

Subject specific vocabulary

Students of psychology often ask their teachers, 'How can I get more marks for my answers, especially the longer ones?' One answer is, 'By using subject-specific vocabulary more effectively.' One characteristic of a 'better' answer is the appropriate use of this kind of vocabulary. Each topic in psychology has words and titles which are not used in other areas of life. Students will need to master the use of such terms in at least three ways:

- understand what they mean, when they are used by the teacher or in written material
- recognise situations to which they apply, eg in scenarios in questions
- be able to use them confidently in writing their own answers.

Many text books contain a glossary of key terms either at the back or where the terms first appear. The chosen terms are a selection of those used in the specification. It would be helpful for the student to deal with other examples in a similar way.

Please be aware that definitions in this subject specific vocabulary may not be an exact match with glossaries that appear in textbooks which support the new AQA Psychology specification.

Absorption-addiction model

This term refers to a possible explanation for the existence of parasocial relationships. The suggestion is that people form parasocial relationships when real relationships are unpleasant or absent. People may follow a celebrity to escape from reality, gain a sense of personal identity or achieve a sense of fulfilment.

Agentic state

A term used in the context of obedience to an authority figure. It refers to the way in which an individual may obey an order, perhaps to do something that they see as 'wrong', because the individual hands over the responsibility for the outcome of the action to the authority figure.

Androcentrism

This term refers to a bias in psychological research in which a male perspective is over-emphasised at the expense of a female one.

Androgyny

This is a term used in the context of gender. It refers to the way in which a biological male or female may show high levels of both typical masculine traits and typical feminine traits.

Atavistic form

A term used in forensic psychology as a possible explanation for criminal offending. The idea is that offenders may represent a more primitive evolutionary stage of development than their contemporaries. This may be shown in a range of facial and physical features.

Aversion therapy

A treatment used to reduce addictive behaviours broadly based on classical conditioning. The addictive behaviour is paired with an unpleasant (aversive) experience such as alcohol with an emetic so that the addictive behaviour becomes associated with discomfort. Covert sensitisation is a therapy designed to create the same associations through imagery, graphic description and mental rehearsal.

Authoritarian personality

This title describes a person who holds rigid beliefs, is intolerant of ambiguity, submissive to authority and hostile to those of lower status or members of an out-group. This may be the outcome of a person experiencing harsh authoritarian parenting as a child. It is used as an explanation for high levels of obedience to authority figures and prejudice against out groups.

Avolition

This term refers to a common negative symptom of schizophrenia where the person involved has little energy, motivation to act or emotional response to situations.

Beck's Negative Triad

A model of the cognitive biases which are characteristic features of depression. The triad consists of three elements, pessimistic thought patterns, about the self, the world and the future.

Cognitive priming

A term that refers to increased sensitivity to certain stimuli due to prior experience. Unconscious memories are stored and then activated when we experience similar situations or cues. eg violent scenes from TV, films or even song lyrics may be stored and when similar situations or cues occur in our own lives these memories are activated and influence or prime how we behave.

Co-morbidity

This term refers to the situation when a person has two disorders at the same time. For example, schizophrenia can be co-morbid with OCD.

Congruence

A term used in the humanistic approach to psychology, particularly the person-centred therapy pioneered by Carl Rogers. It refers to a state in which there is agreement/consistency between a person's 'real self' and 'ideal self'. He suggested that a higher level of congruence is a sign of better psychological health.

Conditions of worth

A term used in the humanistic approach to psychology. It describes a situation in which a child has to behave in ways that parents approve of in order to gain their praise and love. Carl Rogers suggested that this was the origin of many psychological problems. To counteract this, the therapist would offer unconditional positive regard to the client.

Correlation

This term refers to a method of research in which the researcher investigates a possible association between two variables, called co-variables. Data from such research is displayed on a scattergram. Correlational analysis involves measuring the extent of the relationship between the variables by working out the correlation coefficient. The process could be used, for example, to investigate the relationship between levels of obesity and the incidence of coronary heart disease. Unlike experiments, correlations do not show a cause and effect relationship between the variables.

Co-variables

These are the variables investigated in a correlation. They are not referred to as the independent and dependent variables because the study is investigating the relationship between them, not trying to show a cause and effect relationship.

Cue reactivity

This is an example of classical conditioning, where objects and environments become conditioned stimuli. In the context of addictive behaviour it refers to the way in which people experience a greater craving and a physiological reaction, such as an increased heart rate, when exposed to objects and environments associated with their addiction. For example, cigarettes, syringes and bottles of alcoholic drinks, in the context of substance abuse, or the betting shop, in the context of problem gambling. The increased craving may lead to an increase in the addictive behaviour.

Cultural relativism

This term refers to the way in which the function and meaning of a behaviour, value or attitude are relative to a specific cultural setting. Interpretations about the same behaviour may therefore differ between cultures. For example hearing the voice of a deceased relative could be a religious experience or an indication of psychosis.

