



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

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

Whilst it is clear that most schools and colleges have addressed the specification revisions for PSYA3 there are some students whose responses suggest they have been taught the original specification. Students re-sitting units need to familiarise themselves with the changes to the specification.

As usual there was a wide range of quality in students scripts. Some excellent scripts showed admirable combinations of knowledge and understanding of psychological material, along with focussed and effective evaluation/commentary. Weaker scripts demonstrated limited psychological knowledge and a general failure to provide relevant evaluation. More frustratingly, in the middle were many scripts with reasonable psychological content that was not used effectively to answer the question.

This was particularly evident in 09 and 11. These questions required students to use their material to construct arguments, in the one case on the importance of social influences on gender, and in the other to consider, using evidence, the notion of intelligence in non-human animals. Many students produced focussed answers that met the demands of the question, while others, with access to the same material, failed to answer the fundamental question but simply provided examples of eg social influences on gender or of animal intelligence. Constructing a coherent and logical argument is a key skill assessed at A2 and students should be prepared to organise their knowledge around the requirements of the question.

In some questions there was clear evidence of a lack of preparation. A number of answers to 06 were made up of examples of group display but with little or no reference to evolutionary explanations, although the question was taken directly from the specification. Given that several popular topics on this paper have an evolutionary element it would benefit all students to have an awareness of the basic principles of the evolutionary approach that they could apply as and when necessary.

Across the paper there were the common problems with issues, debates and approaches (IDA). It cannot be overemphasised that it is more important to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of one or two IDA than to provide a rote learnt list of four or five applied inappropriately. 'Reductionism', for instance, does not refer to a limited theory or approach, but to one that emphasises explanations at the most fundamental level, often biological. Findings can be generalised from non-human animals to humans (otherwise textbooks would simply eliminate all animal studies), but only with caution. It might be more justifiable in relation to neural mechanisms of feeding, for example, but less so with evolutionary explanations of sleep. If these points are elaborated they provide a rich source of AO2/3 marks.

Some students are still providing overlong lists of methodological criticisms of studies. If the question is on research studies these can be justified, although even here a more productive focus would usually be on findings and their implications. However when the question is on explanations or theories, findings of studies are often a key route to evaluation and AO2/3 marks. In this case methodological evaluation of studies would only be relevant if the points made explicitly affect the reliability and/or validity of the findings. Comments on ethical aspects or informed consent did not earn many AO2/3 marks. Linking findings and explanations is a core aspect of psychological research and is usually essential in constructing logical and coherent answers.

Schools and colleges need to remind students about the assessments of quality of written communication. Vague, inaccurate or ambiguous expression can limit the marks awarded. Although most students were able to articulate their knowledge and understanding to a reasonable standard, there were examples of very poor communication, such that the meaning of entire sentences was often difficult to discern.

Finally, although this report emphasises weaknesses in answers and tries to provide some guidance on how to improve, it is important to note that there were many highly impressive scripts. These reflected effective teaching and learning, and high level skills of organising material around the specific question asked. Although it is a stressful and pressured situation, finding a few minutes thinking time in the examination would have benefitted many students who clearly had a range of knowledge but failed to apply it systematically to the question.

Topic: Biological Rhythms and Sleep

Question 01

Many students achieved full marks on this question by focussing on one explanation for narcolepsy and providing sufficient detail for four marks. The role of the hypocretin (orexin) system was the most popular choice. Others included genetics, REM sleep mechanisms, and psychoanalytic approaches. Weaker answers tended to cover two or more possible explanations superficially, or referred briefly to eg hypocretin, but with little detail of its possible role in narcolepsy. A number of students spent too long on describing symptoms without linking them to explanations, while others evaluated their chosen explanation, which was not required by the question and did not earn marks.

Question 02

This question provided a range of responses. At the top end students were able to outline a number of evolutionary explanations, such as predator/prey status, 'waste of time' models, energy conservation and hibernation approaches etc. Research studies on sleeping patterns across a range of animal species were then used to evaluate explanations. Relevant commentary included the wide range of potential influences on sleeping patterns (eg sleep site, body and brain size, foraging requirements etc), the problem of explaining the different types of sleep, and whether evolutionary approaches still applied to modern humans.

