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Psychology B PSYB2

(Specification 2185)

Unit 2: Individual Differences, Social Psychology and Cognitive Psychology

Report on the Examination

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Unit 2: (PSYB2) Social Psychology, Cognitive Psychology and Individual Differences

General

Time management continues to be an improved feature of candidates' performance on PSYB2. Most paced themselves well through the examination and there were few examples of unfinished answers. Indeed, for many candidates, the strongest and most detailed answer appeared to be the last one they had attempted. Question popularity remains in the following order: Remembering and Forgetting, Social Influence, Anxiety Disorders, Autism, Social Cognition and Perceptual Processes.

Overall, candidate performance on the paper was broadly in line with the standards seen in previous series. Responses to the short-answer questions in particular were often very good. The exception was in those questions where candidates were required to produce elaborated strengths or limitations of particular explanations. Most candidates were able to offer only a brief statement of these without further expansion.

This theme was also evident in many responses to 10-mark questions that were often formulaic with regards to AO2 marks. Top-band answers are those that demonstrate evidence of explanation, discussion and analysis, rather than a list of brief evaluative points. In contrast, many responses were limited to a series of unexpanded comments relating to ecological validity, ethical and methodological issues. Whilst these can be valid points they must be developed and applied to the particular theory, explanation or treatment/therapy under discussion.

Candidates are reminded that quality of written communication is assessed on the 10-mark answers and vague, inaccurate or ambiguous expression can limit the marks awarded in these questions. Although most candidates 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.

Compared to previous series, candidates' understanding of the experimental method would appear to have improved somewhat. The majority were able to access at least some of the AO3 marks available in the Social Influence and Social Cognition sections. However, making effective links within answers to the study described in the stem remains something that many candidates find difficult.

Section A Social Psychology

Topic: Social Influence

Question 01

Most candidates were able to demonstrate knowledge of a relevant explanation of Howard's difficulty parking; however, the application mark was more elusive. Many attempted applications merely repeated information that was already included in the stem. Other responses offered a number of relevant reasons but failed to make appropriate links to the situation described. Many candidates still seem to be under the mistaken impression that arousal can trigger a 'non-dominant response' and that this can account for a deterioration in performance.

Question 02

Most candidates correctly identified the independent variable. Some, inevitably, gave the dependent variable, whilst others failed to make it clear within their answer that there were two conditions within the experiment.

Question 03

A wide variety of answers was acceptable here so the majority of candidates were able to suggest an appropriate extraneous variable that may have confounded the results of the study.

Question 04

Many candidates were able to identify a relevant advantage – 'removes/reduces order effects…' tended to be the most popular – but many failed to make an effective link to the study described in the stem.

Question 05

Again, there were many examples of responses that demonstrated understanding of the issue of 'ecological validity' but appropriate links to the study described were fewer in number.

Question 06

This question was often well-answered. Many candidates gained both marks by demonstrating knowledge of informational social influence and then applying that to the results of the study described in the stem. Less effective answers were built around weak definitions, such as a 'desire to be right', that failed to acknowledge the key point that informational social influence occurs when people look to others when uncertain, as a source of information. Other candidates incorrectly explained the results of the study in the context of normative rather than informational social influence.

Question 07

Most candidates would benefit from advice on how to answer this question and very few responses scored in the top-band. Often, factors were not made explicit and had to be 'searched for' within answers. Selected factors were very rarely described or elaborated and their effect on obedience levels was often not made clear.

In many cases, candidates would present a variation of Milgram's basic experiment but then seemed unsure of what to do next. Sustained explanation/analysis of why stated factors affect levels of obedience was rarely seen, meaning candidates often struggled to access AO2 marks. If there was discussion, it often focused on general ethical or methodological criticisms of Milgram's work and was not made relevant to discussion of the factors.

That said; there were some excellent answers. The most sophisticated were those that tended to move beyond the basic variations of the Milgram experiment, and incorporated other studies, such as Bickman and Hofling, to support or refute the influence of factors. Effective discussion of the wider implications of the influence of factors - for example, within real-life obedience situations - was also seen on occasion.

Topic: Social Cognition

Question 08

Many candidates merely provided an outline of one of the explanations of prejudice, rather than a limitation, and thus scored no marks. There were good answers however. Most common amongst these was the notion that competition for resources cannot adequately explain prejudice in the absence of competition, for instance in the case of new-age travellers. Answers based on authoritarian personality tended to focus on weaknesses of the F-scale as a measure of prejudice, or the inability of the theory to explain prejudice within entire social/cultural groups. There were few relevant limitations of Social Identity Theory.

Question 09 and Question 10

These questions were generally very well-answered. Some candidates confused the independent variable with the dependent variable and vice versa. Other answers were too weakly expressed to gain credit.

