AS Exam Focus: Describing Studies

This handout will help you to:

- ❑ *Distinguish between studies and other forms of Psychological material*
- ❑ *Distinguish between Aims, Procedures, Findings, Conclusions and Criticisms*
- ❑ *Answer exam questions about studies effectively*

What is Evidence?

Psychology is a science (actually, this is a matter for debate, but we'll come to that later). Scientists spend much of their time coming up with ideas about how things work. These ideas are called **theories**. For some people, it is enough to have an idea about how something works, but not for a scientist. Scientists much check whether their theories are correct. To do this, they need **evidence**.

For a scientist, evidence has to take the form of something that is **observable** in the real world. Psychological evidence is obtained by observing people and recording how they behave. Once some evidence is collected, it is compared with the theory that the psychologist is checking or **testing**. Checking the theory against the evidence produces one of two possible results:

Result	**Interpretation**
The evidence agrees with what the theory says should happen.	The theory is assumed to be correct for the time being. More evidence might come along in future that shows it to be wrong.
The evidence disagrees with what the theory says should happen.	The theory is incorrect. It might be that it requires some extension or modification, or it might be completely wrong. OR There is something wrong with the way the evidence was collected, so the evidence is not appropriate for testing the theory. It is still unknown whether the theory is correct.

What is a Study?

Psychologists distinguish between two sorts of evidence. Some evidence can be gathered just by looking around you. Psychologists study human behaviour and you can see that pretty much anywhere – at home, in the street, in a classroom and so on. The evidence that comes from informal, everyday observations is called **anecdotal evidence.** Whilst it can be interesting, it is not strong evidence.

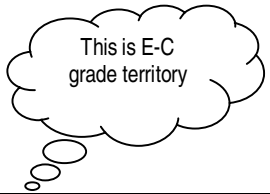
To really test a theory, you need **scientific evidence**. Scientific evidence comes from making your observations carefully and systematically, and trying to eliminate all sources of **error** that might affect your observations. This type of evidence comes from **studies**.

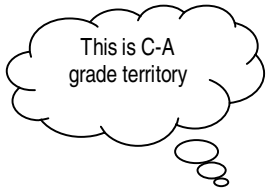
A study is an attempt to gather psychological evidence by observing human behaviour in a careful and systematic way.

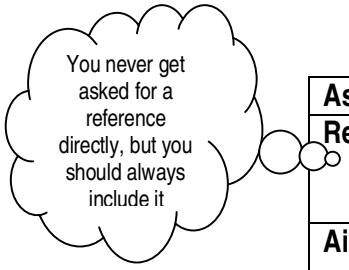
In Psychology, the **only** evidence that really counts when deciding whether or not a theory is correct comes from studies. Anecdotal evidence can not prove a theory right or wrong. Only a study (or preferably, several studies) can do this.

How Do You Describe a Study?

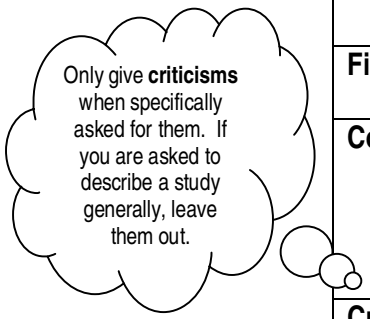
Describing a study in full involves giving several important pieces of information. In an exam, you may be asked to **describe a study**. If so, you should give all the information (except the criticisms). Alternately, you might be asked to describe **only one aspect** of a study. If so, you should describe only that aspect and nothing else. The aspects are as follows:







Aspect	What is it?	You describe this when…	You describe this *well* when…
Reference	It identifies the **source** of the evidence.	The examiner can identify from your description which study you are describing.	You give the name of the researcher(s) who did the study, and the year it was conducted.
Aim	It explains **why** the study was conducted.	You identify the reason for conducting the study.	You identify the circumstances that gave rise to the research, the theory being tested and the expected result.
Procedure	It explains **how** the evidence was obtained.	You explain what the researcher did to obtain the evidence.	You identify the research method and design used and give accurate details of precisely what was measured and how.
Findings	It explains the **results** of the study.	You outline what was found, and indicate trends in the results.	You give exact figures for the observations and measurements taken.
Conclusion	It **interprets** the findings.	You explain the general meaning of the results in psychological terms.	You explain the extent to which the findings support or challenge specific theories, and account for any unexpected findings or irregularities in expected trends.
Criticisms	It identifies possible **problems** with the research that have a bearing on its quality.	You state in general terms one or more problems with how the research was conducted.	You clearly explain one or more problems with the conduct of the study and identify how these could have affected the findings that were obtained.



For any given area of Psychology, the more studies you know about the better. In addition, each area we study will contain one or more **key studies**, which will be highlighted as we go. For the key studies, you must be able to give detail about **every** aspect.

Use This Sheet To Assess Your Own Exam Answers About Studies

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