



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

**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 schools and colleges are not receiving the information; this information is important and worth reiterating.

One of the main issues is the extent to which students select theories and research studies that are relevant to the question asked and the degree to which they engage with the opportunity to apply knowledge, comment and evaluate. It is clear that some very well informed students are not gaining full marks because they are simply not doing what the question asks. Students who think about which part of the specification is relevant, who apply their knowledge appropriately and who can write accurate and concise answers, do very well. In terms of selection issues, sometimes “less is more”. Teachers could consider covering less material, but making sure that their students understand how the material can be used to address the specific requirements of each question. It appears that some teachers are still focusing on the delivery of large swathes of knowledge, but not providing their students with the skills of what to do with it. This approach results in many students being able to reproduce sound and very detailed description of psychological knowledge. However, what they seem unable to do, especially with novel situations, is demonstrate that they really understand 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 space provided for an answer is a good guide to how much a student needs to write. Students (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. Students who are writing too much often do so because they do not write concisely or do not read the question carefully. Although quality of written communication is formally assessed only in the twelve mark question, it clearly benefits students if they can express themselves succinctly and can use psychological terminology effectively.

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 so students who write outside these areas risk not gaining marks. Even more of a concern is those students who continue their answer elsewhere in the booklet but make no reference to this. The best advice is for students 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.

There were a number of students whose handwriting almost illegible. Examiners do their best to decipher such scripts, but it is difficult for examiners to follow the flow of students’ answers when it has to be decoded word by word and read several times due to poor handwriting. These students are disadvantaging themselves by not addressing this problem. Centres should, wherever possible, try to ensure that students’ work is legible. This includes the use of black ink.

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

### **Question 1**

This was a fairly straightforward question, with many students showing good understanding of the two systems. In fact with part (a) there were some extremely detailed and accurate answers that went well beyond an outline. Unfortunately, some students did not read the question clearly enough and confused the pituitary-adrenal system with SAM. This was a question that illustrated the importance of careful reading before starting to write the answer.

### **Question 2**

There were few really coherent answers to this straightforward question, which should have given well-prepared students the opportunity to shine. At the top end, there were some very good descriptions of both the way in which Holmes & Rahe developed the SRRS and also the research by Rahe et al using naval personnel. However, at the bottom end these two approaches were muddled and confused with one another. The evaluation tended to be generic; it could sometimes apply to any research and was not always directly relevant to this topic. Better commentary focused explicitly on the scale itself, such as referring to items that had been omitted, or to the fact that it is slightly dated. Rahe's study could be criticised for lacking population validity. Some students, made good use of research into daily hassles as being a better predictor of stress, as part of their evaluation.

Unfortunately, there were those students who seemed to think that any study on stress would be creditworthy and wrote in great detail about Kiecolt-Glaser's research into immune functioning.

### **Question 3**

This question demonstrated the importance of skill rather than mere rote learning. This question had two requirements, engagement with the stem and reference to relevant research. Student had to select aspects from the stem and then use relevant aspects from research to explain why Brett had been affected by changes. It was very encouraging to see that many students were able to do so. One key aspect is that Brett has a loss of control (he is now dependent on others) this links to research by both Johansson and Marmot, which showed that lack of control was a key issue in workplace stress. Many students referred to Brett's situation equating to Johansson's "finishers" while Sahil's was similar to the "cleaners".

Weaker students were able to describe relevant research but not apply it to the stem. There were also many references to factors in the workplace that were not present in this stem. It was also very disappointing to see reference to Brady's executive monkeys once again.

#### **Question 4**

Although there were some excellent, detailed answers that demonstrated very good understanding of these two methods, few were able to produce a coherent comparison of the methods. Better answers were able to refer back to the measurement of specific personality types, even though this was not necessary. For example in an interview, body language may be observed such as finger tapping.

There was some confusion among weaker students who seemed to think that questionnaires could only use closed questions and interviews only use open questions. There was also some misperception as to the meaning of social desirability: this could occur in either method. There was also a tendency for some students to speculate on Georgia's personality type rather than on the research methods themselves.

### ***Section B Social Psychology***

#### **Question 5**

Better students were able to extract the relevant information from the table and use it effectively. They considered the baseline of 65% (no confederates) and then compared it to the other two conditions, 92.5% and 10%, which showed the power of confederates. They were also able to comment that in fact the disobedient confederates seemed to have more power than the obedient ones, perhaps by providing role models or allies.

Since this question only asked about the confederates, reference to the third condition (experimenter in different room) was not creditworthy. This illustrates the need for students to read the question carefully and select and shape their answer accordingly.

