



You Can Look It Up

A Review of

APA Dictionary of Psychology

by Gary R. VandenBos (Ed.)

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Reviewed by

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When I walked into the American Psychological Association (APA) bookstore last August during APA's annual convention in the New Orleans convention center, I saw what appeared to be a new levee protecting the city. On closer inspection, it turned out to be a display of a couple hundred copies of the new *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. It is clear that APA Books, the book publishing arm of our national organization, thinks this will be a big seller, and I bet it will.

It looks and feels like a dictionary. It is heavy (4.68 lb, according to Amazon.com), has letter tabs on the side, and, with the dust jacket off, is shining red with gold print. The entries are printed clearly with bold type for the headwords and a font size that does not require a magnifying glass. There are about 25,000 entries in its 1,024 pages.

I sat with my copy for a couple of hours on a Sunday afternoon while watching NFL football and actually had fun looking through it. (I will not reveal the ending.) First, I looked up some basic terms—*cognitive dissonance*, *depression*, *perception*, and a few others—and found the definitions to be clear and concise, with appropriate cross-referencing. I found objective definitions of *creationism* and *intelligent design*, along with terms in evolutionary psychology. Laypeople and beginning students will be well informed.

Then I gave the dictionary a tougher test. Does it define more obscure terms, like those I memorized in graduate school in the 1960s? I found *habit strength*, *Jost's law*, *red nucleus*, and *verbal learning*. However, I caught an oversight when I could not find *frustration effect*, which refers to Abraham Amsel's work on the motivating effects of nonreward. That is not a terrible oversight, and it demonstrates how hard I had to work to find something missing.

What I most enjoyed was browsing through the dictionary. There were a few entries that were new to me, such as the "jumping Frenchmen of Maine syndrome... observed in lumberjacks of French Canadian descent... characterized by an extreme startle response involving yelling, imitative speech" (p. 509) and other dramatic symptoms. When I exercise and alternate more and less intense activity, that is *fartlek training* (p. 368). A "Kilner screen... allegedly reveals the invisible auras emitted by human beings" (p. 513).

Browsing also led me to wonder why some entries were included. I wonder who would look in this dictionary to find out what kissing means. The entry is called "kissing behavior" (p. 515), with a cross-reference to French kissing. My *Webster's* does a good job explaining kiss as either verb or noun. And what is psychological about the divine right of kings?

There are numerous references to legal (e.g., *tort*, *jury nullification*) and medical (e.g., *infarction*, *whooping cough*) terms. I would first look for these terms in law or medical dictionaries, and specialists in the application of psychology to these areas would not need to have these terms defined, so it is not clear to me who would look for such definitions

here. In the preface, editor in chief Gary R. VandenBos states that some psychology entries were not included “primarily due to space limitations and the availability of such information in other reference resources” (p. ix). Here is where more space might be found.

My quibbles aside, this is a fine piece of work. Where did all these words come from? The sources include the massive PsycINFO database, the 9th and 10th editions of the *Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms*, specialty area dictionaries, and previous psychology dictionaries, including one from 1902. VandenBos managed the team that sifted through all these sources. In addition to the APA reference staff and 79 psychologists who are listed as editorial contributors, the team included Market House Books, Ltd., “a partner with strong lexicographic and general reference expertise” (p. viii). That experience shows in this volume’s high quality.

There are probably not many people who would buy this book for entertainment, so who might its audience be? VandenBos includes students, professionals outside of psychology, and the general public. This is an excellent reference work that should be ordered by every institutional library and every psychology department to make it accessible to students, faculty, researchers, and practitioners in all social science and health-related areas.

But should this volume be in every psychologist’s library? Maybe. Our field has become so highly specialized that most psychologists know little about many areas outside of their specialty, and specialists often find it difficult to communicate without using the jargon of their field. This dictionary will aid in translation. Teachers of psychology will certainly find this book useful to help explain unusual terms not defined in the textbooks they are using. I can also imagine some interesting learning activities that would use this dictionary.

Of course, there are other places where we can look it up. I have a couple of paperback dictionaries of psychology, and the APA version is vastly superior to those books. However, the most challenging competitor is the overwhelming Internet, where one can look things up by Googling them. For readers who spend a lot of time in front of a computer screen, it will be easier to use the Internet than to walk to the bookshelf and lift a five-lb dictionary. The dictionary, however, will give you one brief, reliable answer, and a Google search will give you thousands of answers, 98 percent or more of which are irrelevant. Internet searches require screening of results for reliability, but Google generally does a good job with that.

I used six terms to perform a limited comparison of Google with the APA Dictionary. I wanted only clear definitions of terms from reliable sources, not enough material for a term paper. In all cases, the first two or three results from Google provided at least satisfactory answers, which leads me to conclude that users who are too lazy to go get the dictionary will not be harmed. For example, Google provided two good sources for the jumping Frenchmen of Maine: Wikipedia and WebMD. In only one case (Jost’s law) was Google less clear than the dictionary. You also can use “psychology dictionary” as a search phrase. All the results I looked at were inferior to the *APA Dictionary* in terms of clarity and coverage.

My qualitative analysis of this comparison results in a conclusion of no significant difference, but that is from a biased judge. Along with many others in my generation, I still have more confidence in hard copy and appreciate a nicely printed, attractively bound real book. The next generation may not buy that, but APA has plans for them. In the coming years, in addition to a second edition, an abridgement, and specialty dictionaries, there will be an electronic version. Perhaps we will be able to Google that.