



General Certificate of Education

Psychology 2181

Specification A

**Unit 4 (PSYA4) Psychopathology,
Psychology in Action and Research
Methods**

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

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Unit 4: (PSYA4) Psychopathology, Psychology in Action and Research Methods

General Points

Candidates need to understand how to use the new answer booklet a lot of candidates did not follow the instructions. Numbering was often unclear and there was frequently no space left between answers. There are no space constraints in A2 booklets and therefore candidates should use as much space as they need to answer each question (bearing in mind the number of marks available). A surprising number of candidates, particularly in the Research Methods section, squashed their answers into a self-imposed small space and then wrote between the lines. This makes it not only hard to read, but difficult for it to be clipped for on-line marking. Candidates should write the correct number in the space provided at the beginning of the answer (not in the middle as this can also cause problems for clipping) and then write their answer. They should then leave a space of at least one line before starting the next answer. This avoids any confusion and speeds up the marking process. Some candidates wrote the wrong number in the margin - this is picked up by examiners but has to be referred back to the processing department to be re-clipped. This causes significant delays to the marking process.

It would be worth reminding candidates that the wording of a question, together with the number of marks available, gives an indication of how much to write. Candidates need to practise/know how much (approximately) to write for the number of marks available. Some wrote far too much for a mere 4-mark question, whereas others wrote nowhere near enough for 9 marks.

Now that these papers are marked online, legibility of handwriting becomes even more of an issue. Some candidates used faint pens, had miniscule writing or had handwriting which was simply very difficult to read. Examiners have the facility to use magnifying tools and line darkening tools but, in lots of instances, these do not really help and examiners are just faced with magnified and darkened scripts which are still illegible. It is very difficult for examiners to follow a line of argument in an answer if they have to puzzle over each individual word in a sentence. Candidates should be aware that if it is really difficult to read their script, marking might be delayed.

Candidates also need to understand that each question is marked independently and examiners do not export material from one answer to another. This means that it is really important to answer the actual question set eg if the question asks for an outline/description, then evaluation is not required. This lack of focus on the requirements of the question was particularly apparent on the applied questions.

Many candidates were well prepared for all sections on the paper and were able to demonstrate both knowledge/understanding and the ability to apply their knowledge effectively. Weaker candidates often showed poor understanding and frequently did not read the questions carefully and so answered inappropriately with irrelevant or poorly focused material.

One important thing that many centres seem to have overlooked is the wording in the PSYA4 specification concerning research methods. It states: 'Candidates will be expected to extend their knowledge, understanding and skills of research design, data analysis, and data interpretation and reporting gained at AS.' Learning about research methods is an accumulative process and the AS specification lays down the building blocks for A2. Candidates need to have an understanding of all the topics on the AS Research Methods section as well as those on the A2 specification in order to be fully prepared for the Research

Methods questions on PSYA4. It was also clear that some candidates had little or no practical experience of presentation, analysis and interpretation of data. Candidates found question 25 very challenging.

Section A Psychopathology

Topic Schizophrenia

Question 01

This was the most popular question in this section. There were some excellent answers to this question showing sound understanding of the issues and thorough, effective analysis. In such answers, issues surrounding the reliability of ICD, DSM and other diagnostic criteria were generally well understood, and problems associated with co-morbidity, cultural bias, symptom overlap and labelling were usually addressed effectively.

However, it was disappointing to see large amounts of irrelevant material presented, even by well-informed candidates. Some candidates saw it as an opportunity to write all they knew about schizophrenia and included clinical characteristics, types, explanations and, even in some cases, treatments. It was quite common for half the essay to be taken up with this kind of irrelevant material.

A significant number of candidates showed evidence of weak understanding. For example, they confused co-morbidity with symptom overlap and were very muddled about how and where DSM and ICD are used and the level of difference between them.

Candidates need to plan their essays a little better, in order to avoid repetition and irrelevance. Many answers were poorly structured and it was difficult to follow the line of argument or identify exactly which issues were being discussed. More structured paragraphs introduced by phrases such as 'an issue is ----', 'this is an issue because ---', 'a consequence of this issue ---', would have benefited many candidates.