Weaker answers were confused over the detail of evolutionary explanations and/or discussed the restoration approach and the work of Oswald and Horne. This approach could have been made relevant to evolutionary ideas but this rarely happened. Case studies of sleep deprivation such as Peter Tripp were described, often in great detail, but without being made relevant to the question.

The most popular IDA was the problem of extrapolating from non-human animals to humans, but, as discussed above, this is rarely used effectively. You can generalise findings from animals to humans, but with caution and in a sensible manner. An energy conservation function for sleep might still apply to modern humans, while the importance of a safe sleep site or protection from predators would not. Usually students assumed that you can never generalise from animals to humans.

Topic: Perception

Question 03

Although not a popular question there were some excellent answers. There is a range of research studies available in this area, including the development of perceptual abilities in babies and cross-cultural studies of perceptual abilities. These could earn credit as long as findings were made relevant to perceptual development, and this could be done effectively via the nature-nurture debate on perceptual development. Some students made use of theories of perceptual organisation such as Gregory and Gibson. These earned marks as long as the emphasis was on the role of innate mechanisms (Gibson) versus the role of experience (Gregory) in perceptual development. Such theories were evaluated using research evidence, and in general a key discriminator was how well students discussed the implications of the findings of research studies.

Weaker answers failed to focus consistently on perceptual development, often presenting studies and findings but failing to link findings to the question. There were some lengthy methodological evaluations of studies that earned few marks, as the implications for the reliability and validity of findings were not clear.

Topic: Relationships

Question 04

This was a very popular question that provided a range of answers. AO1 marks were generally good, with most students able to describe models of relationship breakdown such as Rollie & Duck and Lee. These descriptions were differentiated by the level and accuracy of the detail provided. Also popular were lists of factors that might contribute to relationship breakdown. Some students used economic models such as equity and social exchange; these earned marks to the extent that the focus was on explanations for relationship breakdown rather than formation or maintenance. There were a few answers focussing on evolutionary ideas on relationships and some of these were able to use the material in a convincing fashion to account for relationship breakdown.

The quality of AO2/3 material was more variable and overall there was an imbalance between AO1 and AO2/3 content. Often AO2/3 consisted only of general comments on cultural bias, the problem of non-traditional relationships, and the 'static' nature of stage models. Better answers referred to research studies supporting one or more of the stages and/or to the value of models in understanding the role of relationship counselling. This use of applications as IDA can often be more effective than traditional issues and debates. In addition better students provided sustained discussion of why eg cultural bias, was an important issue in this area. Weaker students in general provided lists of issues and debates, such as reductionism, determinism and gender bias without demonstrating any understanding of why they were relevant to the question.

Topic: Aggression

Question 05

The term 'research' can include both studies and theories, so this question part was quite open and most students did reasonably well. The most popular approach was to outline importation and deprivation approaches to aggression in prisons, with answers varying in level of accurate detail. Zimbardo's prison study was also popular, although students did have to bring out the 'institutional' aspect of the study and explain where the levels of aggression came from. Simply mentioning 'deindividuation' or 'role conformity' was not sufficient to move out of the lower bands.

'Hazing' and religious rituals were mentioned by a few students, but only rarely was the 'institutional' aspect made explicit. Incidents such as Abu Ghraib are not research studies, but could earn marks if used to illustrate explanations of institutional aggression.

Question 06

A question that provided the full range of responses. It was clear that a number of students were unprepared for this question, although it was taken directly from the specification. Answers that focussed on causes of aggression in individuals (eg testosterone, genetics, evolutionary approaches, social learning theory), did not earn marks. Neither did answers that explained aggression and other forms of group display using social psychological approaches such as deindividuation and 'contagion'. In some answers these alternative approaches were used as effective AO2/3 material.

More frustratingly, a substantial minority of students outlined explanations for group display that could have been made directly relevant to the question, but were not. These included the power/threat hypothesis and xenophobia. In these answers the ideas were outlined, but explanations were not elaborated in evolutionary terms eg in terms of status and access or threats to resources (territory, food, mates). Many answers would have benefited from an introductory outline of basic evolutionary principles that would then have provided the context for a discussion of examples of group display. These examples, such as lynch mobs and football crowds, were often described in great detail as though the description itself was an explanation. However an understanding of basic evolutionary principles would have allowed these examples to be used as highly effective illustrations of evolutionary explanations.

