

Paper 3 · Section A focus paper · Issues and DebatesTopic mock · 2026 · Maximum mark: 48

Indicative content is not exhaustive — credit any other valid points. Levels-based questions (08, 10 and 11) require holistic judgement using the descriptors. Specialist vocabulary (alpha bias, beta bias, androcentrism, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, idiographic, nomothetic, reductionism, social sensitivity, hard/soft determinism, diathesis–stress, interactionist) follows AQA's 2025 *Subject specific vocabulary*.

A Issues and Debates in Psychology

0 1AO1 · 1 mark multiple choice

| Which one of the following best describes alpha bias in psychology?

Answer: B — The tendency to exaggerate differences between groups.Award no mark for any other answer. Beta bias = A; cultural ethnocentrism = C; androcentrism = D.

0 2AO2 · 1 mark multiple choice

| Which one of the following is the clearest example of environmental determinism?

Answer: B — A person develops a phobia after being conditioned to associate dogs with a frightening experience.A = biological determinism (neurochemistry); C = free will; D = biological determinism (genetic).

0 3AO1 · 1 mark multiple choice

| Which one of the following best describes an idiographic approach to psychological investigation?

Answer: B — Studying individuals in depth without intending to establish general laws of behaviour.A and C describe the nomothetic approach; D describes a method (brain imaging) rather than an approach.

Outline what is meant by androcentrism in psychology. Use an example to support your answer.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 marks

- **2 marks** for a clear, accurate outline of androcentrism: male experience/behaviour is treated as the standard for "normal" or desirable behaviour, with female behaviour judged abnormal or undesirable by comparison. It is a consequence of beta bias.
- **1 mark** for a suitable example.

Possible examples (credit any one):

- Early fight-or-flight research used only male animals; findings were generalised to females (Taylor 2000's tend-and-befriend response was missed for decades).
- Kohlberg developed his stages of moral reasoning from all-male American samples and generalised to women.
- Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) pathologises female emotion while male anger is framed as a rational response (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008).
- Medical and pharmacological research has historically used male samples, producing drug doses, car-safety designs and CPR guidelines built around the male body (the "gender data gap").

Limited or muddled outline of androcentrism with no example: max 1 mark.

Briefly explain what is meant by cultural relativism and give one example of how it can be applied in psychology.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 marks

- **2 marks** for a clear, accurate explanation: cultural relativism is the view that behaviour, morals or standards should be understood and explained from within the culture in which they originate, rather than from the perspective of another (typically Western) culture. It promotes cultural sensitivity and helps avoid ethnocentric bias.
- **1 mark** for a suitable, applied example.

Possible examples (credit any one):

- Hearing voices is treated as a symptom of schizophrenia in Western psychiatry but is considered a culturally valued spiritual experience in some African cultures — applying Western diagnostic criteria here is ethnocentric.
 - Ainsworth's Strange Situation classifies German infants as "insecure-avoidant" because they show low separation anxiety — but in German culture this reflects valued independence rather than insecurity.
 - Use of indigenous psychologies (e.g. African-centred or Māori psychology) to develop theories within their own cultural context.
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Explain how the psychologist's research and conclusions show cultural bias.

Marks for this question: AO2 = 4 marks

- **4 marks** — A clear, coherent explanation that engages effectively with the stem and uses accurate I&D terminology. Two distinct points of engagement with the stem are present.
- **3 marks** — Clear engagement with the stem; one detailed point or two partially developed points.
- **2 marks** — Limited engagement with the stem or accurate definitions of relevant concepts without clear application.
- **1 mark** — A brief, partial answer with little engagement with the stem.

Indicative content — possible points include:

- **Imposed etic:** a test developed in the USA is being applied to a culturally distinct sample in rural India on the assumption that intelligence has the same form everywhere. This is a clear example of an imposed etic.
 - **Ethnocentrism:** the conclusion that Indian children "have lower intelligence" treats Western performance as the standard against which all groups are judged. Lower scores are interpreted as a deficit rather than a methodological artefact.
 - **Beta bias:** by assuming the same Western IQ test applies universally, the psychologist ignores genuine cultural differences in how intelligence is defined (e.g. Western cultures see intelligence as an individual property; many collectivist cultures see it as a shared, social function).
 - **Validity:** the test may lack **construct validity** for this population — the children's lower scores may reflect unfamiliarity with the test format or culturally specific content rather than lower intelligence.
 - **How to address it:** use indigenous researchers and culturally adapted measures; treat findings as culturally specific; apply cultural relativism in interpretation.
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Distinguish between biological reductionism and environmental (stimulus–response) reductionism. Use one example of each in your answer.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 4 marks

- **1 mark** for an accurate description of **biological reductionism**: explaining complex behaviour in terms of biological components — genes, neurochemistry, neurons or brain structures.
- **1 mark** for a clear example of biological reductionism (e.g. depression explained as low serotonin levels; OCD explained as basal-ganglia hyperactivity; aggression linked to the MAOA gene).
- **1 mark** for an accurate description of **environmental (stimulus–response) reductionism**: explaining complex behaviour as a chain of simple stimulus–response associations learned through conditioning.
- **1 mark** for a clear example of environmental reductionism (e.g. Watson and Rayner's Little Albert — a phobia of rats acquired through classical conditioning; token economies for institutional behaviour management).