Some candidates were able to identify issues but struggled to provide effective AO2/3 material. Rosenhan's work was not used very effectively. There were often very long descriptions of Rosenhan's studies with little attempt to relate them to the question. Despite the quote given in the question paper, many candidates did not seem to realise how dated this work is and that they could have used this fact to provide relevant commentary. The best answers offered extended commentary often citing psychological research to highlight each issue that had been addressed.

A number of candidates really struggled to express their ideas clearly. This often obscured the meaning of what they were trying to say.

Topic Depression

Question 02

This was a very straightforward question and it was encouraging to see few cases of partial performance here. Some candidates described one type of biological explanation and one type of psychological explanation while others gave accounts of more than one of each type. Either approach was acceptable but more depth was required for fewer explanations.

There were some excellent answers to this question where candidates clearly had a thorough understanding of both biological and psychological explanations and wrote in sufficient depth to achieve full marks. However, a disappointing number of candidates wrote very brief and basic accounts, particularly of biological explanations. Descriptions of the genetic explanation, for example, often consisted of little more than the statement that depression could be passed on through the genes. Many candidates clearly had no understanding of biochemical explanations referring vaguely to neurotransmitters and hormones without specifying which ones. Where they were able to go a little further and name the relevant chemicals, it was often at a basic level eg 'people with depression lack serotonin'. Only the strongest candidates were able to suggest possible links between the biological explanations eg between genes and neurochemical abnormalities.

Psychological explanations were generally better outlined and some candidates showed an excellent understanding of cognitive explanations and the psychodynamic explanation, which were the most frequently offered psychological explanations. However, in weaker answers, the psychological explanations lacked depth and often consisted of lengthy descriptions of dogs with learned helplessness or of the negative triad with little or no link back to depression.

Some candidates wasted time describing the symptoms of depression.

Question 03

Some candidates spent a large amount of time describing explanations which they had not included in question 02. It was perfectly acceptable to evaluate newly introduced explanations but the emphasis should have been on evaluation with a brief identification of the explanation. Although there were some excellent answers to this question, many candidates provided weak and poorly elaborated/supported AO2/3 material.

Candidates often relied on generic evaluation eg free will versus determinism, nature-nurture and reductionism. Many candidates are still using these terms without any understanding eg 'it is reductionist because it ignores all other explanations', 'it is determinist because it takes away our free will to be depressed'. Few candidates could provide effective commentary on how the different explanations can live alongside each other – according to many candidates, the explanations simply prove each other wrong. There seems to be a widespread belief that all cases of depression are comparable and must stem from a single cause.

There was quite often commentary on concordance rates not reaching 100% for MZs and 50% for DZs. However, it is disappointing that in most answers, this point was not developed beyond the idea that this suggests that environmental factors also play a part.

Evidence from drug therapies was often used ineffectively in evaluation of neurochemical explanations – sometimes as an excuse to introduce lengthy descriptions of the drugs used. Evaluation of Freudian explanations was very often generic eg 'he only saw neurotic,

middle-aged, Viennese women', 'his theory was not falsifiable'. Good answers were able to cite evidence on the links between early loss and later depression and evidence that disputed the concept of 'anger turned inwards'.

Some candidates made good use of the diathesis-stress model to demonstrate a link between psychological and biological explanations.

Topic Anxiety Disorders

Question 04

This was the least popular question in this section. Candidates were generally able to give an accurate outline of clinical characteristics for phobias and OCD. There were a lot of very good answers.

Question 05

Virtually all candidates were able to identify a relevant psychological therapy, and most were able to give a generally accurate description. A popular choice was systematic desensitisation but, surprisingly, many candidates left out key components of the therapy such as hierarchy and gradual exposure. Some clearly had a basic understanding of ERP but struggled to say much about what it involves. A few candidates seemed to be confused about the differences between ERP and systematic desensitisation and conflated the two. Quite a number of candidates wasted time evaluating the therapy in question 05, when all they were asked to do was describe it. They then repeated themselves in question 06.