Question 11

Not unlike question 04, most candidates could identify a relevant advantage, though placing this within the context of the study described was more problematic.

Question 12

Most candidates were able to recognise the task/situation as artificial and were awarded the mark.

Question 13

Many candidates scored two out of the three marks available for this question. Most were able to state the likely outcome of the experiment and this was achieved in a variety of ways through reference to the likelihood of situational explanations and the apportioning of blame. Many candidates were also able to explain this in the context of the self-serving bias, that one's own negative behaviour is likely to receive an external attribution. The third mark, however, for explaining why the self-serving bias occurs, was rarely accessed.

Question 14

Candidates were rather more successful at identifying 'factors' in this question than in question 07, although this topic was much less popular. It was important that the emphasis should be on how factors 'affect impression formation' but this was often poorly explained. Candidates were able to present relevant evidence related to 'central traits', for instance, but the crucial point, that these traits have much more effect on the overall impression we form of someone, was often not adequately conveyed.

That said, there were a number of top-band answers. These often took the 'primacy effect' and the 'recency effect' as two separate factors and followed this with sustained analysis of their wider implication in real-life situations - during an interview or 'blind date', for instance. There was also creditworthy commentary on the relative power of each factor within these answers.

Unfocused, generic evaluation of the methodology of studies was a feature of some answers. This sometimes contributed little to the discussion of factors, but was much less in evidence here than it was in question 07. As is typical of this question, primacy and recency effects in impression formation were often confused with research that demonstrates a serial position curve in memory.

Section B Cognitive Psychology

Topic: Remembering and Forgetting

Question 15

This was generally well-answered with many candidates gaining the full three marks for a clear outline of the model. Lost marks were often explained by a failure to refer to 'rehearsal' or the existence of a 'sensory store/memory'.

Question 16

Although most candidates were able to access a mark for explaining why 'lack of consolidation' occurs (usually 'head trauma/concussion'); very few made it clear that this particular theory of forgetting explains loss of information as being due to physical disruption. Often, the definitions offered were vague and did not adequately distinguish lack of consolidation from other forms of forgetting; most notably, trace decay.

Question 17

Many candidates gave an accurate outline of interference, usually by explaining the two types: 'proactive' and 'retroactive'. Some candidates confused interference with displacement or more general forms of 'distraction'.

Lots of candidates could state a limitation but very few developed this into a coherent discussion. As a consequence, there were very few five-mark responses. Those that did gain full marks tended to focus on the artificial nature of the evidence supporting the explanation: that studies are often designed to deliberately induce interference by pairing similar sorts of material within short time-frames.

A surprisingly high number of candidates gave limitations that were based on the erroneous assumption that interference only explains forgetting in long-term memory.

Question 18

Most answers to this question scored well in terms of descriptive content. Though some candidates' outline of the model was little more than a list of the three different levels, many others gave clear and elaborated summaries of these, as well as acknowledging the important point, that depth of processing determines level of recall. Supporting studies (usually Craik & Tulving) were also often well described, though candidates were less adept at using such evidence effectively and failed to make clear links back to the central claims of the model.

A fair number of responses confused levels of processing with types of long-term memory (episodic, procedural and semantic) and others conflated the Craik & Tulving study with Baddeley's research into coding.

Attempts to evaluate the model were mixed. Many candidates did little more than criticise the Craik & Tulving study without making any evaluative points about the model in general. There were some speculative attempts to compare levels of processing to alternative models but these often lacked sophistication, for example, 'unlike the multi-store model, levels of processing does not mention short-term memory'.

That said, other candidates produced well informed and sophisticated analyses of the model. The difficulty – and tautology – involved in establishing a precise way of measuring depth of processing was often discussed; as was the difference between maintenance and elaborative rehearsal, alongside application of the latter to real-life examples such as revision.

Topic: Perceptual Processes

Question 19

Candidates were required to give an outline of Gestalt principles but many merely 'named' these, scoring just a single mark in the process. There were some full-mark answers; however, 'proximity' and 'similarity' were often confused.

Question 20

Most candidates were able to name a distortion illusion, though a small minority gave an example of an ambiguous figure. The explanation mark proved challenging for the majority of candidates. Most merely described the effect of their chosen illusion (for instance, the fact that one line might appear longer than another), rather than explaining what that effect tells us about visual perception in general.

Question 21

Outlines of Gibson's theory were generally accurate with candidates typically offering good explanations of 'bottom-up' processing and/or the concept of 'affordances'. As with question 17 however, candidates had real difficulty when expanding their discussion of the strength. As a consequence, many candidates scored three of the five marks available: two marks for accurate description of the theory and one mark for their chosen strength briefly stated (often, 'the theory can be applied in the real-world/has ecological validity').

