Discuss the individual and situational explanations of behaviour debate in psychology. Use examples from appropriate core studies to support your answer. [15]

This debate asks the question of whether a person’s behaviour is due to individual factors (such as personality, genetics) or due to their situation (the environment the person is in).

One strength of individual explanations is that by understanding that individual factors that determine behaviour, researchers can develop real life applications such as therapy that focuses on changing these factors. For example, Baron-Cohen’s study has helpful applications to give those with Autism training on how to read emotions better. This is positive because it is useful as it helps improve the quality of life for those involved. However, individual explanations are unlikely to be generalizable to a wide group of people, as shown in the work by Freud on Little Hans may have proved the Oedipus complex was present in him, but as childhood experiences can be different, it cannot be fully applied to others.

A second strength is that areas using individual explanations, such as the Biological area, often use scientific methods that are high in control. This is good because it means studies are replicable as they have standardised procedures which therefore helps determine cause and effect by isolating specific variables. For example, Sperry’s study looking into split-brain patients showed how having the corpus callosum severed may be the answer to suffering epileptics, even though this was a natural experiment. The use of a scientific methodology is a strength because it helps improve further understanding of behaviour and helps view psychology as a science. However, focusing on the individual as the cause of behaviour can lead to socially sensitive research.

A strength of situational explanations is that it provides explanations for group behaviours that may be deviant. For example, Bocchiaro’s study into disobedience showed that the majority of people are obedient and very few will deviate from that to whistle-blow a higher authority. This helps show that environment and those around us can impact behaviour which can be applied further on to the whole population. Therefore is good because it means we can change people’s behaviour for the better by altering their environment. However, research focusing on situational explanations will not show that the environment is 100% the cause of the behaviour, such as Milgram’s research which showed that 66% obeyed a legitimate authority figure. One third of the participants did not, so the explanation did not take into account individual differences in behaviour.

A second strength of situational explanations is that it provides evidence that certain behaviours are not predisposed, people are not born with the drive to do specific things. For example, Piliavin showed that often people are helpful when they need to be, not because they have a genetic reason to do so. This is helpful because saying as it allows people to be praised for pro-social behaviour, but not blamed for unwanted or abnormal behaviour.