Question 06

The answers to this part of the question were quite variable. Stronger candidates were able to comment on the quality of research evidence which supports the therapies and consider the difficulties associated with such research. They also engaged with their chosen anxiety disorder instead of writing general commentary. Weaker answers contained generic evaluation or unsupported claims such as 'this treatment has been shown to be very successful.'

Section B Psychology in Action

Topic Media Psychology

Candidates seemed to find getting the balance here difficult; some didn't write enough for question 07 and then wrote far too much for question 08.

Question 07

Most candidates knew some relevant research, but there was often too much time spent describing procedure, especially of Bandura's bobo dolls, instead of focusing on what psychologists have found. Bandura's research was not always made explicitly relevant and often candidates seemed to take it as given that this research relates to the media. Bandura's original study had the model in the same room and so candidates needed to describe the televised model study in order to make this relevant and to relate observational learning to the media.

Stronger candidates were also able to offer research findings into desensitisation and cognitive priming and to offer effective evaluation. Unfortunately, a significant number of candidates included hardly any AO2/3 material at all.

In some cases answers were very long, but this was often at the expense of coherence.

Question 08

Some candidates did not seem to realise that this question required identification of factors. Although many provided relevant information and gained full marks, a minority wrote far too much and included material which would have received more credit in the next question. However, there were some very good answers which used factors from the Hovland-Yale model and/or the elaboration likelihood model to answer the question.

Question 09

Some candidates were able to provide a well-informed answer in which they applied their knowledge of research into persuasion and attitude change to the novel situation. Unfortunately, however, many candidates did not perform well on this question. There were two main reasons why candidates performed less well on this question. Some included no real reference to psychology at all and produced an entirely common sense answer. Others did show knowledge and understanding of relevant psychological research, but showed no application of this knowledge to the stem. There were some bizarre suggestions with no attempt to make them relevant to the stem such as: 'in order to change the students' attitude then the course needs to be associated with something they like such as puppies' or 'they should use a celebrity like Tiger Woods'.

Topic The Psychology of Addictive Behaviour

Question 10

Generally, this was answered quite well and candidates were able to explain why Sally has become addicted. Strong answers included factors such as self esteem, genetics, modelling and weight regulation and candidates were able to support the explanations by reference to research or underpinning theory. It was also impressive to see other social reasons (apart from modelling) such as social identity theory. However, some well-informed answers about addiction could not access high marks because they had not applied their knowledge to Sally or to any of the particular features of her situation contained in the stem.

Question 11

A surprising number of candidates seemed to have no idea about this theory. Attempts to guess were unsuccessful. On the other hand, candidates who had learned the theory found this a straightforward question. Some candidates wasted time by offering an evaluation of the theory.

Question 12

Most candidates were able to gain some credit on this question but, a minority confused biological or psychological therapies with public health interventions. For example, some candidates outlined psychological therapies such as CBT with no attempt to justify this as part of a public health intervention. The ban on smoking in public places and restricting advertising were most commonly cited.

Question 13

Some candidates struggled with the requirements of this question. While some candidates were able to use research studies to fully assess the effectiveness of interventions and legislation, weaker candidates offered little more than a repeat of their answer to question 12. There were a large number of unsubstantiated assertions in answers to this question. Candidates often simply stated 'this was effective' or 'this is a good intervention', without any evidence to back it up. Better answers often discussed the difficulties associated with establishing the effectiveness of such interventions.

Topic Anomalistic Psychology

The answers for this topic seemed to be at two ends of the spectrum. There were those that were really excellent and well-informed but also those that were so anecdotal and superficial that it was impossible to find any psychology at all.

Question 14

Most candidates were able to offer some sort of explanation of the term 'pseudoscience' but many struggled to provide much detail. Better candidates were able to offer detailed definitions covering a range of defining factors.

Question 15

This question produced some detailed, accurate answers with most candidates showing some understanding of the Ganzfeld procedure. However, some answers omitted important details on sensory deprivation or how the results were recorded. This question was another example where poor expression sometimes obscured meaning and it was difficult to understand who was the 'receiver' and who was the 'sender' and exactly what they had to do.

