

Idiographic versus nomothetic approaches to psychology

	Nomothetic approach	Idiographic approach
Definitions	The approach of investigating large groups of people in order to find general laws of behaviour that apply to everyone	The approach of investigating individuals in personal, in-depth detail to achieve a unique understanding of them.
Assumptions	Nomos= laws in ancient Greek; this approach assumes that an individual is a complex combination of many universal laws; it is best to study people on a large scale .	Idios= 'private' or 'personal' in ancient Greek; this approach assumes that humans are unique.
Methodology	Quantitative Experimental methods are best to identify the universal laws governing behaviour. The individual will be classified with others and measured as a score upon a dimension , or be a statistic supporting a general principle ('averaging').	Qualitative methods are best; case study method will provide a more complete and global understanding of the individual who should be studied using flexible, long terms and detailed procedures in order to put them in a 'class of their own'.
Examples from psychology	The nomothetic approach is the main approach within scientifically oriented psychology. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviourism: experiments with animals (rats, cats and pigeons) _establish laws of learning (B.F. Skinner e.g.). • Social psychology: Milgram e.g. used the nomothetic approach and made general conclusions on the basis of his research. • Psychological theories that propose generalised principles of behaviour have nomothetic assumptions (e.g. intelligence theory of IQ) • Classification manuals like the DSM-IV classify people according to particular types of disorders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freud (1909) the clinical case study method (patients interviewed over a long period of time, notes of his interpretations, unstructured techniques (free association), and he wrote up his notes at the end of the day to allow a more free and natural expression of the patients' thoughts and feelings. • Piaget (1953) longitudinal studies of cognitive development of his children, keeping frequent notes and using the flexible clinical interview method and informal experiments to gain detailed and ecologically valid understanding. • Gardner and Gardner (1969) spent long time interacting with and observing the chimpanzee Washoe as they tried to teach him sign language.
Advantages	In line with the deterministic, law abiding nature of science, useful in predicting and controlling behaviour; nomothetic findings on prejudice and discrimination perhaps helpful (_reduce discrimination)	More complete and global understanding of an individual; sometimes the most efficient; often lead to results that spark off experimental investigation of behaviour.
Disadvantages	Superficial understanding of any one person; even if two persons have same IQ they may have answered different questions in the test; a person may have 1% chance of developing depression (but is he among the 1%?); classification manuals are not accurate and does not help people.	Difficult to generalise findings; Freud and Piaget created universal theories on the basis of a limited and unrepresentative sample; Idiographic research tends to be more unreliable and unscientific (subjective, long term and unstandardised procedures)