AQA

General Certificate of Education

Psychology 2181
Specification A

Unit 3 (PSYA3)   Topics in Psychology

Report on the Examination
2010 examination - January series

Unit 3: (PSYA3) Topics in Psychology

General Points

This first sitting of PSYA3 demonstrated strengths and weaknesses in candidate responses, some of which were apparent in the legacy paper PYA4 and some of which were related to the different demands of the PSYA3. The balance between AO1 and AO2/AO3 marks (9 versus 16) places more emphasis on the need to provide *effective and sustained* analysis and evaluation. A problem with the previous specification was that weaker candidates could provide only rote-learnt lists of evaluative terms that were applied inappropriately and earned few marks. With the new specification, such an approach would penalise candidates more severely. A far more effective approach would be for candidates to demonstrate their clear understanding by providing contextualised and sustained evaluation/analysis, even if it means that they cover a more limited number of points. In the current sitting candidates from some centres would provide detailed and often irrelevant/inaccurate methodological evaluation of studies, and repeat the process across all three questions regardless of the specific requirements of the question asked. Evaluation of studies is often only directly relevant if the implications for a theory or explanation are explicitly described. Better answers focused on the *findings* of studies and linked them directly to the underlying theory or explanation.

New areas of the specification were in general dealt with well, with evidence of effective teaching and learning. One key change that did differentiate candidate performance was the explicit requirement to consider issues, debates and approaches in relation to the questions answered. Although the specification contains examples of issues, debates and approaches that could be used to satisfy this requirement, examiners were instructed that this indicative list was not exhaustive and that they should be alert to other creditworthy content.

Candidate responses to this requirement fell into three broad categories that also tended to be centre specific. In the first category the requirement was largely ignored and there was little attempt to consider issues, debates and approaches at all. Such answers were therefore limited in the marks they could earn. In the second category issues, debates and approaches were tagged on at the end of answers. Such an approach was rarely effective as presentations tended to appear rote-learnt and list-like, with minimal evidence of understanding in the context of the question asked. To emphasise this, some candidates presented the same list at the end of each of the three questions. Better answers incorporated issues, debates and approaches throughout and demonstrated clear understanding of their relevance to the question.

For marks in the higher bands it was not necessary for candidates to cover a large number of issues, debates and approaches, especially as different topic areas vary in the accessibility of such material. Assessment is based on *understanding* the relevance and significance of the particular content. Some candidates did extremely well by providing sustained and effective use of a limited number of issues, debates and approaches, and demonstrating a clear understanding of their meaning and relevance to the topic.

A minor problem that was evident in scripts from a number of centres was the use of *reductionism* as an issue/debate. This was inappropriately applied as a criticism of explanations that focused on a single model eg cognitive, behavioural, psychoanalytic, and did not consider other approaches. This can be considered a limited or narrow explanation, but it is not necessarily reductionist. 'Reductionism' as a term was introduced in the 19th century in relation to the developing science of biology. It is the idea that a system or phenomena can be best explained by analysing (or *reducing it to*) its component parts. So the best approach to understanding the functions of the liver, for instance, is to study the cells that make it up.

In Psychology reductionism is most obvious in biological explanations of behaviour that neglect psychological, social, and cultural factors (these are *higher* levels of explanation). It has also been applied to extreme behaviourism, which tries to explain complex human behaviour in terms of relatively simple connections between stimuli, responses, and rewards. Reductionism can also be discussed in relation to other areas, such as psychoanalytic theory, and there are other forms of reductionism proposed such as *methodological reductionism.* Candidates are credited insofar as they use the term appropriately in the context of the question they are attempting.

Despite the different demands of the new specification there were some excellent answers, with candidates demonstrating impressive AO1 skills supported by relevant and effective analysis and evaluation. Weaker answers usually provided reasonable AO1 content but failed to move out of the lower bands for analysis and evaluation.

Question 1(a)

This was answered well, with candidates usually able to refer to 24 hour rhythms, the sleep-waking cycle or body temperature, and, at the top end, the role of pacemakers and zeitgebers. Some answers spent too long on supplementary material, such as descriptions of Siffre's cave study, and evaluation.

Question 1(b)(i)

The focus of this question part was on explanations for sleep disorders. However many candidates simply described the symptoms and other characteristics of sleep disorders, with explanations hardly mentioned. Better answers considered factors involved in primary and secondary insomnia, and explanations for narcolepsy and sleep walking.

Question 1(b)(ii)

It was apparent that many candidates did not read the questions closely and spent much of (b)(ii) outlining explanations rather than evaluating them. Where evaluation was attempted, it was often generic, referring to the sleep laboratory and the reductionist nature of research in this area. At the top end, candidates used research studies effectively, linking them to explanations. Some impressive answers focused on narcolepsy and made good use of the range of human and animal studies available. Weaker answers often introduced work on jet lag and sleep deprivation without placing them in the context of sleep disorders.

