Psychology: Knowledge Organiser. Paper 3: Issues and debates

Gender bias

- Psychologists seek universality but bias may be inevitable as they are products of their time.
- Alpha bias: exaggerates differences, tends to devalue females. Examples: Freud, girls have weaker identification with same-sex parent than boys, so weaker conscience.
- Beta bias: ignores or underestimates differences e.g. when conducting research. Examples: fight or flight response based on male animals and assumed to be universal, tend and befriend more common in females, an evolved response for caring for young (**Taylor et al**).
- Androcentrism: male centred, leads to alpha and beta bias, non-male behaviour judged as abnormal, e.g. premenstrual syndrome.

☹ There are implications raised from psychological studies and theories that are gender biased: may lead to misleading assumptions and fail to challenge negative stereotypes—validating discriminatory practises.

☹ Gender bias promotes sexism in the research process. Male researchers more likely and their expectations about women (e.g. expect irrationality) may mean that female participants underperform in studies (Nicolson).

☺ Gender bias has resulted in greater reflexivity (recognising the effect of own values and assumptions may have on the nature of their work).

Free will and determinism

- Free will-determinism debate: is our behaviour selected without constraint (free will) or caused by internal/external factors (determinism)?
- Free will: we are self determining, biological and environmental influences can be rejected, the humanistic approach.
- Hard determinism: all human actions have a cause. Soft determinism: freedom within restricted range of choices.
- Biological determinism: ANS causes stress response, genes cause mental health problems.
- Environmental determinism: we are sum total of reinforcement contingencies: free will is an illusion.
- Psychic determinism: behaviour caused by unconscious childhood conflicts.
- Scientific emphasis: every event has a cause, allows prediction and control of events.

☺ Determinism is more consistent with the aims of science.

☹ The law: hard determinism not consistent with legal principle of moral responsibility.

☺ Free will: even if we do not have free will—evidence suggests (**Roberts**) the fact that we believe we do may have a positive impact on mind and behaviour.

☹ Against free will: research evidence: participants asked to randomly flick wrist and say so, brain activity came before (**Libet et al**).

Cultural bias

- Cultural bias: 68% of research participants from US, 80% are students.
- WEIRD participants: Westernised, Educated people from Industrialised, Rich Democracies.
- Ethnocentrism: superiority of own cultural group, others seen as deficient. Example, strange situation, reflects vales of US culture, meant many Japanese babies classed as insecure (**Takahashi**).
- Cultural relativism: norms and ethics only make sense in their cultural context.
- Universality: etic approach looks at behaviour from outside (looks for universals, whereas emic approach is from inside a culture). Imposed etic e.g. Ainsworth's Strange Situation.

☹ Wealth of evidence to show cultural bias is still an issue in psychology. Alongside this some of the most influential studies in psychology are culturally biased.

☹ Ethnic stereotyping: early IQ tests were ethnocentric, but then used as evidence that certain ethnic/cultural groups were genetically inferior (Gould).

☺ Emergence of cultural psychology: takes emic approach to avoid ethnocentrism e.g. local researcher and culturally-based techniques.

The nature-nurture debate

- Nature: heredity, influence of genes on behaviour, innate influences.
- Nurture: environment, the mind starts as a blank slate (behaviourist approach).
- Measuring nature-nurture concordance (estimates how much trait is inherited), used to estimate heritability (proportion within a population due to genes—IQ is .5 (50%) half nature, half nurture.
- The interactionist approach: Cannot separate nature and nurture, relative contribution is what matters e.g. attachment (parenting versus temperament of child).
- Diathesis-stress model: vulnerability + trigger e.g. OCD (inherited gene + trauma).
- Epigenetics: lifestyle and events (e.g. smoking, trauma) leave 'marks' on our genes, switching them on or off, permanent and can be passed on.

☺ Support for nature: twin study evidence. You can use an example from any topic.

☺ Support for nurture: evidence from studies of social learning theory or classical/operant conditioning. You can use an example from any topic.

