Idiographic versus nomothetic

Lesson 7.1.8 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Idiographic research focuses on the individual person, case or small group in depth, often using rich qualitative detail.

Nomothetic research looks for general laws, patterns or averages that can apply across larger groups of people.

Idiographic approaches can reveal personal meaning, unusual cases and complex life histories that may be lost in group averages.

Nomothetic approaches can support prediction, comparison, diagnosis, policy and evidence-based interventions.

A limitation of idiographic evidence is that findings from one person or small group may not generalise widely.

A limitation of nomothetic evidence is that group trends may hide individual differences, context and personal experience.

Key terms

Idiographic approach: Studying individuals or small cases in depth.

Nomothetic approach: Studying groups to find general laws or patterns.

Case study: A detailed investigation of one person, group or situation.

Idiographic versus nomothetic

Lesson 7.1.8 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Continued

General law: A broad pattern or principle that is expected to apply across people.

Qualitative data: Non-numerical data such as interviews, observations or written descriptions.

Quantitative data: Numerical data such as scores, ratings or frequencies.

Group average: A summary score that represents a group but may not describe every person in it.

Individual difference: A way in which one person differs from another.

Further detail and evidence

Idiographic approaches seek detailed understanding of a particular person/unit, including unique meaning and history. Nomothetic approaches seek general principles and patterns across people. A case study often supports idiographic understanding; a standardised comparison often supports nomothetic claims, but method and purpose should be distinguished.

Qualitative is not identical to idiographic, and quantitative is not identical to nomothetic. A case can use repeated numerical ratings; a large study can compare qualitative themes. A small study may generate a general hypothesis without establishing it.

Chapman/DeLapp's BII case and Lehmkuhl's adapted child ERP illustrate individual formulation. Lovell's randomised comparison and Landry's experimental groups investigate broader patterns. Their conclusions differ in level and appropriate generalisation.

Idiographic versus nomothetic

Lesson 7.1.8 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Applying the ideas

T's reduction in anxiety and return to medical procedures provides detailed evidence of usefulness for one client. A controlled trial could test average improvement across varied clients. Combining both approaches helps explain who benefits, how and under which conditions.

Worked example: A clinical psychologist writes a detailed case report about one client whose symptoms do not fit a common pattern. A hospital manager wants large-scale evidence before changing treatment guidelines. How do these positions differ? The clinical psychologist is using an idiographic approach because the focus is on one client's unique symptoms, life context and personal meaning. The hospital manager is asking for nomothetic evidence because treatment guidelines usually need broader patterns from larger groups. The case report may reveal an important exception, but larger evidence is needed before assuming the same approach should apply widely.

Worked example: In a workplace study, the average stress score falls after a new rota, but interviews show two employees became more stressed because of childcare and travel problems. What does this show about the debate? The average stress score is nomothetic because it summarises a general group pattern. The interviews add idiographic detail by showing how the change affected particular employees differently. Together they give a stronger evaluation: the rota may help the group overall, but individual circumstances still matter when judging its real impact.

Evaluation and connections

Idiographic work preserves context and unusual cases, but cannot estimate a population effect from one person. Nomothetic work supports comparison and prediction, but averages may conceal subgroups. Standardisation improves consistency while potentially excluding important personal meaning. Match the conclusion to the design.