



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2011**

Psychology A

PSYA3

(Specification 2180)

Unit 3: Topics in Psychology

Report on the Examination

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Unit 3: (PSYA3) Topics in Psychology

General

Performance across the different topics was comparable. There is clear evidence of effective teaching and learning, sometimes at an exceptional level. Equally there was evidence of muddled understanding and sometimes failure to cover the specification content for a particular topic. This is especially important as questions may sample from different areas of a topic.

A few candidates still fail to number their answers correctly and in the appropriate space. With online marking this will lead at the very least to a delay in the accurate marking of candidate's work.

There are still persistent problems with the use of issues, debates and approaches. At the top end, answers used issues, debates and approaches to provide effective commentary and demonstrated clear understanding of their meaning and relevance. Weaker answers simply provide a list of possibilities with no elaboration and often no relevance. This formulaic approach is then repeated for every question. Examiners do not expect a long list of IDA to be covered. It is far more effective to select relevant issues and or debates and use them to provide effective commentary thereby demonstrating clear understanding of their meaning and relevance.

Many candidates become carried away with methodological evaluation of studies. With questions focusing on theories and explanations, methodological evaluation of research evidence will only earn credit if the implications for the theory/explanation are made clear. For instance, effects on ecological validity and internal validity can earn credit as they affect the value of findings. Siffre's cave study (biological rhythms) is important because it demonstrates the interaction between endogenous pacemakers and exogenous zeitgebers; the critical aspect is the findings. It can be heavily criticised, but for top marks a candidate should point out that the findings have been replicated by subsequent studies. In fact, for most areas, the most effective AO2/3 comes from the consistency of research findings rather than from the methodological evaluation of any single study.

Topic Biological Rhythms and Sleep

Question 01

There were some extremely impressive answers to this question. Candidates outlined the SCN-pineal system accurately, including the interaction with light and the role of melatonin. Studies such as Siffre and work with hamsters and chipmunks were used as effective commentary, supporting the role of endogenous pacemakers and their interaction with zeitgebers. At the top end research on infradian rhythms such as the menstrual cycle was used as comparison with the control of the sleep-waking cycle.

General commentary included sleep-waking cycles in the Inuit (Eskimos). Effective IDA included the reductionist approach and problems with generalising from animal studies. Weaker answers failed to outline the relationship between pacemakers and zeitgebers or the functioning of the SCN-pineal system. Some candidates referred to light and pheromones as endogenous pacemakers, showing a complete lack of understanding.

Topic Perception

Question 02

Although not a popular question there were some good answers to this question. Candidates showed impressive knowledge of infant and cross-cultural studies of perceptual development. Better answers were framed in the context of the nature-nurture debate as this provided a coherent structure for the essay. Effective IDA included nature-nurture, free will/determinism, cultural differences and biases.

Weaker candidates presented research evidence but spent far too long evaluating studies without bringing out the implications for the reliability of the study and implications of findings. The nature-nurture debate was often mentioned but not used effectively to structure the answer.

A proportion of candidates referred to theories of perceptual organisation but usually failed to mention development of perceptual abilities.

Topic Relationships

Question 03

A very popular question with many competent answers. The most popular theories were reward/need satisfaction, matching theory, filter theory, and exchange approaches. Detail was often impressive, especially of the roles of operant and classical conditioning in reward/need satisfaction.

Research findings were the main source of evaluation. There was often confusion over the details and outcome of Walster's dance studies in relation to the matching hypothesis, and in general weaker candidates found it difficult to relate research findings to theories. They tended to spend too much time on methodological evaluation of studies without bringing out the implications for the theories they were supporting or contradicting.

Although exchange/economic theories could be made relevant to the formation of romantic relationships, many candidates who referred to them failed to make them specifically relevant to formation and focused on maintenance instead. At the bottom end models of relationship breakdown were also introduced.

Effective IDA for this question included cultural and gender differences and biases, reductionism, free will/determinism, and socially sensitive research.

Topic Aggression

Question 04

Another popular question with many excellent answers. At the top end the background in evolutionary theory was outlined and linked to the evolution of mate retention strategies. Detail was often impressive. The role of jealousy in male aggression was usually referred to, although a significant proportion of answers failed to explicitly link jealousy and paternal uncertainty to aggressive behaviour and missed out on credit. Research studies (including cross cultural studies) were used effectively, and alternative explanations (eg biological factors, social psychological approaches) were often used as comparisons.

