This strengthens the case for socially sensitive research *provided* it is done responsibly.

Strength — improves the quality of psychology. A further strength is that careful attention to social sensitivity improves methodological standards. Concerns about cultural bias have led to better sampling, indigenous psychologies and cross-cultural validation; concerns about gender bias have led to more representative participant pools and reflexive analysis. This is important because socially sensitive critique pushes psychology toward greater universality and rigour. This is an example of ethics and methodology working hand-in-hand.

Limitation — risk of misuse for social control. A serious limitation is that socially sensitive research can be — and has been — used as a "scientific" justification for discriminatory practices. The US eugenics movement, Nazi racial science and Burt's intelligence research all used psychological data to justify forced sterilisation, immigration restriction or educational segregation. This is important because once findings enter the public domain, researchers lose control over how they are used. This is a major reason why psychologists must consider Sieber and Stanley's third and fourth aspects (institutional context and application) before publishing.

Limitation — findings can be misrepresented (Packard 1957). A further limitation is the risk of misrepresentation. Vance Packard's claim in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) that subliminal advertising significantly boosted Coca-Cola and popcorn sales was entirely fabricated — yet still shapes public belief in the power of subliminal messaging. This is important because even fraudulent or misinterpreted psychological findings can have lasting social impact. This places a strong responsibility on psychologists to communicate findings clearly and to correct misrepresentations actively.

Limitation — cost–benefit analyses are hard. A further limitation is that ethics committees must perform a cost–benefit analysis weighing the academic and social benefits of socially sensitive research against the risks of misuse. This is important because long-term social consequences — changes in legislation, shifts in public attitudes — are inherently difficult to predict in advance. This is a genuine limitation: even well-intentioned ethical review may underestimate the downstream damage that socially sensitive research can cause.

Application — Issues and Debates (links to gender and cultural bias). Social sensitivity is the underlying ethical concern that connects gender bias (Section 1), cultural bias (Section 2) and reductionism (Section 5). Findings that exaggerate group differences (alpha bias) or assume universals based on biased samples (beta bias) can both be socially sensitive. This is why reflexivity — researchers acknowledging the social impact of their work — has become a central component of ethical psychology.

Conclusion. Socially sensitive research is unavoidable in a discipline that studies human behaviour, and it is necessary if psychology is to address inequality and injustice. The challenge is not whether to conduct it but how to conduct, interpret and communicate it responsibly — with explicit attention to its potential social consequences at every stage of the research process.

These revision notes were prepared for Simply Psychology and cover spec section 4.3.1 of the AQA Psychology 2025 specification (A-level Paper 3, Issues and Debates). Definitions of *alpha bias, beta bias, androcentrism, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, idiographic, nomothetic, reductionism* and *social sensitivity* follow AQA's official *Subject specific vocabulary*. For deeper coverage of any topic, see simplypsychology.org/issues-debates.html.