De-individuation

A term used in the context of aggression and obedience. It refers to a state in which individuals have lower self-awareness and a weaker sense of personal responsibility for their actions. This may result from the relative anonymity of being part of a crowd.

Demand characteristics

These are features of a piece of research which allow the participants to work out its aim and/or hypotheses. Participants may then change their behaviour and so frustrate the aim of the research. This is more likely in repeated measure designs for experiments. It is also a problem for repeating historical research projects as participants may be familiar with the results of original research.

Diathesis-stress model

This model proposes that people develop psychological disorders when they possess both an inherited or constitutional predispositions (diathesis) and are exposed to stressful events. For example twins may both have inherited a susceptibility to schizophrenia but only one experiences critical life events that trigger the appearance of symptoms of schizophrenias.

Differential association theory

This is a learning theory of offending behaviour. The idea is that individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behaviour through interactions or 'association' with intimate personal groups such as family and friends. On balance criminal behaviour is likely to occur when the individual is exposed to positive attitudes to criminal behaviour more than positive attitudes for law-abiding.

Endogenous pacemakers

Internal body 'clocks' that regulate biological rhythms such as regular times of sleep linked to levels of light. Examples include the suprachiasmatic nucleus and the pineal gland.

Enmeshment

It describes a family where parents are over-emotionally involved with their children but may be dismissive of their emotional needs. This can make it difficult for the child to develop an independent self-concept. The concept is used in family systems explanation of disorders such as anorexia.

Ethological explanations

Ethology is the study of animal behaviour, often a particular type, such as aggression, across different species. Ethologists are interested in the role that the behaviour has in natural selection. Ethological explanations for human behaviour relate it to similar animal behaviour and suggest the evolutionary advantage that it may have for humans.

Exogenous zeitgebers

External stimuli, such as levels of light, temperature and social cues, which influence biological rhythms.

Frustration-aggression hypothesis

This is a possible explanation for prejudice or aggression. It suggests that when people suffer frustration, for example, due to lack of employment, they may act aggressively towards scapegoats, perhaps members of a minority who are employed.

Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)

A technique of brain-scanning which uses a magnetic field and radio signals to monitor the blood flow in the brain. Areas of the brain that are involved in activities done by the person during scanning have a greater blood oxygenation and flow, so specific brain areas can be linked to specific abilities.

Gating

This term refers to the process of limiting or filtering the personal information we disclose during social interactions. In virtual relationships within social media, or

emails and blogs, individuals may be less selective about what to reveal than they would in face-to-face interactions. In other words there may be an absence of gating.

General Adaptation Syndrome

This was proposed by Selye to describe a three-stage sequence of physiological changes which occur when people or animals are subjected to prolonged stress. The stages are called the alarm reaction, the stage of resistance and the stage of exhaustion.

Hemispheric lateralisation

This term refers to the fact that the left and right halves, or hemispheres, of the brain have centres that are specifically associated with different brain activities, eg speech centres on the left and the ability to make sense of 3D arrangements on the right.

Hostile attribution bias

A tendency to perceive hostile intent on the part of others, even when it is really lacking. The term is used in the context of offending behaviour and aggression. It offers a cognitive explanation of aggression. The idea is that people may interpret, perhaps wrongly, the behaviour of others as being hostile towards them, and so react aggressively believing they are responding to provocation.

Interactional Synchrony

A term used to describe, for example, contacts between a child and a care-giver where they 'take turns' in smiling, 'cooing', making eye contact etc. Contacts like these help in a child's social development and the formation of attachments with important figures such as the mother.

Interactionist approach

Different approaches to psychology offer different explanations for a particular behaviour. A more complete explanation is gained by considering several factors which may, operating together, have an influence on it. The different approaches may provide explanations at different levels.

Interference

An explanation for forgetting when similar material, eg the vocabulary of two similar languages such as Italian and Spanish, is confused in recall from the LTM.

Retroactive interference occurs when newly learned information interferes with the

recall of previously learned information. Proactive interference occurs when past memories inhibit an individual's full potential to retain new memories.

Internal working model

This is a cognitive framework we use to understand the world, self and others. The internal working model developed as a result of the early attachments of an infant provides mental representations memories and expectations that influence the development of relationships throughout life.

Introspection

A technique pioneered by Wilhelm Wundt, the 'father of modern psychology' to gain insight into how mental processes work. People were trained to report in detail on their inner experiences when presented with a stimulus such as a problem to solve or something to be memorised.

Levels of explanation

Different psychological approaches offer different explanations for a particular behaviour. Some are more holistic, such as the humanistic approach, while others are more reductionist, such as the biological approach. Levels of explanation refer to the extent to which explanations are holistic/reductionist.

Locus of control

This refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they can control events in their lives. People with an 'internal' locus of control tend to take personal responsibility for their actions and to feel that they control their own lives. People with an external locus of control tend to feel that their lives and actions are strongly influenced by luck, chance, other people and environmental factors. The term is used in looking at responses to stress and research into social influence.

