



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

Although the following advice was given in previous reports, it has been repeated again as some centres do not seem to have taken it on board.

A QCA directive was to make the AS exams much less predictable and to move away from the formulaic structure of questions with set number of marks in a conventional format. This means that candidates now need to give themselves much more time to think about the specific requirements of each question. Skills that they now need to show are their ability to select the appropriate information and to apply their knowledge. The exam has been designed to allow time for this very important skill. 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; sometimes when it comes to writing “less is more”.

As candidates write their answers in the booklet, they should be guided by the space provided. 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; an accurate and concise answer can gain just as many marks as one that uses the extra space but is less focused. 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.

The AS papers are marked online and teachers might need to explain to their students the process of scanning and clipping. Examiners do not see whole scripts, but only the clipped part of the question they are marking. Examiners will not see anything that is written outside of the lines or margins, and therefore the clipped area, and so candidates who write outside these areas risk not gaining marks. Even more of a concern is those candidates who continue their answer elsewhere in the booklet but make no reference to this. In such cases it is highly unlikely that their extra answer will be marked, as no one will know that there is any additional material to be marked. The best advice is for candidates who need to write more than the space given allows, is to use the additional pages, but make sure that they inform the examiner that they have done so. A simple “continued” or “see extra page” will suffice.

This year, a very worrying trend became apparent, with many candidates using inappropriate language. This was particularly the case in answers to Question 12. Teachers need to emphasise that psychology is an academic subject and as such, candidates should use the appropriate language when writing about psychodynamic theory. Students often made broad sweeping statements without any critical analysis, which is worrying. This was particularly so in relation to homosexuality; some people could find such writings to be offensive. Possibly equality and diversity needs to be considered more by teachers when delivering this topic. Some candidates seem to have no idea that Freud was a scientist and he did not simply “invent” his theory, and their understanding of his ideas of infant sexuality were woefully inaccurate.

Section A Biological Psychology

Question 1

- (a) Most candidates were able to select the appropriate examples, but the main issue here was that of poor handwriting. In far too many cases, the legibility made it very difficult to determine which letter had been selected. A small minority of candidates chose letters that were not on the list, such as T and M.
- (b) This is a good example of a question where the selection of appropriate material is so important. Only research that is specifically relevant to life changes or daily hassles was creditworthy. Research that is about the immune system, or indeed any other area of stress, is simply not answering this question. Exam skills of reading the question effectively need to be reinforced. In this case the key word is “shown”, which in many answers was ignored and candidates described methodology in great detail with very little consideration of what we have learned (findings/conclusions). Another problem was some candidates ignored the either/or requirement.

Question 2

In general candidates were able to do well on this question, although some did not read it carefully enough and wrote about the same type of issue/problem in both parts of the question.

Question 3

Styles of coping appear to be a topic that many candidates do not understand and this question was not answered well. There was a considerable amount of irrelevant material, which did not answer the question and many wasted time writing out the question as opposed to going straight to the point, or evaluating rather than explaining.

Question 4

There are two skills required by this question; a knowledge of what is involved in CBT and also how it might be applied to Karen’s situation. Very few candidates were able to address both of these skills. Some candidates had excellent and detailed knowledge of CBT (in particular SIT) but failed to engage with the scenario. Other candidates could not go beyond a very basic statement of “it aims to change negative thoughts into positive ones” without any mention of the procedures involved in this therapy.

Question 5

Candidates seemed well-prepared for this question. The main problem was the way in which some candidates used examples as elaboration. Simply writing “this was shown in Sherif’s study” but without any attempt to explain how or why would gain no credit.

Question 6

On the whole, most candidates achieved full marks on this question. A few candidates lost marks by misreading it, ie giving an advantage where the disadvantage was required and vice versa. Teachers should emphasise the need to read the question carefully before attempting to answer it.

Question 7

This is a very good example of a question where selecting the right material is so important. The question was about independent behaviour, so discussing the reasons why the participants in Asch and Milgram who did not conform or obey are creditworthy. Far too many candidates spent time explaining "why we obey/conform" before moving onto the relevant material, eg just about every candidate felt the need to explain external locus of control and agentic state in detail before getting to the material that would actually gain them any marks. Again this is an area of exam skill that teachers may wish to focus on. The other aspect of this question that candidates seemed to ignore was the requirement to "discuss" such explanations; AO2 was often lacking in these answers, limiting the marks gained.

Question 8

As with Question 4, there are two skills required here; knowledge of the psychology of social change and an application to a novel situation. It was very pleasing to see that most candidates now have a grasp of what is involved in social change and can write accurate and coherent answers. However, there is still a problem with engagement with the scenario, too many candidates were unable to demonstrate the skill of analysis of an unfamiliar situation. Perhaps this is a skill that teachers can focus on developing.

Question 9

A very well answered question and one that was obviously popular with the candidates. Many wrote extensively on their chosen definition and it seemed that they could not resist using all the space on page 10. This however, wasted time and candidates need to understand that identification of a definition does not mean explain in great detail; especially when so few marks are available. The limitation was usually in terms of era dependency, context or cultural relativism.

Question 10

Drawing conclusions from data seems to be a topic that candidates find hard. Perhaps teachers might emphasise the difference between a conclusion and a finding (although findings can be used to support a conclusion). Also they need to highlight to candidates that these types of questions are straightforward and are not trying to trick them. Often very able candidates seemed to think that they had to go beyond the data and make links to theory etc.

Question 11

- (a) The advice to candidates is, just answer the question, there is no need to waste time in writing out the question. Far too many answers started with "systematic desensitisation is one method of treating abnormality" and often went on to explain that it was best suited to treating phobias. This is not what the question required and such answers often ran out of space before they started to describe what is involved. However, those candidates who read the question carefully often provided accurate and detailed answers.
- (b) There seems to be some misconceptions about this therapy, especially with respect to ethical concerns. Some candidates argued that it is unethical making people face their worst fear, however the whole point of counter-conditioning is that the client is completely relaxed at the time. This type of behavioural therapy is considered one of the most ethical therapies.

Question 12

As mentioned in the introduction, the answers to this question caused many examiners to wonder exactly what candidates are being taught about Freud. The language used was almost offensive (in a significant minority it was offensive) and the understanding of how Freud's theory can be used to explain abnormality was often minimal. It would appear from candidates' answers that this area of the specification is over-taught, but in a very general sense. It might be better to reduce the amount of psychoanalytic theory taught and focus more on the precise links to abnormality. Many candidates were able to describe each psychosexual stage in great detail, but with very little, if any, understanding of how the stages relate to abnormality. Extensively detailed descriptions of Little Hans were often given, without any explanation of how this case study supports Freudian theory. Therapies were described in detail, but without reference to the rationale that underpins the therapy. A consequence of so much detailed description was that it often limited the time candidates had to develop an effective evaluation of the psychodynamic approach to abnormality. As has often been written in these reports, sometimes "less is more".

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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