

**Essay title:** Discuss idiographic and nomothetic approaches to psychological investigation. (16 marks)

What is the ultimate aim of psychological research: Is it to discover universal laws of human behaviour, or to develop an in-depth understanding of unique cases? The first possibility demands an approach to research called nomothetic, from the Greek word for 'laws'. If psychology is a science like physics or biology, then this must be its intention. But if it isn't, then perhaps its approach should instead be idiographic, from the Greek word for "own" or "private." The nomothetic approach is based on the collection and examination of large amounts of quantitative data which are subjected to statistical analysis from which quantified probabilities can be derived. Idiographic research makes use of such techniques as in-depth interviews and case studies to focus on particular individuals or small groups, and seeks insight into the unique personal experience of its subjects through the generation of data that is largely qualitative rather than quantitative.

Given these profound differences in intent and methodology, it is not surprising that those who favour either approach see the other as misguided and inappropriate. 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. For a discipline so dedicated to the application of its scientific understanding, this is a devastating limitation.

Aside from its limited practical use, many psychologists criticise the idiographic approach for its essentially unscientific nature. The emphasis on in-depth data collection, and the difficulties in arriving at justifiable generalisations, contradicts the central purpose of any mature science: to explain the most variation in the fewest possible terms so that phenomena can be predicted and ultimately controlled. Research practices that do not address these goals can seem scientifically pointless.

Idiographic researchers respond to these criticisms by emphasising the evidence-based nature of their descriptions and conclusions, and the critical awareness

*An impressive use of specialist terminology drawing on the origins of nomothetic and idiographic.*

*Well-detailed and accurate definitions of the key terms are presented.*

*An interesting criticism of the idiographic approach is presented. This point could have been developed with an elaborated example.*

*This is a reasonably good evaluation point which could have been developed with a specific example.*

embedded in such research techniques as reflexivity, and often claim that the validity of their findings is more secure than that which rests entirely on statistical results. As Allport noted when introducing the terms into American psychology in 1937, it is only through the understanding of single individuals that psychologists can hope to predict how such individuals will behave in a given situation.

*An interesting argument in relation to idiographic approaches is presented.*

There have been some attempts to reconcile these two approaches. Holt (1967) claimed that the ideographic approach was in reality nomothetic, in which abstract concepts (like personality traits) were applied to individual cases rather than more generalised categories. Millon and Davis (1995) suggested that the identification of psychological disorders was already based on nomothetic principles that could then be more narrowly focused when treating an individual with his or her own unique personality traits. Flyvbjerg (2011) claimed that empirical science was itself based on case studies, since every laboratory experiment is, in fact, a unique case. It is a matter for critical judgment whether these efforts to elide profound epistemological and ontological differences are realistic, or convincing.

*An effective and thorough conclusion which is focused on the 'discuss' command term.*

[496 words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 4**

This is an exceptionally well-detailed essay that demonstrates an impressive use of specialist terminology to construct an interesting essay. The essay is centred on a discussion and is thorough and effective and focused on the question.