



General Certificate of Education

Psychology 1181

Specification A

**Unit 2 (PSYA2) Biological Psychology,
Social Psychology and
Individual Differences**

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - June series

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PSYA2 Biological Psychology, Social Psychology and Individual Differences

General

One of the most significant changes to the AS exams is that they are much less predictable. This change was made following the recommendation of QCA, which was to move away from the formulaic structure of questions with a set number of marks in a conventional format. This means that candidates now need to read the question carefully and give themselves much more time to think about the specific requirements of each question. Skills that they now need to show are their ability to select the most relevant information and to apply their knowledge. It is a very different set of skills from the previous somewhat rote-learned approach, which was a feature of the old specification. The new exam has been designed to allow time for these very important skills. Candidates who think about which part of the specification is relevant, who apply their knowledge appropriately and who can write accurate and concise answers, will do very well. Often, time spent thinking and planning is extremely beneficial; sometimes when it comes to writing “less is more”.

Now that candidates write their answers in the booklet, they should use the space provided to judge the length of answer required. Candidates (and teachers) should be reassured that it is perfectly possible to gain full marks in the space provided, often without the need to use the extra space. So if only three or four lines have been provided, then this is all that would be expected. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, an accurate and concise answer can gain just as many marks as one that uses the extra space but is less focused. It is possible that many candidates who are writing too much probably do not read the question carefully. It is clear that some very well informed candidates are not gaining full marks because they are simply not doing what the question asks.

Finally, it is worth removing the myth, surrounding the use of additional pages, that seems to have developed. The myth is that if a candidate uses additional pages then a senior examiner will mark their paper. This is most definitely not the case. Unless candidates have large handwriting, or have made a mistake and crossed out work in the booklet and need to write their answer again, they should not **need** to use the additional sheets. If a candidate has a few words that do not fit onto the lines in the booklet, it is worth writing them in the area immediately below the lined space. Examiners can see this, so there is no need to use an additional page for one or two words!

Section A: Biological Psychology

Question 1

A wide range of answers were given, confirming the view that multiple-choice questions are not necessarily as easy as people suspect they are. This question was a good discriminator.

Question 2

The main problem with the responses to this question was that many candidates failed to identify **one** (either advantage or disadvantage) but instead linked several together. This meant that their answers lacked detail and they seldom gained more than one mark. Comparison with another method is a useful way of answering this type of question. For example, one advantage of using questionnaires is that in comparison with an interview, the person

administering the questionnaire does not need to be trained, while with an interview they do require some specialist skills. Candidates often found the disadvantage easier than the advantage, using the problems associated with social desirability very effectively.

Question 3

This is a good example of where candidates need to remain focused on the question and to read it carefully before launching into a formulaic response. This type of question requires candidates to apply their knowledge to an unfamiliar situation, to spend a little time thinking and not just giving the knee-jerk reaction of describing the HPA and SAM axis or even the GAS model, before getting to the link between stress and illness. Simply describing how stress affects the immune system in detail and adding “and this applies to Paula” is not really engaging with the question. However, those candidates who did take time to read the question were able to provide excellent answers, using the material in the stem to focus their response.

Question 4

When the candidate answered the question with the appropriate material, there was clear evidence of excellent knowledge. Some candidates really excelled in this area, with impressive knowledge of the mechanisms by which the drugs take effect. It was also pleasing to see that many candidates also had an extremely good understanding of biofeedback. Although in general, for both drugs and biofeedback, candidates knowledge was better than their evaluation. However, in spite of the fact that the wording of the question came directly from the specification, many candidates made one of two fundamental errors. They either wrote about *psychological* methods of stress management, or they could not locate the correct topic and wrote about *coping* with stress or about *workplace stress*. These answers were often very detailed, with good knowledge but for this question, simply not creditworthy.

Section B: Social Psychology

Question 5

This was generally a well-answered question, with candidates making good use of examples to illustrate their understanding. It was refreshing to see that candidates could actually link locus of control to obedience and conformity. Perhaps it could be emphasised that locus of control is about the perception of control rather than the control itself. Some candidates seemed to confuse high and low with internal and external. They wrote about people having a high locus of control or a low locus of control, which is meaningless unless internal or external are included.

Question 6

Despite the very clearly worded question, many candidates failed to answer it appropriately, simply describing normative social influence rather than compliance. They failed to make the point that with compliance there can be a change in public but not private views.

Question 7

In (a), candidates could either outline a method or refer to a specific psychologist, or indeed a mixture of both. However, there were only two marks available, so a concise answer naming an appropriate study and identifying the method could gain both marks. Reference to studies that were not relevant to conformity, such as Milgram’s experiment (obedience) or Moscovici’s experiment (minority influence), were not creditworthy. Many candidates offered ethical issues

as a limitation, but this is not a limitation of the method *per se*. Those candidates who offered, for example, ecological validity or demand characteristics as a limitation of the experimental method, were able to gain full marks and also do well on part (c) too. It is worth reminding candidates to read the whole question through before answering it; their answer to (b) has implications for their answer to (c).

Question 8

It seems as if the word “obey” triggers a Pavlovian response in candidates to detail the entirety of Milgram’s research in minute detail. Some of these detailed descriptions went on for over a page and a half, without any attempt to answer the question. These candidates often followed their lengthy descriptions with evaluation in terms of ethics and validity. The question was explicit in what was required from the candidate but many paid no heed whatsoever and consequently gained no marks. On the other hand, those candidates who read the question carefully and understood that it was about explanations of why people obey were able to use their knowledge of Milgram very effectively. For example, they were able to use his experiments to illustrate gradual commitment, the role of buffers, the role of legitimate authority, etc.

Perhaps the responses to this question reflect the need for some candidates to spend more time on exam skills, such as the importance of reading a question carefully and structuring their answers to meet the requirements of the specific question.

Section C: Individual Differences

Question 9

This question was generally answered well, but some candidates failed to gain full marks because they did not make the link with psychopathology. The limitation was usually in comparison with other approaches, which could gain full marks.

Question 10

Candidates frequently confused the different definitions of abnormality, so offered failure to function adequately as one criteria and deviation from social norms as the other. However, those candidates who did understand that the definition for psychological health has several criteria, such as autonomy and self-actualisation, were able to gain full marks. Clearly some centres had prepared candidates well and they knew about Jahoda’s criteria in great detail.

Question 11

Most candidates were able to identify two techniques, with free association and dream analysis being the most popular answers. Some candidates were also able to elaborate these methods (sometimes in impressive detail) for the second mark. For part (b) some candidates did take the “I’d tell her there is no problem with it” approach. Candidates need to be aware that if the question asks about ‘problems’ then the examiner is inviting one to be identified. However, a candidate could legitimately make the case for saying that they would not tell her if there were any problems, as they did not want to influence her in any way. Since this question did not ask for one problem, answers that included several problems were acceptable; such as it can take a long time and is costly; it might cause her to recall unpleasant memories.

The main problem with part (c) was that many candidates did not have sufficient knowledge of CBT to be able to explain why it might be more appropriate. The question indicates that Sally

believes people do not like her; the aim of CBT is to change faulty thinking. Some centres appear to think that CBT and SIT are synonymous. SIT is one type of CBT and whilst SIT is an effective way of addressing stress, it does not apply quite so well with abnormality.

Question 12

In general this question was answered well, with many candidates having a very sophisticated understanding of ECT and how it is used. As usual, there are still some candidates with a very confused view of ECT (some referring to out-dated methods too) seeing it as dangerous and barbaric. In fact, modern ECT is fairly common and not the unpleasant therapy it used to be. A notable minority confused it with aversion therapy.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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