



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

This Summer's sitting of PSYA3 produced a wide range in the quality of student responses, although there were instances where advice from previous Reports on the Examination has not been taken on board.

It was more obvious this Summer that AO2/3 skills for some students are ineffective, being largely generic and lacking engagement with the question. In some scripts the use of a study was automatically followed by a list of methodological issues, with no awareness that some or all of these might be irrelevant. If a question requires a theory/explanation to be evaluated, then the findings of studies are usually critical and the main source of AO2/3 material. Methodological criticism of a study can only be made relevant and earn credit if the implications for the theory/explanation are clear, for example simply stating that a study used only males and so is gender biased will not earn marks. It only becomes credit worthy if the implications for the theory/explanation are clear, for example that the theory/explanation may not apply to females. Ethical issues of, for example informed consent are unlikely to be relevant to the theory/explanation and so students should be advised not to quote them (sometimes at length). This problem was most apparent in question 05, where some answers spent over a page on methodological evaluation of Bandura's studies. However many of these answers failed to draw out issues such as reliability, validity and the implications for social learning theory, and so failed to earn AO2/3 marks. However, some questions may refer only to research, which includes studies, in which case general methodological evaluation of a study can earn marks.

Once again, there were common problems across the paper with issues, debates and approaches (IDA). In general students failed to contextualise IDA and failed to demonstrate clear understanding of their meaning and relevance. 'Reductionism' is still misunderstood by many students, who think it means a failure to consider alternative explanations. This means that most explanations are reductionist (in the same way that all explanations are 'determinist') and it becomes an irrelevant comment to make. Reductionism refers to explanations at the lowest level of analysis, which in psychology usually means the biological approach. This uses genetics, neurotransmitters, etc, to explain behaviour, ignoring psychological and social factors, and is genuinely reductionist.

Students need to be provided with examples of IDA that are specific and relevant to particular topics, for example reductionism in relation to biological explanations of feeding behaviour, aggression and gender. Determinism/free will is very relevant to explanations of aggression and social views on the origins of aggression. Cultural bias/differences are important in the study of relationships and gender development. Practical applications of theories and findings are an important and under-used area of IDA and can be relevant to feeding behaviour, models of relationship maintenance and breakdown and theories of cognitive development, etc.

Use of one or two IDA demonstrating clear understanding can earn good AO2/3 marks and lift an answer into the top mark band. It is clear that a significant minority of students can do this and it would be encouraging to see IDA used more widely and effectively.

Topic: Biological Rhythms and Sleep

Question 01

Responses to this short answer question were often disappointing. The focus needed to be on ultradian rhythms, but many students were diverted into describing the stages of REM and NREM sleep in far too much detail. For full marks the focus needed to be on the patterning of the stages and the fact that the 'sleep staircase' repeats throughout the night in a rhythmic pattern.

Many answers failed to identify an ultradian rhythm, confusing ultradian with infradian. It is also worth noting that body temperature is not an ultradian rhythm. It is a circadian rhythm, with one peak and one trough every 24 hours, in the same way the sleep/waking cycle has one sleep period and one waking period every 24 hours.

Question 02

This question produced a wide range of answers. Although many essays referred to a similar range of studies, there was great variation in how well findings were interpreted in relation to restoration explanations. AO1 material was usually competent, with students able to outline the models of Oswald and Horne on the functions of REM and NREM sleep, although with varying degrees of accuracy and detail. Findings from non-human animal work were usually used effectively, but again many answers spent far too long on methodological evaluation of these studies. The question is on explanations, and it is hard, if not impossible, to relate ethical aspects of animal work to the explanations. Similarly, the case studies of Tripp and Gardner were popular, but interpretation was very variable. The better students linked the effects of total sleep deprivation to Horne's ideas on core sleep, as effects were largely cognitive. Weaker answers became over-involved in methodological and ethical issues, and in some cases failed to refer to the findings in relation to the explanations. As with so many questions, the key to good answers was to organise the material around the question, and to maintain a consistent focus on restoration explanations.

Evolutionary approaches were sometimes used as effective commentary on restoration explanations, while some weak answers focused on sleep patterns in dolphins and contained very little relevant material.