Mediational processes

These are cognitive processes such as attending, understanding and decision making that occur between a stimulus and a resulting behaviour. A feature of social learning theory.

Meta-analysis

A process in which a large number of studies, which have involved the same research question and methods of research, are reviewed together and the combined data is tested by statistical techniques to assess the effect size. As the

data comes from a much larger group of participants the conclusions may be regarded with more confidence.

Monotropic theory

A term used by John Bowlby to suggest that the infants have an inbuilt tendency to make an initial attachment with one attachment figure, usually the mother. He suggested that this tendency has an evolutionary origin.

Operationalisation of variables

Research ideas may begin with terms such as 'memory' or 'locus of control' as variables to manipulate or measure. In operationalisation these variables are expressed in a form that can be measured accurately. For example, 'locus of control' could be measured as the score on a suitable questionnaire, while 'memory' could be measured as 'the number of words recalled'.

Paradigms

This term refers to a set of assumptions, methods and terminology shared by psychologists. Each different 'approach' could be considered to have its own paradigm. The historical sciences are regarded as having a single paradigm often involving observation, theory, hypothesis, empirical testing, support/challenge leading to refined theory. A paradigm shift happens when the established paradigm has been challenged to the point that a different one takes its place. The change from a predominately behaviourist approach to psychology to a cognitive one in the 1960s could be an example.

Parasocial relationships

These are one-sided relationships, such as fans may feel they have with a celebrity, through concerts, TV appearances, films, magazines etc, where the celebrity is unaware of the fan's identity or even existence.

Quasi experiment

In an experiment, usually with a high degree of control of extraneous variables, a researcher manipulates an independent variable to find out its effect on a dependent one. In a quasi-experiment, the researcher is unable to freely manipulate the independent variable or randomly allocate the participants to the two conditions. An example would be a study with gender or age as the independent variable.

Recidivism

A persistent pattern of criminal offending and re-offending by an individual who may be described as a recidivist.

Restorative justice programmes

These focus on the needs of the victim, offender and wider community. They involve the offender being encouraged to meet the victim, take responsibility for the offence, apologise and try to make amends. The offender will be helped to avoid further offending behaviour.

Retrieval Failure

An explanation for forgetting when material is stored in the LTM but cannot be consciously recalled as a result of a lack of retrieval cues to 'jog the memory'.

Self-actualisation

A term used by Abraham Maslow in the humanistic approach to psychology. It refers to a state in which people achieve their full potential. He suggested that every person has a motivation to achieve this.

Social readjustment ratings scale

This is a self-report measure of stress. The designers used a large group of participants to identify a series of stressful life events, such as a marital separation or loss of employment, and give them a 'value' based on the likely level of stress experienced. The user of the scale selects the items that have occurred during, for example, the past 24 months and the values are added up to give an overall 'stress score'.

Stress inoculation therapy

This is a cognitive therapy used to teach people the skills needed to reduce their stress. It involves conceptualisation, skill acquisition and rehearsal, and application and follow-through.

Synaptic transmission

The process by which nerve impulses are carried across the small gap, the synapse, between one neuron and another. The nerve impulse is an electrical signal which is carried by chemicals called neurotransmitters.

Systematic desensitisation

A behavioural therapy for treating anxiety disorders, eg a phobia of dogs, in which the sufferer learns relaxation techniques and then faces a progressive hierarchy of exposure to the objects and situations that cause anxiety.

Thematic Analysis

A method of qualitative research linked to content analysis, which involves analysing text in a variety of media to identify the patterns within it. A coding system may be needed sort the data and to help to identify patterns.

Vicarious reinforcement

This term refers to an aspect of social learning theory. A reinforcement, such as reward, makes a behaviour more likely to happen again. When it is vicarious, the person learns by observing the consequences of another person's behaviour, eg a younger sister observing an older sister being rewarded for a particular behaviour is more likely to repeat that behaviour herself.

Violation of expectation research

Baillargeon pioneered this kind of research in studying the cognitive development of young infants. The studies tested cognitive development in terms of what the infant would expect to happen in familiar situations. For example, a hinged screen would be expected to come to rest on a rigid cube behind it and not to squash it. Infants of five months old looked longer when the screen appeared to flatten the cube because it 'violated their expectation', showing that they had learned that objects typically stop when they meet obstacles.

Zone of proximal development (ZPD)

This term is used in Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development. It refers to cognitive tasks that are just beyond what a child can do unaided but could be achieved with the help of a more experienced person. Tasks in a child's ZPD should be the focus of learning.

Specifications that use this resource:

- [AS and A-level Psychology 7181; 7182](#)

Document URL

<https://www.aqa.org.uk/resources/psychology/as-and-a-level/psychology/teach/subject-specific-vocabulary>

Last updated 07 Sep 2020

© AQA