



General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012

Psychology B

PSYB4

(Specification 2185)

**Unit 4: Approaches, Debates and Methods in
Psychology**

Report on the Examination

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Unit 4: (PSYB4) Approaches, Debates and Methods in Psychology

General

The standard of responses was wide ranging with some students producing impressive answers across all three sections of the paper. Most students seemed able to pace themselves and wrote at length. A few students responded to both options in an attempt to write what little they knew about everything on the paper. However, the quality of written communication continues to be a cause for concern. Both general structure and grammatical structure of answers made it difficult at times for examiners to understand what the student was trying to convey. Examiners can only award marks for what is clearly communicated and not for what is inferred. In some cases, answers would have benefited from more attention to punctuation and spelling.

Students seemed more attuned this year to questions that contained two demands. Examples of such questions were 01 which required students to respond to both 'Outline what is meant by ...' and 'give an example of...' and question 08 'Outline what is meant by ...' and 'Explain why ...'. Similarly when asked for two assumptions or reasons as in questions 02 and 03, most students applied themselves to the two demands.

Although students wrote at length, particularly in response to the longer essay type questions, examiners reported little evidence of planning in students' answers. This often resulted in answers that were rambling and repetitious, weakly argued and lacked relevance in parts. Others produced list-like, rote-learned responses not developing AO2 points sufficiently well to gain credit.

Some centres had clearly prepared their students very well for the practical aspect of 'Section C Methods in Psychology'. However, on the whole, students struggled with this aspect of the exam. The specification requirement to carry out practical work cannot be over-emphasised. Students who did have experience of carrying out research were able to select and apply knowledge to the questions in this section, in particular questions 16 and 17, in a meaningful way.

Option A in Section A was slightly more popular than Option B, possibly attracting students because of the psychodynamic approach in question 04.

Centres need to keep reminding students that Unit 4 assesses their knowledge and understanding of 'Approaches, Debates and Methods in Psychology'. Some students still appear to forget this, writing about topics in psychology rather than approaches and/or debates.

Section A Approaches in Psychology

Option A

Question 01

This was a straightforward question for which many students gained at least one of the two marks for referring to numerical data. However, not all students provided a suitably clear example of quantitative data collected by a psychologist who studied conditioning. Those who managed to gain full marks often did so with, for example, reference to the work of Pavlov and Skinner, by referring to the amount of saliva or time taken to respond.

Question 02

Almost all students gained at least one mark. Those who gained full credit did so by appropriately referring to the nomothetic/scientific nature of the behaviourist approach and disadvantages of qualitative data. Some students gave good and relevant justifying commentary for comparisons with quantitative data collection. Students who only achieved one mark, generally did so because they gave two vague or very brief reasons or a generic evaluation of qualitative data not linked to investigations carried out by behaviourists. A minority of students gave one reason only.

Question 03

In order to gain full marks, students were required to identify two clear assumptions of the cognitive approach. Hence, students who simply stated ‘...mental processes and schemata...’ or ‘...we behave like a computer...’ did not gain the full two marks. Additionally, the assumptions had to be applied to two topics. Such applications were sometimes vague, for example, ‘... this can be seen in the topic of memory...’ without any further elaboration. Some students were unclear about information processing, confusing this assumption with ‘mediational processes that lie between stimulus and response’. The assumptions were applied to a range of topics with the most common being depression, memory and face recognition.

Question 04

This question clearly highlighted the fact that students need to plan their essays in the context of the questions asked instead of writing a pre-prepared essay. The few students who accessed the top band focused on what was unique about the approach and made thoughtful and intelligent comparisons with other approaches. Unfortunately, many students, though showing detailed knowledge and effective evaluation of the psychodynamic approach, wrote a pre-prepared “Describe and discuss” essay. Other students focused on irrelevant comparisons referring simply to Freud’s unscientific approach as a unique feature, with incorrect statements such as ‘case studies are unique to the psychodynamic approach’ or ‘the approach is unique because it is the only approach that is unscientific’. It was disappointing that students focused on the weaknesses of Freud’s psychodynamic analysis rather than the theoretical aspects of the approach. Another frequently stated assertion was that the psychodynamic approach is the only approach to take account of both nature and nurture. This essay clearly emphasised the need for students to take time to carefully think about and plan their answers.

Option B

Question 05

Many students performed well on this question with two assumptions of the humanistic approach clearly placed in the context of the rejection of the scientific method. Generally, students focused their answers on holism and the reductionist nature of science, and free will and the determinism of the scientific method. Where students did not score full marks, this was often because the student made generic points such as 'you cannot generalise' or the link to science was unclear. Some, for example, referred to the use of client-centred therapy and it was not always apparent why this was a rejection of the scientific method.

Question 06

Students were familiar with the role of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) and most were able to apply this to the source material. Few students, however, accessed full marks for this question due to limited knowledge of the role of the Central Nervous System (CNS), often referring to the structure of the CNS (the brain and spinal cord) rather than the role of the CNS and consequently were unable to link Martha's experience to the CNS. Several students unnecessarily provided two links to the ANS (parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems). Examiners also noted that a substantial number of students believed that '... the CNS is part of the brain...'; others did not separate the ANS from the CNS.