☹ Implications of both nativism (nature) and empiricism (nurture).

☹ Strong support for adopting an interactionist approach as opposed to only nature or nurture.

Idiographic and nomothetic approaches

- Two positions on how to investigate human behaviour: idiographic (detail, single cases) or nomothetic ('laws' or norms).
- Idiographic: one person/group/institution. Qualitative methods e.g. thematic analysis of interviews, may make generalisations. Examples: Rogers (unconditional positive regard, based on individual clients), Freud (phobia, Little Hans).

☺ With its in-depth qualitative methods of investigation, it arguably provides a more complete account of an individual.

☹ The idiographic approach on its own is restricted, no baseline for comparison, also can be unscientific and subjective e.g. case studies.

- Nomothetic: 'laws' applied to individuals. Quantitative methods, hypothesis testing, statistical analysis, seek to quantify behaviour. Examples: Skinner (laws of learning), Sperry (split brain research).

☺ Scientific credibility: establishes objectivity through standardisation, control and statistical testing.

☹ Losing the whole person: loss of understanding when focusing on statistics e.g. knowing there is a 1% lifetime risk of developing schizophrenia tells us very little about what life is like for someone who has the disorder.

- Objective versus subjective: nomothetic assumes objective measurement is possible through standardisation, idiographic believes only individual experience matters.

Holism and reductionism

- Holism-reductionism debate: look at whole person or constituent parts.
- Holism: whole is greater than the sum of its parts, e.g. humanistic, qualitative approaches.
- Reductionism: law of parsimony, reducing to simplest (lowest level) principles.
- Levels of explanation: e.g. explain OCD at socio-cultural, psychological, psychological, physical, environmental/behavioural, physiological, neurochemical level. Can debate which is best.
- Biological reductionism: physiological, neurochemical, evolutionary, genetic e.g. OCD reduced to serotonin activity.
- Environmental reductionism: behaviour reduced to stimulus responses (behaviourism), e.g. love/attachment is learned through classical conditioning (UCS+NS=love).

☺ In support of Holism: some behaviours can only be understood by higher level explanations or holistic ones (e.g. Stanford prison experiment).

☹ Against holism: lack practical value. Holistic accounts become complex and impractical e.g. difficult to treat depression when causes include past experiences, relationships etc.

☺ In support of reductionism: scientific approach. Reductionism is the basis of operationalisation, enables objective experiments/observations.

☹ Against reductionism: oversimplify complex behaviour. E.g. reductionism approaches in terms of genes/neurotransmitters don't include context and therefore lack meaning (e.g. when pointing your finger).

Ethical implications of research studies and theory

- Ethical implications: being concerned about the consequences of theory/studies.
- Socially sensitive research (SSR): research that has consequences for the participants or the groups they represent (**Siber and Stanley**).
- Applies to all research but some more than others e.g. research on memory versus research on depression.
- Research question: if focus is on 'alternative relationships' then heterosexual ones may be assumed to be excluded, biased from the start.
- Dealing with participants e.g. victims of domestic abuse may worry about confidentiality, stress of discussing experience.
- The way findings are used may give scientific credence to prejudice e.g. US IQ tests used to restrict immigration. Also media interest.

☺ Socially sensitive research can have benefits for the groups being studied—e.g. homosexuality was seen as a mental illness but the Kinsey report showed it was normal (**Kinsey et al**).

☹ However, there may also be negative consequences e.g. the criminal gene has implications for individuals claiming no personal responsibility.

☺ Real world application: decisions on child care, crime etc use SSR e.g. ONS (Office for National Statistics). Demonstrates that psychologists have an important role to play in providing high quality research on socially sensitive topics.

☹ Poor research design: **Burt's** research in 1950s on IQ led to 11+ exam but later showed to be fraudulent, but to late to change the consequences. Socially sensitive topics need to be planned with care to ensure findings are valid because of the enduring effects on particular groups of people.