Question 16

This was generally answered well and most candidates could offer two or more factors underlying a belief in anomalous experience.

Question 17

In spite of the fact that most candidates answered question 16 well, many were not then able to explain why such factors might help us to understand belief in psychic mediumship. This question was generally poorly answered with candidates providing anecdotal reports of psychic experiences in general rather than basing their answers on psychological research and relating it specifically to an explanation of psychic mediumship.

Section C Psychological Research and Scientific Method**Question 18**

Many candidates seemed not to have heard of this term, and attempts to guess were unsuccessful eg 'working with your friends'. A common misconception was that it was a marking exercise to give feedback during the research process. There were also many tautological answers such as 'getting a peer to review your work'. Many candidates appeared to have an idea of what peer review was, but were unable to articulate it in the way that would get them full marks.

Question 19

Candidates who understood peer review were able to give a reasonable answer, but not many showed the elaboration needed for full marks. Many expanded on what it is rather than why it is important. A common error was that it enabled peers to replicate the research. While ethical considerations could have been of relevance, some candidates did not understand that peer review is a retrospective process and can only prevent ethical problems being repeated. A surprising minority talked about corrupt peers who would give a negative review to maintain their own interests.

Question 20

Many candidates seemed unable to say what is meant by content analysis. In some cases, this was because of poor expression and the inability to define terms clearly. In others, it was simply that they did not know the term. Teachers and candidates must be aware that the Research Methods section of the PSYA4 specification builds on what was covered at AS. Anything that appears on the Research Methods specification at AS can be examined on PSYA4.

Question 21

When candidates understood the term they were able to apply their knowledge effectively. For example, they explained how the psychologist would identify themes or categories in the drawings, count examples of each category to provide quantitative data and compare categories of drawings for changes over the duration of the study.

Question 22

Many candidates wrote thorough consent forms using appropriate content and tone. But some just included procedural details with no mention of ethics or vice versa. Some had problems in including enough information to allow the participant to make an informed decision. Specifically there was often insufficient information on the stay in a research unit, the nature of the restricted diet and the need for testing. While some candidates referred to ethical issues, including right to withdraw, many did not. A few actually suggested that participants would be locked in if they agreed to take part.

Question 23

Almost all answers were correct – however, surprisingly, some answers were left blank or the answer 'yes' was provided.

Question 24

Many candidates clearly understood how to read the table and to interpret results and so gained the full 3 marks here. Some gained 1 mark for saying that the result was significant but then demonstrated a complete lack of understanding in the rest of their answer.

Question 25

This question proved to be a good discriminator. Candidates who understood scattergrams were able to make a reasonable sketch with appropriate labels and accurately plotted data and so gained full marks. However, a disappointingly large number of candidates clearly had no understanding of scattergrams and drew a frequency polygon instead for which they could gain no marks. The requirement to present and understand graphs is clearly stated on the AS specification: 'presentation and interpretation of quantitative data including graphs, scattergrams and tables.'

Question 26

Some candidates gave full answers in which they made good use of the data contained in the table. However, fewer candidates were able to make use of the information in the scattergram and very few referred to correlation. There were 4 marks available for this question which should have made candidates realise that some detail was required. Answers such as 'she was concerned because the observers gave different ratings' could not gain much credit. Quite a few candidates wasted time by defining inter-rater reliability. Answers included suggestions of how to improve reliability which, of course, was addressed in question 28.

Question 27

Relatively few candidates identified an appropriate test - almost every reasonably familiar test was quoted. Experimental designs were often quoted as incorrect reasons for test selection. Many candidates did not even suggest an inferential test but suggested calculating the range, mean or standard deviation. Candidates who did identify the appropriate test were usually also able to offer an appropriate justification.

Question 28

This was a good discriminator. Most candidates could offer at least one solution to this issue but many stopped after making their initial point eg 'give them more training'. Some were able to elaborate on this effectively to gain full marks but many showed little understanding. Very common errors were 'get more observers' or 'average the results' or 'only use one observer'.

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>