Other examples of aggression included murder and suicide, although links to evolutionary explanations were often lacking.

A common weakness in answers was a failure to focus on aggression eg with many candidates giving full accounts of mate retention strategies, most of which do not actually involve aggressive behaviour. Some candidates either misunderstood the question or knew nothing of evolutionary explanations. They discussed social psychological theories such as social learning and deindividuation and earned no marks.

Effective IDA included free will/determinism; reductionism; cultural and gender issues.

Topic Eating Behaviour

Question 05

There was a range of answers to this question, varying greatly in quality. Weaker answers were virtually anecdotal, with mention of parents, peers, mood and media influence but with little or no psychological content eg in terms of social learning theory. Better answers explained how these factors, or others, might influence attitudes to food. Research studies were the key to effective commentary, but again some candidates were inclined to provide too much methodological evaluation without bringing out the impact on findings and their implications. Effective IDA included cultural and gender issues, and free will/determinism. Some candidates discussed eating disorders, and these earned credit insofar as they were shaped to the question.

Question 06

At the top end, candidates focused on the dual centre model based on the hypothalamus, accurately describing the role of feeding and satiety centres. Some essays made appropriate reference to neurotransmitters, and signals from stomach (ghrelin) and fat stores (leptin). Evaluation centred on research studies on animals and humans; there was some excellent evaluation of lesion studies in animals, such as the problem of localising effects to the hypothalamus. Effective IDA included reductionism, generalising from animals to humans, ethics of animal research, and free will/determinism.

Weaker answers were muddled on the dual centre model, or focused on hormonal mechanisms such as ghrelin and leptin without linking them explicitly to brain (neural) systems.

Topic Gender

Question 07

This popular question was relatively straightforward, but provided a range of answers. Descriptions of Kohlberg varied in the degree of accurate detail of the stages (age range and brief details of each stage). Some were excellent, showing effective teaching and learning, but others were muddled and confused.

The most effective commentary referred to research studies and findings. Methodological evaluation of studies was credited only if the implications for the reliability of findings and their implications were clear. Alternative approaches, especially gender schema theory, were often used effectively to contrast with Kohlberg's theory. However a significant proportion of candidates provided far too much descriptive detail of gender schema theory instead of focusing using it in discussion of Kohlberg's theory.

At the top end candidates brought out the links between Kohlberg and Piaget's model of cognitive development.

Effective IDA for this question included gender and cultural issues and biases, free will/determinism, and ethical issues of research with children.

Topic Intelligence and Learning

Question 08

This question provided the full range of answers, from candidates that clearly had not covered Gardner's theory, to answers that provided full details of the multiple intelligences and also searchlight and laser intelligence.

Question 09

The quality of answers to this question depended on how well the candidate understood the rationale behind MZ/DZ twin studies and the implications of findings. Better candidates could relate findings to genetic factors in intelligence test performance and also provide effective evaluation of these studies. Many answers referred to the pioneering work of Burt, but then spent far too long on the controversy surrounding his work. At the top, end candidates could point out that his findings have been largely replicated by later studies.

Other sources of evaluation included the Flynn effect and other evidence for non-genetic factors in intelligence test performance. Effective IDA included cultural and gender differences and biases, free will/determinism, and the social implications of research in this area.

Weaker answers failed to realise that twin studies are evidence for both genetic and non-genetic factors. At the bottom end answers were diverted into the development and use of IQ tests.

Topic Cognition and Development

Question 10

There were a range of answers to this question. Although many candidates could provide accurate descriptions of research in this area, especially some of the many human and animal studies on theory of mind, there was sometimes a failure to focus on the 'development' aspect of the question. In particular Baron-Cohen's studies on autism were popular, but often not linked directly to the question. Selman's work on perspective taking was less popular, but often used effectively.

Methodological evaluation of studies could also earn AO2/3 credit, but often these marks were not accessed as the implications for the reliability of findings were not explicit. At the top end, candidates were able to discuss the confounding role of language in studies of theory of mind.

Effective IDA for this question included ethical issues of research with children and animals, and gender and cultural issues and biases.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.