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| **Holism and reductionism AO1** | |
| **Holism:**  Gestalt psychologists famously declared that the ‘whole is greater than the sum of its parts’. This view is the basis of holism in psychology: The idea that any attempt to break up behaviour and experience is inappropriate as these can only be understood by analysing the person or behaviour as a whole. This is a view shared by humanistic psychologists who saw successful therapy as bringing together all aspects of the ‘whole person’.  **Reductionism:**  This analyses behaviour by breaking it down into its constituent parts. It is based on the scientific principle of parsimony: that all phenomena should be explained using the most basic principles. This is often the simplest, easiest and most economical level of explanation. | |
| **Levels of explanation in psychology**  The notion of ‘levels of explanation’ suggests that there are different ways of viewing the same phenomena in psychology. For instance OCD may be understood in a socio-cultural context as producing behaviour, such as repetitive hand washing, that most people would regard as odd or irrational. At a psychological level, as the experience of having obsessive thoughts and at a physiological level as hypersensitivity in the basal ganglia. Which of these provides the best explanation of OCD is a matter of debate, but each level is more reductionist than the one before. This is why holism argues that things should be studied as a whole. | |
| **Biological reductionism**  Biological reductionism is based on the premise that we are biological organisms made up physiological structures and processes. Thus, all behaviour is at some level biological and so can be explained through neurochemical, evolutionary or genetic influences.  This is the assumption of the biological approach and has been successfully applied to a number of different topic areas in psychology. For example, the effects of psychoactive drugs on the brain have contributed much to our understanding of neural processes and the fact that it might be possible to explain serious mental disorders such as depression and schizophrenia at a biochemical level. | |
| **Environmental (stimulus-response) reductionism**  The behaviourist approach is built on environmental reductionism. Behaviourists study observable behaviour only and in doing so break complex learning up into simple stimulus response links that can be measurable within a laboratory.  Thus, the key unit of analysis occurs at the physical level – the behaviourists approach does not concern itself with cognitive processes of the mind that occur are the psychological level. The mind is regarded as a ‘black box’ ad irrelevant to our understanding of behaviour. | |
| **Holism and reductionism AO3** | |
| **Holism – FOR**  P: One strength of holistic approaches in research is that it addresses an entire group at once.  E: For example, there are aspects of behaviour that only emerge within a group context and cannot be understood at the level of the individual group members e.g. the effects of conformity to social roles and the deindividuation of prisoners and guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment could not be understood by studying the PPs as individuals, it was the interaction between people and the behaviour of the group that was important.  E: This is a strength because holistic/same level explanations provide a more complete and global understanding of behaviour than the more reductionist approaches, which it can be assumed can be more easily generalised to wider societies and larger cultures.  L: As a result this provides support for the use of holistic methods within psychological research. | **Holism – AGAINST**  P: One weakness of holistic explanations in psychology is that they tend to be more vague and speculative as they become more complex.  E: For example, humanistic psychology which takes a holistic approach to behaviour tends to be criticised for its lack of empirical evidence and is instead seen by many as a rather loose set of concepts.  E: This is an issue because higher level explanations that combine many different perspectives (holism) present researchers with practical dilemmas, such as if they accept that there are many factors that contribute to depression, it becomes difficult to establish which is most influential and which one to use as a basis for therapy.  L: this suggests that when it comes to finding solutions for real-world problems, lower level explanations may be more appropriate. |
| **Reductionism – FOR**  P: One strength of the reductionist approach is that it is very scientific.  E: For example, it conducts experiments or records observations (behavioural categories) in a way that is meaningful and reliable as you can operationalise the variables.  E: This is a strength because the reductionist approach allows us to break target behaviours down into constituent parts for the research, meaning we can draw more reliable and therefore arguably more accurate conclusions from the research. For example, the behaviourist approach was able to demonstrate how complex learning could be broken down into simple stimulus-response links within the lab.  L: This therefore gives psychological research deemed reductionist greater credibility, placing it on equal terms with the natural sciences lower down in the reductionist hierarchy. | **Reductionism – AGAINST**  P: One weakness of the reductionist approach is that it oversimplifies complex phenomena.  E: For example, explanations that operate at the level of the gene, neurotransmitter or neuron do not include and analysis of the social context within which behaviour occurs – and this is where the behaviour in question may derive its meaning.  E: This is an issue because it tells us very little in reality about why we act a certain way. It can only ever form part of an explanation. For instance, the physiological processes involved in pointing one’s finger will be the same regardless of the context. However an analysis of this will not tell us why the finger is pointed – to draw attention to some object or person, as an act of aggression, as part of a raised hand to answer a question in class etc.  L: This means that validity of reductionist research can be questioned, due to the lack of depth and full explanation. |