Question 22

There was frequent confusion between factors here, such that, when descriptions of studies that invariably contained accurate material were offered, subsequent conclusions/implications were often linked to the wrong factor. This was the case with 'emotion' and 'expectation', as well as 'emotion' and 'motivation'. Accounts of the influence of culture were a little better and included occasional reference to the 'carpentered world hypothesis' as a means of analysis. There was less of a tendency in this essay to include evaluation of the methodology of studies that could be deemed irrelevant to the question; though there were many unsubstantiated arguments related to the 'ethics' of particular studies.

Candidates should be advised that not all of the AO1 marks in this essay are awarded for descriptive content of studies and that they should, wherever possible, attempt to describe the effects of factors as well as presenting relevant evidence - particularly when such factors are already given within the stem of the question.

Section C Individual Differences

Topic: Anxiety Disorders

Question 23

Most candidates who attempted this question were able to access both marks.

Question 24

Many candidates were able to produce a clear outline of a psychodynamic explanation of phobias. Often descriptive marks were awarded for implicit reference to concepts such as 'displacement' that formed part of a broader summary of the Little Hans study. There was occasional confusion with psychodynamic accounts of OCD however.

When discussing their limitation, candidates fared a little better than in similar-style questions elsewhere on the paper (for example, questions 17 and 22). Most were able to sustain at least a partial discussion of their chosen limitation, and many of these centred on the lack of scientific rigour within Freudian theory.

Question 25

There was broad variation in the quality of candidates' answers here. Some responses demonstrated detailed and sophisticated understanding of cognitive explanations of OCD that included a number of different concepts: hypervigilance, catastrophising, faulty thinking, etc. Other candidates did little more than provide a list of these terms without explaining what they meant. Still others offered only a definition of OCD – often emphasising the obsessional thoughts – without making it clear how a cognitive psychologist would explain these.

Question 26

On the whole this question was answered well. Lots of candidates scored highly on the AO1 component of the question by offering detailed accounts of 'systematic desensitisation' that often included clear examples of how the stepped approach could be applied to a specific phobia. Descriptions of drug therapy too were typically well-informed with several named examples, whilst some candidates were able to provide sophisticated accounts of the mode of action of certain drugs. There were very few examples where candidates only discussed one type of treatment, meaning that most answers were fairly well-balanced.

Evaluations of drug therapy were usually more successful than evaluations of systematic desensitisation. Often, candidates labelled systematic desensitisation as 'unethical' because patients are made to confront their fear, which seemed to miss the point of the treatment. Other candidates would often lapse into weak evaluation points based on 'cost', 'time', 'effort', etc that were rarely reasoned or based on comparison with alternative therapies.

Despite these shortcomings, many candidates clearly knew this area very well and there were many top-band answers.

Topic: Autism

Question 27

As with the corresponding question on the previous section, most candidates scored two marks here. Some candidates lost a mark by giving a relevant symptom, but then offered a second symptom/behaviour that was little more than an extension or example of the first; as in the case of repetitive behaviour and hand flapping.

Question 28

Many candidates ignored the key point that the Lovaas technique is a specific form of language training. Often, accounts and descriptive examples were of behaviour modification in general, with no obvious emphasis on communication, and lost a mark as a result. Discussions of the effectiveness of the treatment were reasonably focused, although some candidates offered very long-winded accounts of behaviour modification studies, without any clear comment on the implications of these for the effectiveness of the treatment.

Question 29

Descriptions of the cold parenting hypothesis were generally good and included clear explanations of key concepts such as 'lack of responsiveness', the 'refrigerator mother' and the 'failure to develop a sense of autonomy'. Many candidates were able to supplement their description with clear discussion as to why cold parenting is no longer regarded as an acceptable explanation for autism. The majority of answers pointed to the lack of empirical evidence in support of the theory and the ethical implications for parents.

Question 30

Lots of candidates adopted a successful, 'broad-brush' approach to this question and described all three cognitive explanations named on the specification. Often these were little more than one sentence summaries; however, with credit for description of evidence also available, this enabled many candidates to score the full five marks for the AO1 component. Of the three theories, 'failure of executive functioning' tended to elicit the least convincing descriptions.

Relevant evidence for all three theories was often well-described: the Sally-Anne and Smartie tube studies were popular, as was the Wisconsin card sorting task. Evidence was not always used effectively however, and if attempts were made to say what particular studies implied, these were often reduced to very brief statements – 'this supports lack of theory of mind...', etc.

As with other questions on the paper, evaluative comment was often restricted to the methodology of particular studies, rather than the theories. However, there were some examples of well-informed discussion and this was often in relation to cognitive explanations in general, rather than specific theories. Many candidates made the point that cognitive explanations tend not to provide information about causation, and that an interactionist approach to autism, that makes some attempt to include insights from the biological perspective, would be more informative.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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