Topic: Perception

Question 03

Most students were able to provide a range of studies on the development of depth/distance perception and/or visual constancies. The key discriminator was how well the implications of findings were discussed. The most popular approach was to use the nature-nurture debate as a framework, with students at the top end able to bring out the implications of findings, using a range of infant and cross-cultural studies. This was also a topic where methodological evaluation of studies was often successfully linked to the implications for the nature-nurture debate, although the ethical issue of informed consent from infants was irrelevant. Weaker answers tended to move away from the question and failed to provide coherent discussions of the studies they outlined.

A number of answers referred to the theories of Gibson and Gregory. As long as the focus was on the development of perceptual abilities, such answers could earn marks across the scale. However, a significant proportion of students lost sight of this crucial aspect.

Topic: Relationships

Question 04

Another very popular question that exemplified the need to organise material. Students accessing the higher marks outlined the principles of Darwinian evolution, then reviewed various aspects of human sexual selection. These included intra- and inter-sexual selection, gender differences in reproductive priorities (spreading genes versus resource support) based on parental investment theory, and consequent gender differences in attitudes to short- and long-term relationships. At each stage supporting evidence could be quoted from a range of cross-cultural and western studies. Other aspects, such as attitudes to jealousy, could earn marks if clearly linked to the question of sexual selection.

Weaker answers showed an incomplete understanding of evolutionary theory and failed to provide a coherent and organised answer. Findings of studies were incompletely interpreted, and methodological evaluation sometimes misplaced. Buss' cross-cultural study was not 'culturally biased' and evolutionary theory clearly does provide an explanation for female sexual and reproductive behaviour, which it is not 'gender biased'.

Social psychological theories could be used effectively as AO2/3, but some students had clearly prepared answers on social psychological approaches only and earned few, if any, marks. General commentary included the changing socio-cultural roles of men and women, and the issue of explaining non-traditional relationships.

Topic: Aggression

Question 05

This was the most popular question and was answered reasonably well. The most popular theories were social learning (Bandura) and deindividuation (especially the research of Zimbardo). AO1 marks were awarded for detailed outlines of the theories, although many students failed to access marks through lack of detail, especially for deindividuation. In some cases no attempt was made to outline the psychological processes involved in deindividuation, before some reference to 'anonymity'. For SLT there needed to be some detail of the underlying processes, such as imitation, modelling, vicarious reinforcement, self-efficacy, etc.

Evaluation of Social Learning Theory focused on Bandura's studies. Many students spent far too long on methodological evaluation of these studies without bringing out the implications for the theory, when reference to the findings of additional studies would have been far more effective. In comparison, deindividuation was often evaluated more successfully as better answers referred to three or four relevant studies. Although accurate commentary on some studies was sometimes lacking, for example whether the 'trick or treating study' is relevant to aggression, the accumulation of findings was an effective route to AO2/3 marks. Many students used Zimbardo's prison study in this context but, as mentioned in previous reports, this is a difficult study to interpret, particularly in relation to deindividuation, and some answers failed to bring out its relevance. General commentary included comparison with evidence for the role of biological factors in aggression and the fact that many individuals exposed to aggression, or who are part of a large groups, do not in fact behave aggressively.

Some weaker responses appeared to be pre-prepared answers on institutional aggression, which earned marks when factors were explicitly presented as social psychological.

Topic: Eating Behaviour

Question 06

This short answer question was well answered. The most popular disorders identified were anorexia nervosa and obesity. For anorexia nervosa explanations varied from the psychoanalytical through media influences to the biological/genetic. The genetic explanation was often limited, with descriptions of only twin studies given and no reference to possible mechanisms, or to what is actually inherited. In general the role of neurotransmitters was covered more successfully. For obesity the focus was either on socio-cultural factors or physiological mechanisms of feeding behaviour.

Weaker answers often described symptoms or provided evaluative material that was not relevant in this question. A further common weakness was for answers using media influence to focus on largely anecdotal material with no reference to, for example social learning theory. For anorexia nervosa, the key stage of why media influence leads to pathological slimming was usually ignored.