Credit answers that explicitly link biological reductionism to the biological approach and environmental reductionism to the behaviourist approach.

Explain how this use of Bowlby's theory illustrates social sensitivity in psychological research.

Marks for this question: AO2 = 2 marks, AO3 = 2 marks

Levels guidance:

- **4 marks** — Clear and coherent explanation that engages effectively with the stem; demonstrates understanding of *both* what makes the research socially sensitive *and* the consequences for the group represented.
- **3 marks** — Clear engagement with the stem but one aspect (definition or consequences) is less developed.
- **2 marks** — Limited engagement with the stem; either describes social sensitivity in general terms without applying it to the scenario, or applies the scenario without using the concept of social sensitivity accurately.
- **1 mark** — Brief, partial answer.

Indicative content:

- **Definition:** Socially sensitive research is research that has potential negative implications for the participants or for the social group they represent. Findings can shape public policy and the way social groups are perceived.
 - **Sieber and Stanley's four aspects:** the research question, methodology, institutional context and the way findings are interpreted and applied.
 - **Application — Bowlby:** Using Bowlby's theory to argue mothers should stay at home affects working mothers as a social group. It places responsibility for child outcomes on mothers specifically (not fathers or other caregivers), perpetuating a gendered division of childcare.
 - **Consequences:** Such a policy could reduce women's economic opportunities, fuel guilt in working mothers, and ignore evidence that secure attachments can form with fathers, grandparents and other caregivers (Schaffer and Emerson; Tiffany Field).
 - **Reflexivity:** Bowlby never specified that the attachment figure had to be the mother — the policy use distorts the science. Psychologists have a responsibility to anticipate how findings will be communicated and applied.
 - **Cost-benefit:** Bowlby's theory also delivered *positive* applications (hospital visiting, early adoption policy). Socially sensitive research is not automatically wrong — but requires careful attention to how it will be used.
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Briefly explain what is meant by the interactionist approach to the nature–nurture debate. Refer to one example in your answer.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 3 marks

- **2 marks** for a clear, accurate explanation: the interactionist approach holds that nature (genes, biology) and nurture (environment, experience) work together rather than in opposition. Their influences are so intertwined that separating them is meaningless — the question is not "nature *or* nurture" but how nature and nurture interact.
- **1 mark** for an appropriate example.

Possible examples:

- **Diathesis–stress model** (Tienari et al. 2004) — high-risk Finnish adoptees only developed schizophrenia when raised in disturbed adoptive families. Genes and environment both required.
 - **Epigenetics** (Caspi et al. 2002) — men with low-activity MAOA gene only became aggressive if they had also experienced childhood maltreatment.
 - **Neuroplasticity** (Maguire et al. 2000) — London taxi drivers showed enlarged posterior hippocampi after years of navigation; environment physically reshapes biology.
 - **Niche-picking** (Plomin) — genetically influenced traits lead individuals to select environments that reinforce those traits.
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Discuss the idiographic and nomothetic approaches to psychological investigation.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 4 marks, AO3 = 4 marks

Level	Marks	Descriptor
4	7–8	Knowledge of both approaches is accurate and well detailed. Discussion is thorough and effective, with appropriate evaluation. Clear, coherent, focused; specialist terminology used effectively.
3	5–6	Knowledge of both approaches is generally accurate, though may lack some detail. Discussion is mostly effective but may be limited in places. Reasonable structure; specialist terminology mostly used appropriately.
2	3–4	Some accurate knowledge of at least one approach. Discussion limited; mainly descriptive. Structure and terminology may be lacking.
1	1–2	Knowledge limited or muddled. Little or no discussion / evaluation. Lacks clarity, accuracy and organisation.
0	0	No relevant content.

Indicative AO1 content:

- **Idiographic:** focuses on the individual and their uniqueness; favours qualitative data (case studies, unstructured interviews); avoids universal generalisation. Examples — humanistic psychology, Freud's Little Hans, the case of HM.
- **Nomothetic:** seeks general laws of behaviour by studying large samples and using statistical analysis; classifying people into groups, establishing universal principles, establishing dimensions of measurement (Radford and Kirby). Examples — Asch's conformity studies, behaviourist lab work, IQ testing, fMRI research.