Topic: Eating Behaviour

Question 07

This was a straightforward and relatively popular question with some excellent answers. On the whole these focussed on the dual centre model of the hypothalamus (lateral and ventromedial feeding and satiety centres), with better students able to refer to neurotransmitters such as serotonin, bombesin and noradrenaline, and key signals such as glucose or lipid levels. Findings from animal studies involving hypothalamic damage were used as highly effective AO2/3; some students spent too long on methodological evaluation of these studies, especially the problem of generalisation (as discussed earlier) and ethics, but some effective points included the problem of localising lesion damage to specific areas of the brain.

Peripheral hormones released from the stomach, gut and fatty tissue (eg ghrelin, CCK, leptin) are not in themselves neural mechanisms and research studies on the role of hormones alone did not receive marks. However if the discussion included their action on hypothalamic and other brain centres controlling feeding behaviour then full credit could be earned.

Commentary in better answers included a review of the variety of factors that can affect feeding behaviour, including mood and dieting, and could then lead to some sustained evaluation of the neural mechanisms approach in terms of reductionism and determinism. Weaker answers simply stated issues such as cultural bias and gender differences, which were not relevant to this question.

Topic: Gender

Question 08

This question was done reasonably well. An encouraging number of students were able to quote several research studies into social influences on gender; popular were parents, peers, school and teachers, and media, while a few answers outlined cross-cultural studies. Descriptions of theoretical approaches, such as Kohlberg's cognitive approach and gender schema theory, were creditable but only if the role of social influences was emphasised. Weaker answers presented anecdotal lists of influences with little psychological content, or narrative accounts derived largely from sociology. A significant number of students included evaluative material that was not required by this question and did not earn marks.

Question 09

This question required a consideration of the importance of social influences on gender, and a key discriminator was the extent to which students did this. A common error was to simply provide evidence for effects of social influences without explicitly addressing implications for how important or significant they were. Better answers carried this issue throughout the essay, constantly reviewing what findings might mean for the importance of social influences.

Additional sources of AO2/3 material included evidence for the contribution of other factors, such as genetics and biology, usually using some of the case studies of gender reassignment. These received credit as long as the emphasis remained on the overall significance of social influences. Similarly discussion of the biosocial model as a sensible integration of social and biological influences was often an effective conclusion.

The focus on social influences and the use of biological factors as evaluation also helped many students provide effective and sustained IDA in terms of the nature-nurture debate.

Topic: Intelligence and Learning

Question 10

This question provided a range of responses. Some students were clearly unprepared for a question on classical conditioning and provided confused and muddled accounts mixing up classical and operant conditioning. Others outlined some features of Pavlov's original work but were confused over the precise procedure, principles and terminology. Better answers were able to outline Pavlov's basic paradigm accurately and describe one or two additional features such as extinction, spontaneous recovery or stimulus generalisation.

Question 11

As with question 09, a key discriminator in this question was the extent to which material was used to answer the question. A number of students were able to discuss examples of animal intelligence but did not address what such examples said about animal intelligence. Better answers covered similar material but also considered whether all such examples represented 'intelligence', looked at comparisons with human intelligence (especially in relation to theory of mind and social cognition), and/or considered alternative interpretations in terms of eg conditioning. This was also an area where methodological evaluation could be used effectively in questioning the validity of findings from studies such as the mirror self-recognition test.

Popular examples included theory of mind (self recognition), Machiavellian intelligence, foraging and imitation. Weaker answers did not discriminate between examples of 'intelligent' behaviours and simple classical/operant conditioning, and showed little awareness of the meaning of 'intelligence'.

Topic: Cognition and Development

Question 12

There were a number of different approaches to this question. Most popular was to focus on the development of theory of mind and understanding of others, using the classical smarties and Sally Ann studies of Wimmer & Perner, Baron-Cohen and others. Answers varied in the level of accurate detail, and also in the degree to which the focus of the answer was on the development of the understanding of others ie there needed to be some consideration of the ages at which theory of mind developed. However this requirement was sometimes ignored. Better answers evaluated research on the theory of mind in terms of findings, methodology (eg the language used and whether the children genuinely understood the task), disputes over when theory of mind develops, and applications eg to the understanding of conditions such as autism.

An alternative but less popular approach used Selman's stages of perspective taking. Although detail of stages and ages was variable, this approach provided a logical structure to the answer that benefited students. Evaluation was often effective, in particular using applications to education and to therapy.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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