Question 07

The key to good answers to this question was organisation. Many students could refer to factors/explanations for the success and/or failure of dieting, such as the boundary model (although this was often presented inaccurately), the 'what the hell effect', ironic processes, diet variety and mood, and also outline relevant studies. However, essays were often poorly organised with AO1 material presented in almost random fashion, with an overall lack of coherence. Accurate understanding of the implications of findings was often lacking, which was especially the case for the 'preloading' study. This is a key test of the boundary model, but only the better students were able to link the two effectively. Also, better answers referred to research evidence for genetic factors and/or the role of hormones and neurotransmitters, and used this evidence effectively.

Weaker answers used largely anecdotal material on, for example the role of social support or exercise (often using the work of 'weight watchers'). There is accessible research evidence in this area, which would have been far more effective.

Topic: Gender

Question 08

A number of students were un-prepared for this question and so were unable to provide an accurate description or evaluation of gender schema theory. It emphasises the importance of covering the whole specification content of any particular topic for the examination. The better students were able to define and describe cognitive schemas in terms of their structure, development and function in gender-related behaviour. They were able to refer to in groups and out groups, and the influence of gender schemas on cognitive processes, such as perception and memory. Such answers could receive AO1 marks in the top band. Weaker answers had some ideas on what schemas were but lacked detail and accuracy.

Effective evaluation used the findings of studies to support or contradict the role of schemas in gender-related perception and memory. Comparison with Kohlberg's developmental stage theory and his concept of gender constancy was used effectively by some students. More often, however, there was confusion between Kohlberg and Gender Schema Theory (GST),

and many answers failed to draw out the differences between them. Weaker students simply described Kohlberg's model and appeared unaware that it differed from the gender schema

approach. The work of Bem was introduced in some answers, but again the link to gender schema theory was usually unclear. Similarly the biological model of gender development was sometimes used effectively to evaluate GST, but more often students became diverted into the more dramatic case studies of gender reassignment, and did not link material back to the question.

Topic: Intelligence and Learning

Question 09

Very few students opted to answer this question and the overall quality of responses was low. Although the use of Spearman and Cattell was popular, there was often confusion on the details of the theory presented. Some students wrote mainly about IQ tests without specifying the theory behind them. Few answers referred to key concepts such as the quantifying of intelligence and how the concept of intelligence is made up by combinations of different factors.

Evaluation was generally weak and few students compared the rather static psychometric approach with the more dynamic information processing models. However, some better answers did provide a coherent outline of how the psychometric approach led to the development of IQ tests and how these have been used by society. A few answers became diverted into the nature-nurture debate in relation to IQ, without making it relevant to an evaluation of a psychometric theory.

Question 10

There was a frustrating set of answers to this question. Many students showed impressive knowledge of evolutionary factors in the development of human intelligence, which included foraging, group size and communication, language, tool use, hunting, etc. However, in order to gain marks in the top bands, this material had to be related to the development of human intelligence rather than, for instance, brain size. Brain size is of central importance, but for high marks the student had to explicitly outline the probable relationship between brain size and intelligence.

Better answers referred to an impressive number of research studies, for instance on brain size and group size, or on the controversy of whether non-human animals show theory of mind. The key to good marks was how effectively the findings of such studies were related back to the question.

Topic: Cognition and Development

Question 11

Although this was not a popular question, it was answered well. Most students were able to outline the stages of Piaget's theory, in varying degrees of detail and accuracy. The better answers also outlined the processes of assimilation, accommodation and equilibration. Evaluation consisted mainly of the findings of Piaget's original studies, methodological evaluation of these studies and attempts to demonstrate that Piaget underestimated the cognitive abilities of young children. Better answers were able to discuss the role of language and demand characteristics in Piaget's studies. Further evaluation included the application of Piaget's theory to education, although this often lacked the detail to demonstrate complete understanding. Some students tried to compare Piaget's theory with Vygotsky's, and again there was substantial variation in the level of focus and detail. Some answers provided accurate detail of Vygotsky but failed to bring out how this reflected on Piaget. Overall, answers to this question were generally quite impressive.

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>

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