

SL IB Psychology

Exam Tips & Guidance

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How to Answer an Exam Question on Abnormal Psychology

How to Answer an Exam Question on Abnormal Psychology

How is the exam paper structured?

- You will be asked an exam question on Abnormal Psychology on **Paper 2** of the exam
- If you are **HL** you are required to answer **two questions** on **two different options** on Paper 2 e.g. Abnormal Psychology and Relationships
- If you are **SL** you are required to answer **one question** on **one option** on Paper 2 e.g. Abnormal Psychology
- If you are HL Paper 2 lasts for two hours; if you are SL Paper 2 lasts for 1 hour
- Each option consists of **three different questions** each of which are worth 22 marks; you choose to answer **one** of those three questions (don't answer more than one question per option!)
- You may be asked to choose to answer a question from, for example, the following choices: *biological explanations of one or more disorders; the validity of diagnosis; psychological treatments for one or more disorders*
- It is **highly unlikely** that you will be asked to choose all three questions from one topic e.g. the questions will not all be taken from the Factors Influencing Diagnosis topic
- Each question is an **Extended Response Question** worth 22 marks so you should spend **one hour** planning and writing each question

How to structure and plan your response to an Abnormal Psychology exam questions

Let's take this question: **'To what extent do sociocultural factors influence the etiology of abnormal psychology'?** [22]

What is this question asking you to do?

Start with the **command term**: "to what extent" requires you to consider the role /influence/effect of sociocultural factors on the etiology of psychological disorders. 'To what extent' means that you need to present an argument which explores the extent to which sociocultural factors influence the etiology of abnormal psychology.

Here are some useful sentence stems/phrases that will help you to form convincing 'To what extent' arguments:

- *This theory/study supports the idea that sociocultural factors influence the etiology of abnormal psychology to the extent that...*
- *However there are some flaws/issues/limitations to this explanation/theory in that it cannot explain...*
- *On the other hand, there are possible alternative explanations for the etiology of abnormal psychology such as...*
- *This theory/study only explains X in terms of Y but it does not...*

- *There is compelling evidence for this argument but what it cannot account for is...*
- *There are other factors which may have also influenced the results of the study such as...*

But what does all of that actually mean?

Students often express some confusion (panic even!) when they read exam questions. This confusion/panic tends to stem from a) exam nerves (understandable) and b) misreading the question or feeling that the question is asking them to do something that they have never done before.

So, let's **unpack** the above exam question and break it down into its constituent parts; this way you will be able to see that yes, you *can* answer this question and yes, you have studied the correct theories and studies that will enable you to answer the question. You should use this approach to deconstruct all possible exam questions as this strategy will help you to understand and be prepared for whatever the exam throws at you!

- Unpacking the question: **'To what extent do sociocultural factors influence the etiology of abnormal psychology'?** [22]
- **'To what extent'** means (as already mentioned) that you need to assess how influential sociocultural factors are in the etiology of disorders e.g. can sociocultural factors provide a full enough explanation or are there any other factors that may also influence the etiology of disorders?
- **Sociocultural factors** are:
 - Any factors which involve the **environment** (place, **culture**, other people, **learning**) as a key influence on behaviour
 - Any factors which assume that abnormal behaviour is the result of **external**, rather than internal (biological or cognitive), factors
 - Any factors which can be **analysed** using sociocultural theories such as **Behaviourism, Social Identity Theory, Enculturation Acculturation**
- **The etiology of disorders** refers to one of the 3 main topics in Abnormal Psychology (the other two are Factors Influencing Diagnosis and Explanations for Disorders)
- **Etiology** means, simply, 'what has **caused** this condition/illness/disorder?', how can its origins be explained?
- **Abnormal psychology** (and this may seem obvious but it's worth reiterating just for clarity) refers to any behaviour (or sets of behaviours) which present as **deviant** (i.e. not what is considered the '**norm**') and which causes **suffering/discomfort/distress** for the person with the disorder and/or for others around or involved with that person

In conclusion, this question is asking you, *'Are sociocultural factors such as the environment, culture, learning, the only explanation for how disorders develop/originate or could other factors such as genetics or thought processes also provide convincing explanations?'*

How to get full marks for this question

Yes, it is possible to get full marks for this question or for any question on any of your IB Psychology papers. It is, however, not easy to do so (if it was, everyone would be doing it!) but with hard work, revision (and use of this helpful revision site!) full marks could be yours.

So, let's take this bit by bit: what do you need to do to be in with a chance of achieving 100% on this question?