A significant number of students confused conformity and obedience and used these terms interchangeably. They seemed to forget that this data referred to Milgram's experiment into obedience and seemed to think that the confederates were a majority.

#### **Question 6**

This was one of the questions most AS psychology students wanted to come up on the paper yet the quality of most answers was what at best could be described as basic. It was both surprising and disappointing, given the straightforwardness of this question, how poorly students performed. The biggest problem seemed to be that weaker students appeared to think that any study of social influence would be creditworthy. It was worrying to see that many students offered Milgram, Hofling and Moscovici as studies of conformity. Students need to understand that there are different forms of social influence and in particular conformity (majority influence) is a different form of influence to minority influence.

The most common study described was that of Asch, including the variations. The description of his procedures was usually given in reasonable detail, but there was some lack of clarity when it came to reporting his findings, very few could cite them accurately. Other research included Sherif and Zimbardo, but surprisingly few seemed to know about the work of Perrin and Spencer, or even use it to evaluate Asch.

Research could also include explanations and types of conformity, both received credit. The evaluation was for the most part very superficial and generic, commenting on the ethics of the studies, their lack of ecological validity etc. These are all points that could have yielded good commentary, but most students merely presented in a restricted manner, in many cases little more than a list. Teachers may wish to alert students that if an evaluative point is basic repeating the same points for every study they present does not raise the quality of the evaluation to reasonable. The evaluation remains basic no matter how many times it is presented.

Better evaluation was specific to the study described, such as Asch's research being a "child of its time" and era dependent. Students should be encouraged to try and make sure that their commentary is pertinent to the study they are evaluating, rather than a generic comment that could apply to any study.

### **Question 7**

There were some excellent answers to this question, with many students showing very good understanding of the term. Better students often used examples to illustrate their answers. A small minority still confused high/low with internal/external.

### **Question 8**

There were some extremely well informed answers to this question, with students demonstrating sound understanding of how minorities can bring about social change. Such answers made reference to minorities being consistent, flexible and non-dogmatic. They outlined the snowball effect and the impact of social crypto amnesia in the process. Weaker answers described research into minority influence (such as Moscovici or Clark) but without selecting aspects of the research relevant to social change. They gained some marks by showing that for a minority to bring about change it needed to be consistent etc.

## **Section C *Individual Differences***

### **Question 9**

The main difficulty for many students appeared to be identifying one definition and then explaining the same one. Students often identified failure to function adequately, but then went on to explain deviation from ideal mental health, or vice versa. Some answers were so poorly expressed that it was impossible to decide which definition it applied to; for example "deviation from behaviour" or "failure to behave".

The answers to 9(b) were sometimes very generic and could apply to any definition, to gain credit they needed to show how the evaluation applied to their chosen definition. However, some students made very good use of relevant examples (rather than superficial ones that did not relate to psychopathology) to illustrate their evaluation.

### **Question 10**

Interestingly, students seemed to find it easier to outline a weakness of case studies rather than explain what they are. There was a wide range of answers to 10(a) and better answers referred to a study of a single person, usually over a period of time, using a range of methods to collect data. Some students also illustrated their answers with relevant examples, such as Freud's Anna O or Little Hans.

Most students were able to offer lack of population validity, since a case study was of a unique person; or the issue of reliability since they could not be replicated.

### **Question 11**

Students should be warned, that as the instructions to this question clearly stated they should tick two correct boxes, any student who ticked more than two boxes received no marks.

### **Question 12**

The requirement here was simply to outline the approach, so no credit was given to evaluation or commentary. This illustrates the importance of reading the requirements of the question carefully. However, there were some extremely accurate and detailed answers showing very good knowledge of the biological approach. The main problem was for students who described some of the treatments without first explaining the underlying rationale; as such answers were only basic. Teachers might want to be careful with the examples they use as illustrations. While case studies such as HM and Phineas Gage are not wrong, there are many better pieces of research, which could be used to accurately reflect the biological approach.

### **Question 13**

The opposite problem was seen in answers to this question compared with Question 12, where students provided lengthy descriptions of the therapy, but often with minimal evaluation (students need to read the question carefully). Better answers considered issues such as the amount of time and commitment required, the fact that it might only work for a certain type of patient with certain disorders, the potential issue of false memory syndrome and the power of the therapist.

It also appeared as if some students understood psychoanalysis to be a term that covered all therapies used in psychology. Thus they wrote about biological therapies and behavioural therapies, these clearly are not relevant. Other students had a very limited understanding of what is involved in psychoanalysis and made reference to it failing to treat the underlying cause, which is not the case.

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

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