Question 2

Although this was not a popular question, there were some very good answers. These used neonate, animal, and cross-cultural studies effectively to discuss the nature-nurture debate in the context of perceptual development; at the top end, implications of each study were drawn out, and methodological evaluation used to modify conclusions. Weaker answers focused on methodological issues rather than the implications of findings. Additionally, a significant proportion of candidates structured their answers around theories of perception, in particular the top-down and bottom-up theories of Gregory and Gibson. These received marks to the extent that they focused on the nature-nurture debate and perceptual development, although many failed to do this.

Question 3

This was a popular question that produced a range of answers. Most candidates had a grasp of the evolutionary approach to parental investment, but weaker answers focused too much on sexual selection and attraction without drawing out the implications for parental investment. They often referred to non-human animal work without linking it explicitly to the question. At the top end Triver's parental investment theory provided the framework, with relevant research studies used effectively along with a consideration of the relevance (or not) of evolutionary ideas to contemporary society. Some candidates also provided impressive reviews of parent-offspring conflict. However this was also an area that elicited some answers with generic issues and debates that demonstrated little understanding of the nature of evolutionary psychology.

Question 4

'Institutional aggression' is a broad term and this was reflected in the range of material used by candidates. On the whole, essays using situational vs dispositional or importation vs deprivation explanations as a framework were more successful. They were able to use directly relevant studies as effective AO2, alongside a variety of methodological and more general issues. Answers focusing on explanations such as deindividuation tended to lose focus on institutional aggression and became general essays on the social psychology of aggression. Zimbardo's prison study was popular, but there was a common problem of linking it *explicitly* to institutional aggression via role play, situational factors, or deindividuation. At the top end some excellent essays made good use of contemporary issues such as the behaviour of troops in Iraq and the police at the G20 summit. Weaker essays often discussed eg lynchings, genocide and hazing, but provided little in the way of coherent explanations in relation to institutional aggression.

Question 5

Answers to this popular question reflected similar issues to the last question. Candidates who chose to frame their answers around a limited number of explanations eg body weight set-point, restraint and ironic processes, denial, or the boundary model, were often able to quote the findings of directly relevant research studies as part of their evaluation and provide a coherent and well-organised essay. Weaker answers demonstrated little understanding of the models outlined, and tended to introduce irrelevant and often anecdotal material on dieting behaviour and medical treatments for obesity. Often the focus was on studies and not explanations. A proportion of candidates presented detailed outlines of the hypothalamic centres involved in feeding behaviour and the roles of hormones and neurotransmitters such as leptin and ghrelin. These earned marks to the extent that they were explicitly linked to the question of the success or failure of dieting.

Question 6 (a)

Most candidates provided both psychological and biological explanations of gender development. Psychological explanations emphasised Kohlberg and gender schema theory, and to a lesser extent Freud and social learning theory. These tended to be quite good. On the biological side too many candidates focused on the determination of biological sex rather than extending the biological approach to implications for gender role. For marks in the higher bands it was essential that candidates understood the difference between biological sex and the various aspects of gender, and could refer to the latter rather than focus on the former.

Question 6 (b)

For marks in the higher bands answers were required to present an argument as to whether biological or psychological approaches provided the better explanation of gender development. A common weakness was for each approach to be evaluated in turn, with no explicit reference to the precise question that had been asked. These evaluations may have been individually very comprehensive, with reference to the range of human and animal experimental and clinical studies on sex and gender but did not address the question requirement. Often, if a conclusion was reached, it was fairly minimal, although at the top end there were some excellent answers that reviewed the evidence and demonstrated a clear trajectory from the evidence to the conclusions.

Question 7

Although not a popular question there some very good answers. These reviewed the research evidence for higher cognitive processes in non-human animals, covering areas such as foraging, deception, spatial memory, imitation, Machiavellian intelligence, and Theory of Mind/self recognition. Such evidence is accumulating all the time, and it was encouraging that many answers quoted very contemporary work. Overall commentary was less common, with few candidates able to provide a comparative framework for comparing eg humans and non-human animal intelligence. Although not necessary for marks across the scale, such commentary is an effective source of AO2 marks. Weaker answers did not interpret research findings accurately in terms of the various forms of animal intelligence, or focused on operant and classical conditioning, suggesting that they had not read the question carefully.

Question 8 (a)

This was done very well, with an impressive proportion of candidates achieving full marks. Piaget's theory was most popular, and at the top end answers covered the basic assumptions and processes of accommodation and assimilation, and then provided outline accounts of the developmental stages. Some candidates introduced evaluations of the theory, which were not creditable in this question part. A few answers presented reasonable accounts of Vygotsky's theory.

Question 8 (b)

This question produced a range of responses. At the weaker end candidates focused on Piaget and evaluated his theory in the traditional way, with little or no reference to education. At the top end answers tended to refer to at least two theories, and in some cases to Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. They considered how they had been applied to education, and evaluated these applications by comparing them, referring to research evidence and to changes to the curriculum over the last twenty years. It was impressive that some candidates were able to discuss ways in which the different theories and their applications had sometimes influenced each other.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website: http://www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat.html