Question 07

In the main students were knowledgeable about key features of social learning theory (SLT) and many provided very detailed explanations of this with description of one or more of the Bobo doll studies. However, there were some very inaccurate descriptions of studies such as '... the group that saw the aggressive model copied the model's aggressive behaviour more than the group that did not see the aggressive model...' Some students have clearly been guided to make evaluative points about the methodology and ethical issues raised by the Bobo doll studies. Although it is commendable that students are made aware of such issues, students must be reminded always to consider whether or not these are of direct relevance to the question set. Likewise, many raised the issue of 'lack of ecological validity' although they did not explain clearly why this was the case or why this was problematic in the context of the question. Valid and thoughtful comparisons with the behaviourist and cognitive approaches were made by more successful students. Less effective answers made comparisons, but did not use these to draw out the strengths and limitations of the theory. Evaluative points were not always well developed, for example, some stated that social learning theory (SLT) was highly scientific as it made use of laboratory experiments and that SLT 'fails to take biological factors into account', with no further elaboration.

Section B Debates in Psychology

Question 08

Students seemed to have a reasonable understanding of replication in relation to finding similar results, although only a few mentioned repeating the study in the same way or similar way, such as repeating the same method or procedure. Students who referred to 'replicating' the method or procedure did not gain credit. On the whole, students fared better

with the second part of the question which required application to the scientific approach. However, some students failed to grasp that replication is a condition for validity but does not on its own confirm validity.

Question 09

Most students were able to explain determinism although quite a few resorted to tautological definitions including predeterminism. There was a wide range of responses in terms of how well determinism was applied to Joel. Students generally did well on biological determinism making explicit links to Joel, but wrote in more general terms about environmental determinism. Very few referred to psychic determinism.

Question 10

Answers to this question varied considerably. Less successful students produced quite muddled answers that were more to do with the idiographic-nomothetic debate and it was not uncommon for students to venture into the nature-nurture debate. Some students lost sight of the question when discussing topics and simply compared different explanations of the same topic and made evaluative points that were not in the context of the holism-reductionism debate. Indeed, some answers read more like responses to PSYB3 questions containing criticisms of studies. It was disappointing that students who did try to focus on the debate often concentrated on methodology without making thoughtful and conceptual links to the debate, for example, stating that ‘...holism does not use experiments...’. The many references to the use of client-centred therapy by humanistic psychologists frequently lacked the explanation required to make them relevant to the question. Indeed, all too often, students were side-tracked into the humanistic approach focusing on little else. Better students were able to place the main approaches in the context of the debate and use these as a focus for application to topics. Generally speaking, students were better able to respond to reductionism than holism.

Section C Methods in Psychology

Question 11

Students often struggled with this question. Very few understood why measures of dispersion are used in addition to measures of central tendency and a number used the term ‘dispersed’. Applications to the stem lacked the necessary detail to attract a mark.

Question 12

Most students were able to correctly explain why a two-tailed test was chosen.

Question 13

Many students were able to make correct use of the table and draw an appropriate conclusion about the statistical significance of the T value. Stronger students were able to present this information well, with some even correctly stating that the results were not

significant at the 0.02 level and explaining why. A few less successful students were confused about the critical and calculated values of T.

Question 14

It was heartening to see so many students being able to explain why this test was used, with many students scoring the full 3 marks. A few students, however, stated that the data was nominal or interval.

Question 15

Most students were able to score at least one mark on this question even if they scored poorly on preceding and subsequent questions. Students had to think carefully about this answer and many were able to suggest one or two sensible reasons for the use of a diary by each offender. Elaboration and explanation of each reason proved more of a challenge, sometimes resulting in overlap and repetition across the two reasons offered. Some students simply repeated the stem.

Question 16

This question produced some answers that showed a lack of understanding of the use of a control group with quite a few students suggesting that a control group would consist of 'a group of non-offenders' or 'normal people/people with no anger issues from a normal population'. More informed students were able to explain why a group of people who would not have the anger management programme would have improved the study although some simply said that 'it would make it more scientific' without explaining why.

Question 17

Answers to this question were most disappointing with almost two fifths of students failing to score a single mark. What should have been a straightforward question proved challenging for many students who seemed unfamiliar with how to establish the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Some students confused reliability with validity, others simply provided definitions of each and, where an attempt was made to apply reliability and validity to the stem, students very often referred to pilot studies and peer review. Reliability was sometimes mistaken for replicability, the 'split-half method' was frequently explained as dividing the total score in half to see if the two halves correlated and test- retest was sometimes explained as testing one group of offenders and retesting another group of offenders. Face validity was rarely applied to the questionnaire ie anger scores. Even students who correctly addressed the issues of reliability and validity, failed to explain how statistical tests of correlation would be used in this context. The value of carrying out practical activities to enable students to 'think like a psychologist' and apply their knowledge of practical activities in answer to questions such as this one cannot be overstated. It is clear that where students had been presented with such opportunities, they were able to write confidently and in an informed manner.

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>

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion