3 (a) Outline what is meant by the nature/nurture debate in psychology. [2]

Using the studies from the list below, answer the questions which follow:

Nelson (children’s morals)

Langlois, Ritter, Roggman and Vaughn (attractive faces)

Held and Hein (kitten carousel)

(b) Describe whether each of these studies supports the nature or nurture view. [9]

(c) What problems may psychologists have when they investigate whether behaviour develops through nature or nurture?(9)

Sample essay for Paper 2 format from Specimen Paper 2012

3. (a) The nature/nurture debate concerns whether human behavior occurs naturally, through biologically inherited characteristics (nature) or whether human behavior is primarily learned through the socialization process and environmental factors(nurture).

(b) The Nelson study supports nurture as the motivating factor.  The groups of children were no younger than 3 years old (some of them over 7) and had obviously learned from parents, peers, siblings, etc. by interacting in social situations.  Familiar scenarios were used in story form, pictures, and thought bubbles.  All of the children were able to understand the difference between good and bad motives and outcomes and there was no evidence presented that they naturally possessed these abilities.

Langlois, et. al. presented information supporting nature as the more important factor.  The subjects were only 6 months old and variables supporting nurture were controlled (such as the attractiveness of the mother; keeping the faces neutral; and offering no cues to sway their preferences).  Infants tended to focus more on the attractive faces, regardless of age, gender, or race and this lends credibility to the nature hypothesis.

Held and Hein’s study supports the nurture hypothesis.  The pairs of kittens were matched as much as possible except for the “active” or “passive” condition.  If nature was the significant factory, they would have reacted similarly to the paw placement, visual cliff, and reflex response to approaching objects.  Changing their environment in the carousel (nurture) caused completely different responses to the experimental conditions.  The passive kitten only returned to normal responses after being returned to a normal environment, making nurture the more likely explanation.

(c)  It isn’t always possible to control enough variables to pinpoint whether nature or nurture (or a combination of both) explains certain behaviors.  In the Nelson study, for example, different children may have experienced different socialization experiences regarding morality based on outcomes and motives.  Having heard the story, they may have been responding to demand characteristics and we may not know if they have internalized moral standards from their upbringing.  Even if they have, are some of these moral principles already part of their character by inherited genetic traits?  How can we know for sure?

In the Langlois study, even though the infants were only 6 months old, it is impossible to rule out their life experiences as influences over their preferences for attractive faces.  Most of the faces they have seen on TV or in story books are likely to have been attractive, especially if they were the main characters.  Can we be sure nurture hasn’t influenced them?

Most experiments testing nature vs. nurture, like the Held and Hein experiment, use procedures that are not ecologically valid.  The “kitty carousel” for example caused the passive kitten to have unnatural responses to the conditions.  Are there no kittens whose responses fall outside the normal range without being subjected to an artificial apparatus?  Is it ever possible to control all variables in an experiment?  The passive kitten may have been suffering from atrophy of muscles, not an inability to respond cognitively or instinctively.