1. First, the good news (yes, there is some): you do not need to cover two sociocultural factors in your exam response (the IB state this clearly on the **markscheme** for this question so relax, it's fine to just focus on one factor, but you *can* cover two if you like)
2. With the above point in mind, decide which factor(s) you are going to use in your essay – if you are using this revision site as your guide you may choose to go the following route:
 - a. Factor/theory – **Behaviourism i.e. conditioning/learning**
 - b. Research – **Watson & Rayner (1920); DiNardo (1988)**
3. You need to be able to satisfy the markscheme criteria as follows:
 - a. **Focus on the question (2 marks)** – are you *explaining* how sociocultural factors influence the aetiology of disorders throughout your essay?
 - b. **Knowledge & Understanding (6 marks)** – do you know the theory well, in detail, and can you give examples to illustrate your understanding of how the theory, study and topic link back to the question?
 - c. **Use of research (6 marks)** – is your answer evidence-based? Does this evidence support your argument? Two studies are ideal but one study in detail is better than several studies used at a superficial level that repeat the same point over and over
 - d. **Critical thinking (6 marks)** – does your answer show that you have an inquiring and reflective mind? Have you evaluated the research methodology as well as underpinning theories? Have you challenged the central assumptions of the question along with its attendant theories and research?
 - e. **Clarity & organisation (2 marks)** – is your meaning clear throughout and have you structured your essay coherently?



That's all very well but can you show me how?....

There is a full exemplar answer to this response (see the page titled 'Model Exam Response – Abnormal Psychology'). This exemplar response is accompanied by commentary linking each paragraph back to the question, explaining how it satisfies the criteria for full marks.

But just to whet your appetite and give you a 'taster' of the exemplar response here are some edited highlights:

Exemplar paragraph from the model answer:

While the sociocultural explanation of the aetiology of phobias goes some way towards

providing a valid explanation of the topic, its very emphasis on external factors only means that it is limited in its scope. One biological theory of phobias which is based on evolutionary survival mechanisms (preparedness) also provides a compelling account of humans as being 'hard-wired' to fear dangerous stimuli in order to keep them safe e.g. an innate fear of snakes (Ohman et al. 1975). The cognitive explanation of Generalised Anxiety Disorder is equally convincing as an explanation of phobia aetiology

with its emphasis on irrational thought processes, cognitive distortions and panic as the foundations of phobia origination.

Commentary provided for the above paragraph:

The student considers other, alternative explanations for the etiology of phobias as part of their **Critical Thinking** which also includes wider **Knowledge & Understanding** of the topic and cites another piece of **Research**. The command term is explicitly addressed (**Focus**). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (**Clarity & Organisation**) with effective use of terminology.

Model Exam Response: Abnormal Psychology

The question is: ***'To what extent do sociocultural factors influence the etiology of abnormal psychology'?*** [22]

What follows is an exemplar response to this question which would achieve a high mark (if not full marks) in an exam. The right-hand column consists of commentary linking each paragraph back to the question, explaining how it satisfies the criteria for full marks.

Words or phrases written in **bold** in the right-hand column show which aspects of the markscheme criteria are being met per paragraph.

Model exam response	Commentary per paragraph
A sociocultural explanation of the etiology of abnormal psychology assumes that external factors influence the onset/development of abnormal behaviour. Sociocultural factors which may influence the etiology of disorders include culture, learning and conditioning. Sociocultural factors can, however, only explain the etiology of disorders to a certain extent: the role of genetics and thought processes also provide viable explanations of how disorders develop. Research by Watson & Rayner (1920) and DiNardo (1988) will be considered in terms of the extent to which Behaviourism (both classical and operant conditioning) provide valid explanations of the etiology of phobias.	The wording of the exam question is used which shows Focus on the question. There is an explanation of sociocultural factors which shows Knowledge & Understanding . The command term is referred to explicitly which tells the examiner that the student has understood what is required of them (Focus). Relevant Research is cited so that the examiner knows what to expect in the essay plus the student has identified the sociocultural factor of conditioning/learning as the key area of focus in the essay (Focus; Knowledge & Understanding). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.
The core assumptions and mechanisms of Behaviorism are (in summary): only observable behaviour can be measured: human beings are born as 'blank slates'; behaviour can be conditioned via classical conditioning and operant conditioning; learning and experience are key factors in behaviour. Classical conditioning is learning by association (a neutral stimulus becomes a conditioned stimulus/response). Operant conditioning involves the role of learning via consequences (positive reinforcement by rewards; negative reinforcement by avoidance). The behaviourist approach is an ideal vehicle by which to understand the etiology of phobias with its emphasis on structured processes and	Behaviourism is explained (Focus) in some detail (Knowledge & Understanding). The command term is referred to (indirectly) in the final sentence of the paragraph (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.

