

Essay title: Describe and evaluate the nature–nurture debate in psychology. (16 marks)

Amongst the most famous and consistently evoked debates in psychology is that often summarised (and simplified) as nature vs. nurture.

The nurture side of the debate suggests that our behaviour is the product of environmental influences which are caused by our interactions with the environment. These interactions include our social and physical world and can be referred to as ‘experience’. For example, it has been suggested that attachment behaviours might be explained as the result of classical and/or operant conditioning.

Nature refers to innate influences on human behaviour and cognition (biological or genetic), i.e. to any characteristics determined by genes, either at birth or subsequently. Many psychological disorders, for example schizophrenia, are said to have a genetic component. Research has found concordance rates of 40% in monozygotic twins and 7% in dizygotic twins, suggesting that nature is a powerful contributing factor in schizophrenia. Similarly, Huntington’s disease is a genetically transmitted disorder that usually emerges between the ages of 30 and 50, although it can appear at any time since the genetic cause is innately present.

As psychological knowledge has deepened, the nature–nurture debate has grown increasingly complex, to the point where some psychologists believe that it is now a meaningless distinction, and a pointless distraction from more important matters. Plomin et al. (1977) have suggested the idea of “passive influence” in which genetic influences on parental behaviour create a particular environment in which their children are raised. For example, parents with a genetically influenced mental illness (like schizophrenia) may create an unsettled home environment. This suggests that disorders like schizophrenia may be the result of indirect influences. Furthermore, these ideas also demonstrate the possible interaction between nature and nurture and demonstrate that nature can actually affect nurture.

Other psychologists have suggested that the influence can operate in the other direction. Research examining neural

The term ‘nurture’ has been defined accurately.

While the example is correct, it could have been developed further to explain how classical/operant conditioning are examples of ‘nurture’.

The term ‘nature’ has been defined accurately and research evidence has been used effectively to enhance the definition.

Research evidence used to evaluate the debate.

A highly effective evaluation point.

plasticity suggests that life experiences (nurture) shape our biology (nature). For example, Maguire et al. (2000) investigated the hippocampi volume of London taxi drivers' brains. She found that this region of the brain was larger in taxi drivers in comparison to non-taxi drivers. Consequently, Maguire concluded that driving a taxi (nurture) actually had an effect on the size of the hippocampi (nature).

Most psychologists now believe that we should consider both nature and nurture and therefore adopt an interactionist approach. A celebrated example of the interactionist approach is the diathesis-stress model which suggests that even though one may be born with a biological vulnerability, such as a gene for depression, the depression will only develop if it is triggered by a stressor in the environment. Research has demonstrated that not everyone with the gene for depression goes on to develop it, suggesting instead that one's nature is only expressed under certain conditions of nurture.

The interactionist approach has led to the development of theories/models that have helped improve our understanding and treatment of many physical and psychological illnesses.

[481 Words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 4:**

This is a very clear and well-detailed essay which defines the key terms succinctly and provides an interesting range of evaluation points. There were two opportunities where the answer could have expanded or developed examples/explanations. However on the whole, this is good mark band 4 essay.

An excellent evaluation point drawing on biopsychology research evidence.

The concluding sentence could have been developed further to say why this is a problem for the debate.

An example of the interactionist approach is used effectively.