

Improve your synoptic essay skills

Discuss the view that psychology is a science. Refer to two topics in your answer.

This student has included plenty of the right sorts of ideas but her essay suffers from two common problems. First, the quality of her expression is relatively poor and untechnical. Second, she doesn't elaborate fully on her ideas, especially when she is commenting, analysing and evaluating (A02).

Annotate the essay, pointing out where improvements could be made. Have a go at rewriting the portions you select to improve the quality of expression and the degree of elaboration.

To see if Psychology is a science we need to look at what a science is. Science is a sort of knowledge and a way of getting that knowledge. In science knowledge comes from looking at things and working things out. This makes it different from religion where it all comes from reading scripture or divine inspiration.

In science you have a paradigm, which tells you what to study and how. You make theories, which explain things and then check the theories against evidence to see if they are right. If they aren't you must then change them. Other scientists must be able to see your results. This makes science better than lots of other sorts of knowledge because you can sort out the errors and everyone has to agree.

One example of where psychology is scientific is in criminal psychology. Before criminal psychology was invented by Lombroso people just sat about and talked about criminals. Lombroso put forward a theory about criminal behaviour and looked for evidence that showed it was true. This was better than just talking about how bad criminals were. Lombroso's ideas were a bit odd – he thought that you could tell someone was criminal just by looking. But it doesn't matter that Lombroso was wrong, the important thing is that he introduced the use of evidence into criminal psychology. He didn't really do science like we would now, however.

Another example is mental illness. In this topic you can see where psychology is and isn't scientific. The cognitive approach is scientific because cognitive psychologists come up with theories and hypotheses about how people with depression think differently from normal people and then you can do experiments to see if the hypothesis are true or not. For example, Roth & Rehm (1980). However, the psychodynamic approach isn't scientific because of all the case studies that are done. You can't generalise from a case study and they never try to see if their ideas are wrong.

From these examples we can see that psychology is often a science but not always. Psychology has theories and these are used to make hypotheses and then they go out to find evidence to test them. When the results are different from the theories then the theories are changed, or rejected, as happened to Lombroso. This is like a science should be. However, some parts of psychology are not scientific, like the psychodynamic and humanistic approaches.

There are some problems with psychology being a science. Some say it doesn't have a proper paradigm like physics and chemistry. Also psychology deals too much with things you can't test, like thinking. This might mean it isn't a science. Also, some people argue it can't be a science because people have free will. Also some people say it shouldn't be a science because science is all about controlling people and that would be unethical. But to answer the question, psychology is scientific in parts but not completely.