<p>learned responses so the extent of its usefulness seems promising.</p>	
<p>Classical conditioning forms the first phase of the Two-Process Model, suggested by Mowrer (1960). The TPM takes, as its basis, the idea that behaviour is learned through experience via environmental stimuli (classical conditioning) and once the behaviour has been established it is reinforced via operant conditioning. This concept would explain the etiology of phobias as there are countless phobias which do not seem to be explicable in terms of the potential threat they pose to people e.g. button phobias. Button phobia (koumpounophobia) must, it seems, be the result of conditioning i.e. the phobic person had an adverse experience involving buttons and has been conditioned to fear them. To some extent this is a valid explanation but what classical conditioning cannot explain is how some fears may be as a result of biological factors such as preparedness. A fear of snakes or fire would seem to be an evolutionary advantage when it comes to survival as both of these stimuli can harm or even kill a person.</p>	<p>Classical conditioning is explained in light of a relevant model (Knowledge & Understanding) and the question is addressed directly i.e. the etiology of phobias is cited. The paragraph then develops this idea and expands on it to introduce Critical Thinking in terms of an alternative explanation for phobias. The command term is explicitly addressed (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>One study which used classical conditioning to instil a phobia into a young child was Watson & Rayner's (notorious) 1920 study commonly known as the 'Little Albert' study. This study used the mechanisms of classical conditioning to condition fear of rats (which generalised to fear of all fur-covered objects) into an 11-month-old baby. The pairing of the neutral stimulus of the rat with the loud, discordant striking of a metal bar behind the boy's head produced a conditioned response i.e. the boy developed a rat phobia as a result of being conditioned to do so. In short, the study was successful in its aim but, at a cost i.e. the ethical violations present in the study mean that it cannot ever be replicated to check for reliability. To this extent the study lacks usefulness and applicability and as it was a case study of one child the data cannot be generalised to the conditioning of all phobias and to a wider population.</p>	<p>The use of Research to expand on and support a sociocultural etiology of phobias. Study detail is used (Knowledge & Understanding). Critical Thinking is used to challenge the extent of the usefulness of the study, linked to ethics and replication. The response demonstrates a good use of ethical issues as it does not simply state that the procedure is unethical, it extends the argument. The command term is explicitly addressed (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>Operant conditioning forms the second phase of the Two-Process Model, the mechanisms via which the phobia is maintained. One study which investigated whether phobia of dogs was maintained via the mechanisms of operant conditioning is DiNardo (1988). Via the use of structured</p>	<p>The use of Research to expand on and support a sociocultural etiology of phobias. Study detail is used (Knowledge & Understanding). Critical Thinking is used to challenge the extent of the validity of the</p>

<p>interviews the researcher sought to determine the extent to which participants with a dog phobia harboured feelings of fear about the possible consequences of encountering a dog. The results support the TPM to some extent as very few of the non-phobic participants believed that any future encounter with a dog would result in fear whereas the dog-phobic participants expressed an exaggerated fear of physical harm linked to possible future encounters with a dog. These findings may explain to some extent how operant conditioning maintains an established phobia but they are based solely on participants self-reporting their experiences with dogs and their anticipated fear, both of which may be subject to misremembering, social desirability bias or researcher bias (i.e. the researcher may have behaved in a way which suggested what the 'correct' answers should be).</p>	<p>study in terms of different types of bias that could have interfered with the findings. The command term is explicitly addressed (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>While the sociocultural explanation of the etiology of phobias goes some way towards providing a valid explanation of the topic its very emphasis on external factors only means that it is limited in its scope. One biological theory of phobias which is based on evolutionary survival mechanisms (preparedness) also provides a compelling account of humans as being 'hard-wired' to fear dangerous stimuli in order to keep them safe e.g. an innate fear of snakes (Ohman et al., 1975). The cognitive explanation of Generalised Anxiety Disorder is equally convincing as an explanation of phobia etiology with its emphasis on irrational thought processes, cognitive distortions and panic as the foundations of phobia origination.</p>	<p>The student considers other, alternative explanations for the etiology of phobias as part of their Critical Thinking which also includes wider Knowledge & Understanding of the topic and cites another piece of Research. The command term is explicitly addressed (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>To conclude, a sociocultural explanation of the etiology of a disorder such as a phobia is most suited to a behaviourist approach with its emphasis on phobic responses which are learned and maintained via the mechanisms of conditioning (the TPMI). The sociocultural explanation of the etiology of disorders can, however, only go so far in providing a valid and convincing account of how phobias develop and, once developed, how they continue to exist. What the behaviourist approach fails to account for is the existence of pre-existing phobias as a result of preparedness and to the role of irrational thought processes in phobia development. It also fails to account for adverse experiences linked to specific stimuli which do not develop into phobias. So, in summation, sociocultural influences on the etiology of phobias is to some</p>	<p>The essay comes to a conclusion, reflecting on what has been covered and returning to the demands of the question (Focus). Critical Thinking explores the limitations of sociocultural influences and points out what this approach does not account for. The command term is explicitly addressed (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>

extent valid but it should be used in conjunction with other explanations in order to provide a fuller picture of abnormal psychology. **976 words**

Why would an examiner give this model answer top marks?

- It is fully focused on the question at all times
- It does not go 'off on a tangent' by including off-topic, irrelevant or superfluous detail
- It is concise, there is no 'waffle' and it uses key terminology throughout
- Research is used in a way which adds value to the response i.e. it is not a 'shopping list' of 'everything I know about this topic/theory/study' (what some teachers call a 'knowledge vomit', sorry for the gross imagery)
- It picks key critical thinking/evaluation points
- Critical thinking is not simply an evaluation of research, it is an appraisal of the question as a whole
- Each paragraph is composed of a topic sentence which is then expanded on, with examples