

Definitions and Concepts for AQA Psychology A-level

Topic 5: Approaches in Psychology

Definitions in bold are for A2 only

Behaviourist approach: A learning approach that suggests all children are born as “tabulae rasae” (blank slates), learning through their interactions with their environment.

Biological approach: A learning approach that views human behaviour as a result of genetics and proposes that individual psychology stems from internal physiology.

Classical conditioning: A form of learning which occurs by associating naturally occurring instinct with new stimuli, thus creating a “conditioned” response.

Cognitive approach: A learning approach which likens the human mind to a computer, with internal mental processes turning an input to an output. This approach suggests studying these internal processes by inference is the key to understanding human psychology.

Congruence: When a person’s ideal self and actual self are aligned.

Defence mechanism: Strategies employed by the ego to protect the mind from feelings that may be too overwhelming.

Denial: A defence mechanism utilised by the unconscious mind. This is the complete refusal to acknowledge the occurrence of an event, in an attempt to prevent harm.

Displacement: A defence mechanism utilised by the unconscious mind. This mechanism works by substituting the real target of overwhelming emotions with a (usually) defenceless target. This allows for a cathartic release of emotions that would not be possible with the original target.

Ego: One of three components of the personality according to the psychodynamic approach. The ego develops after the Id and functions to mediate between the desires of the Id and what is attainable. The ego is the decision-making component.

Free will: The idea that we are in full control of our behaviour and decisions.

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Genotype: The genetic profile of an individual i.e. the genes they carry.

Humanistic approach: A learning approach which presumes all humans are fundamentally good, and encourages the holistic study of the entire individual.

Id: One of three components of the personality according to the psychodynamic approach. The Id is the most primitive and selfish part of the personality, the only one present at birth and only concerned with desires and achieving them.

Identification: A form of learning according to the social learning theory, which suggests humans can learn by observing role models whom they perceive as similar to themselves. It suggests we internalise the beliefs of someone we “identify” with i.e. are similar to, perhaps in gender, age, or goals.

Imitation: A form of learning suggested by social learning theory, which proposes that people learn through copying the behaviour of a role model they identify with.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: A theory that suggests humans have multiple needs that need to be achieved in a particular order to fully achieve a person’s potential.

Modelling: When a role model enacts a behaviour that can be imitated by an observer.

Mediational processes: Internal processes that contribute to producing certain behaviours, hence “mediators” between observation and imitation.

Negative reinforcement: A behaviour performed in response to a negative stimulus in the expectation that the negative stimulus will be removed, for example a mother comforting a crying child. They learn to comfort their child again and again (reinforced behaviour) to avoid the child crying (negative stimulus).

Operant conditioning: A form of learning by direct consequences for behaviour, whether that be reinforcement (consequences that increase behaviour) or punishment (consequences that decrease behaviour).

Phenotype: An organism’s physical manifestation of their genotype.

Positive reinforcement: Administration of a positive stimulus that aims to increase a certain behaviour. An example would be giving a child a treat (positive stimulus) if they clean their room, so they clean their room more often (reinforced behaviour).

Psychodynamic approach: A learning approach that describes human behaviour as a product of unconscious processes.



Psychosexual stages: A theory by Freud which suggests personality develops via overcoming a series of stages in childhood. Failure to complete a stage would result in fixation, which manifests as some sort of disorder in adulthood.

Repression: A defence mechanism utilised by the unconscious mind. This mechanism prevents disturbing thoughts/memories reaching the conscious mind, in an attempt to prevent harm.

Schema: A mental framework based on previous information that allows us to interpret new information efficiently.

Self actualisation: Essentially, a person's full potential, which can be achieved after primary needs have been met.

Social learning theory: A learning approach that combines the behaviourist ideas of learning through our environment and the cognitive ideas of involvement of internal mental processes. It proposes that new behaviors can be acquired by observing and imitating others.

Superego: One of the three components of the personality according to the psychodynamic approach. The superego develops last and aims to be the moral component of personality that encourages the ego to achieve perfection via self-criticism.

Vicarious reinforcement: Indirect encouragement of behaviour through observation of consequences for other peoples' behaviour.

