



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

**Psychology A**

**PSYA2**

**(Specification 2180)**

**Unit 2: Biological Psychology, Social  
Psychology and Individual Differences**

***Report on the Examination***

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

### ***General***

Many of the general comments given in this report were also covered last summer. Unfortunately, it appears as if some centres are not accessing the report on the exam.

One of the main issues is the extent to which candidates can select theories and research studies that are relevant to the question asked and the degree to which they can engage with the opportunity to comment and evaluate. In terms of selection issues, sometimes “less is more”. Teachers could consider covering less material, but make sure that their candidates understand the material so that they can use it to address the specific requirements of examination questions. It appears that some teachers are still focusing on the delivery of large swathes of knowledge, but not developing in their students the skills of using the material effectively. This approach results in many candidates being able to reproduce very detailed and very sound description of psychological knowledge. However, what they seem unable to do, especially with novel situations, is demonstrate that they really understand it and can apply their knowledge. This is a real shame and leads to the underperformance of what could be very good students of psychology.

The other main issue relates to exam skills. Candidates should be aware that all the questions are written very carefully, the words are chosen specifically to elicit certain information and allow candidates to demonstrate certain skills. It was obvious that a significant number of candidates do not appreciate this and assume that simply writing everything they know about a topic will suffice. Quite clearly this is not an appropriate approach and not following the specific requirements of a question can result in no marks being awarded. Question 3 is a good example of this where candidates ignored the word “studies”.

One of the reasons why so many candidates used the additional pages was due to their inability to write concisely. The space provided for an answer is a good guide to how much a candidate needs to write. 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 given, then this is all that would be expected for the allocated marks. 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. 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.

Teachers might also think about spending some time explaining to their students the mechanics of online marking. Candidates need to understand that examiners do not see the whole answer booklet, but instead only see “clips”. These are the section of the answer that refers to a specific question. If a candidate does not indicate that their answer continues elsewhere (especially if their answer ends with a full stop) the examiner will not know that there is more to mark. It is in a candidate’s own interest to indicate clearly that their answer continues and to use the additional pages, not spare space in their booklet.

## **Section A *Biological Psychology***

### **Question 1**

A very straightforward question, but some candidates seemed unable to follow the instructions, putting one letter in each box. Some candidates selected letters that were not on the list, while others put more than one letter in the box. Candidates should be careful with their handwriting in such questions; sometimes it was extremely difficult to decipher the letter.

### **Question 2**

This question asked candidates to explain the strengths, not merely describe a characteristic of a questionnaire. There were a wide range of answers, such as if the questionnaire is anonymous, respondents may be more honest; if they are filled in private demand characteristics are reduced. However, answers that simply said that they are 'cheap' or 'quick', gained no credit unless there was some elaboration. For example, questionnaires are quicker than interviews. Describing the type of data as a strength was in itself not creditworthy, since such data could often be generated by other methods. However, if reference was made to the type of question and the data it would generate, this could be creditworthy. For example, open-ended questions produce qualitative data that can be rich and varied.

Many candidates misread the question and provided one strength and one limitation.

### **Question 3**

The focus of this question was on studies of workplace stress and not factors. The most frequently used studies were those of Johansson and Marmot. However, any study that explicitly focused on workplace stress would receive credit.

### **Question 4**

Almost all candidates correctly identified Mark as being Type A. However, few were then able to explain in terms of physiology, how this type of personality responds to stress. What was missing from most answers was any understanding of how this personality responds to stress and how they have an increased risk of CHD and other stress related illnesses. Some candidates described the Friedman and Rosenman study in detail, but failed to apply their knowledge to this question.

### **Question 5**

Most candidates could name a psychological method of stress management, apart from the minority who offered a physiological method.

However, in (b) they were required to explain the strengths of their chosen method. This is not the same as describing the procedures of the method itself. This is a good example of the need for candidates to read the question carefully. Too many simply described the method, without considering its strengths. One way of considering strengths are by comparison with other methods: such as CBT does not have any side effects, nor is it addictive, unlike some physiological methods.

## **Section B Social Psychology**

### **Question 6**

This question should not have been difficult for candidates to do, although many candidates seemed to find it so. Independent behaviour is explicitly stated in the specification and clearly in Asch's and Milgram's studies there is arguably almost as much evidence for independent behaviour as conformity and obedience. Even for those candidates who were able to focus on the independent behaviour aspects of the question, very few were able to extend their evaluation beyond the rather basic (and often repetitive) methodological criticisms of the various studies. There is more to evaluation than the stock phrases of ecological and population validity - these seem to be churned out no matter what the study is. Very few candidates were able to provide wider commentary on the more general potential benefits to society of dissenting voices, questioning of authority, new, creative views or the idea of social heroism. This area of psychology should be much more meaningful to the students than it appears to be.

Another notable point was the absolute determination of a high percent of candidates to give the standard Asch/Milgram essay. Even those candidates, who started their answer with a broad statement about independent behaviour, seemed to then forget the question completely and go straight into lengthy descriptions of Asch/Milgram. Teachers may wish to note that the over teaching of these two studies in many cases is impacting negatively on their candidate's performance. There is much more to social psychology than Asch and Milgram and candidates need to have this strongly reinforced.

### **Question 7**

Both parts of this question were answered well, with many candidates demonstrating a sound understanding of the need for deception and ways of dealing with it. It is worth noting, that this question asked for an explanation, so simply stating, "it avoids social desirability" is not quite enough. Candidates need to be able to explain why this is important, eg "so it affects validity". The most common way for dealing with deception was through the debrief, although a minority suggested presumptive consent and prior general consent.

### **Question 8**

There were some excellent answers to this applied question. Candidates were able to explain which girl was showing internalisation and which girl was showing compliance; or which girl demonstrated informational social influence and which girl demonstrated normative social influence.

### **Question 9**

This question was also answered very well by the majority of candidates, with a range of answers including legitimate authority, gradual commitment, agentic state etc. Unfortunately, there was a notable minority who confused conformity with obedience.

## **Section C Individual Differences**

### **Question 10**

It was encouraging to see that this cohort of candidates was able to go beyond simply describing the findings. They were able to make suggestions about what they showed. For example, that both therapies showed some improvement, as there were no scores of zero; that in fact neither showed much improvement as the average was only 6.

However, it was also clear from the responses that a minority of candidates had no real understanding of what range tells us about data.

### **Question 11**

This question required candidates to demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge. Most candidates chose deviation from social norms and successfully used the stimulus material to justify their choice. Candidates who chose either failure to function adequately or deviation from ideal mental health, found it a little more difficult to apply it to the scenario, but made some creditworthy attempts.

The most common limitation offered was that the definition suffers from cultural relativism, but for the full marks, candidates needed to explain why this is a limitation, rather than explaining what it is.

### **Question 12**

Candidates appeared to struggle with part (a) and showed very little understanding of what is involved in psychoanalysis. Many candidates could not go beyond a brief statement: that it is the “talking cure”. Only a minority was able to refer to the techniques used in psychoanalysis, such as free association and dream analysis.

In part (b) candidates demonstrated better knowledge, and were able to include reference to the anxiety hierarchy, deep muscle relaxation and the gradual working up through the hierarchy.

### **Question 13**

There were some excellent answers to this question, with candidates showing very accurate and detailed knowledge. There was usually a very good balance between AO1 and AO2. However, some candidates only focused on treatments and such answers were usually restricted to basic marks. It is important to note that while treatments are clearly part of the approach, they are not the main over-arching feature of the approach.

Unfortunately, some candidates misread the question and offered the behavioural approach instead. Such answers gained no marks.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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