Indicative AO3 content (any combination):

- **Strength of idiographic:** rich, in-depth data; can generate theory (HM transformed memory research); can falsify universal theories with single-case dissociations.
- **Limitation of idiographic:** limited generalisability; subjective and prone to researcher bias; difficult to replicate.
- **Strength of nomothetic:** scientific rigour, reliable measurement, established norms (e.g. IQ = 100); enables prediction and effective intervention.
- **Limitation of nomothetic:** can lose the individual; population averages tell us little about individual experience or treatment response; favours quantification over meaning.
- **Complementarity** (Millon and Davis 1996): the most powerful research combines both — nomothetic for general patterns, idiographic for individual variation. Cognitive neuroscience routinely combines large-N fMRI work with detailed single-case studies.

Discuss the free-will and determinism debate in psychology. Refer to the case of Jacob as part of your discussion.

Marks for this question: AO1 = 6 marks, AO2 = 4 marks, AO3 = 6 marks

Level	Marks	Descriptor
4	13–16	Knowledge of free-will and determinism is accurate and generally well detailed. Application to Jacob is effective and well integrated. Discussion is thorough and effective, with strong evaluation. Clear, coherent and focused. Specialist terminology used effectively.
3	9–12	Knowledge is evident with some accuracy. Application is mostly effective but may not be fully integrated. Discussion is mostly effective but limited in places. Mostly clear and organised. Specialist terminology used appropriately.
2	5–8	Some accurate knowledge; application limited and partial. Discussion superficial; may be mainly descriptive. Lacks clarity, organisation and/or terminology in places.
1	1–4	Knowledge limited and may be inaccurate. Little or no application; little or no discussion. Lacks clarity, accuracy and organisation.
0	0	No relevant content.

Indicative AO1 content — candidates should cover at least two of:

- **Free will** — individuals can make genuine choices about their behaviour; central to the humanistic approach (Rogers).
- **Hard determinism** — all behaviour can in principle be predicted from prior causes; no genuine free will.
- **Soft determinism** — behaviour has causes but agents can exercise meaningful choice within those causes (cognitive approach).
- **Biological determinism** — genes, neurochemistry, hormones (relevant: Jacob's father, possible heritable traits).
- **Environmental determinism** — conditioning, social learning, environment (relevant: deprived neighbourhood, exposure to violence).
- **Psychic determinism** — Freud's unconscious drives and childhood experience.
- **Scientific emphasis on causal explanations** — determinism aligns with the scientific method.

Indicative AO2 content — clear engagement with Jacob's case:

- Father in prison for assault → potential biological determinism (heritable traits associated with aggression, e.g. MAOA-L) or environmental determinism (modelling, social learning).
- Deprived neighbourhood, gang exposure → environmental determinism via social learning theory (Bandura) and operant conditioning of antisocial behaviour.
- The psychologist's claim that Jacob's behaviour is "almost inevitable" is a **hard determinist** position.

- The legal system normally assumes free will / moral responsibility — there is tension between the psychologist's determinist evidence and the court's need to assign responsibility.
- A soft determinist position would acknowledge that Jacob's choices are shaped by his background *but* that he retains some meaningful agency, especially given access to intervention.

Indicative AO3 content:

- **Strength of determinism:** consistent with the scientific method; supports development of interventions (drug therapy, CBT, behavioural treatment).
- **Limitation of hard determinism:** incompatible with moral and legal responsibility. The legal system rejected exactly this defence in the Stephen Mobley case (MAOA gene).
- **Strength of free will:** face validity; internal locus of control is associated with better mental health (Roberts et al.); supports a rehabilitative view of offending.
- **Limitation of free will:** neuroscientific challenge — Libet (1983) and Soon et al. (2008) found neural activity preceding "conscious" decisions by up to 10 seconds.
- **Interactionism:** most modern psychology adopts soft determinism — behaviour has causes (biological, environmental, cognitive) but agents retain some constrained agency. This is the position most compatible with both psychological evidence and the demands of the legal system.
- **Socially sensitive implications** (link to Section 7 of I&D): adopting a strong determinist view of offending can either reduce stigma (offending is "not their fault") or remove accountability (offending cannot be punished). How findings are communicated matters as much as what they say.

Top-band answers will reach a clear conclusion — typically defending a soft-determinist position that takes Jacob's background seriously without removing his moral responsibility, and acknowledging the tension between scientific determinism and the assumptions of the legal system.