Nature versus nurture

Lesson 7.1.3 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Nurture explanations focus on experience and environment, such as learning, family life, culture, social norms, education, media or workplace conditions.

Most psychological explanations are not purely nature or purely nurture; many behaviours develop through interaction between biology and experience.

Core studies and specialist options can be evaluated by asking whether their evidence supports biological causes, environmental causes or both.

Nature explanations can support medical or biological interventions, but they may become deterministic if they ignore learning and context.

Nurture explanations can support prevention, education and environmental change, but they may underplay biological vulnerability or individual differences.

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Key terms

Nature: Inherited or innate contributions to behaviour; biological measurements alone do not establish inheritance.

Nurture: Influences on behaviour linked to environment, learning and experience.

Inheritance: Passing characteristics from parents to offspring through genes.

Innate: Present from birth rather than learned through experience.

Learning: A change in behaviour or knowledge through experience.

Socialisation: The process of learning norms, values and behaviours from other people.

Interactionist explanation: An explanation where biological and environmental factors work together.

Biological vulnerability: A biological risk factor that may make a person more likely to develop a behaviour or disorder.

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Further detail and evidence

Nature concerns inherited/innate contributions; nurture concerns experience and environmental influence. Biological measurement is not automatically evidence of inheritance: experience can change the brain and physiology. Genetic association is not a demonstration that genes determine behaviour.

Family resemblance combines shared genes and environment. Twin/adoption evidence can help separate influences, but depends on assumptions and comparable environments. Genetic effects may depend on exposure; people also select and shape environments partly through their characteristics.

Learning accounts explain how rewards, modelling and associations contribute. Clinical conditioning, Food Dudes and workplace rewards illustrate nurture mechanisms. They do not prove that biology is irrelevant or that every individual responds identically.

Applying the ideas

Oruc compares genetic variants in bipolar I patients and controls. The main null result and weak exploratory subgroup findings do not justify a single-gene conclusion. In contrast, behavioural treatment changing a learned fear is evidence that experience can modify responses, not evidence that susceptibility has no inherited component.

Evaluation and connections

Use precise conclusions: heritability is about variation in a population/context, not the percentage of one person caused by genes. A nature/nurture label should follow the proposed mechanism and evidence. Interaction accounts are often more informative than declaring one side the complete winner.