

Psychology Factsheets



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How to write about relationships without losing marks

This Factsheet is about how to answer exam questions about relationships. It will guide you through the different types of relationship exam questions, highlighting the pitfalls so that you can avoid them and avoid losing marks. Words in bold are explained in the glossary and the worksheet gives you the opportunity to apply what you have learned to exam style questions about relationships.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

- Discuss and evaluate theories about the formation, maintenance and breakdown of relationships.
- Discuss and evaluate evolutionary theories about human reproductive behaviour and relationships.
- Discuss and evaluate theories about the effects of early experiences on adult relationships.
- Discuss and evaluate the nature of relationships in different cultures.

In the exam you will be assessed according to the following assessment outcomes (AO):

- **AO1** - Recognise, recall and show understanding of scientific knowledge, select, organise and communicate relevant information in a variety of forms.

Exam Hint:- While the examiner expects you to recall what you have learnt, s/he also expects you to demonstrate your understanding by engaging with the information and thinking like a psychologist. In selecting information to communicate to the examiner, it should be explicit why you have chosen to apply this particular piece of information to this particular question. The examiner should not be left thinking 'so what?'

- **AO2** - Analyse and evaluate scientific knowledge, apply knowledge and processes to unfamiliar situations, assess the validity, reliability and credibility of scientific information.

Exam Hint:- In order to gain marks for analysis you must pick the material apart and give value, positive or negative, to each part of the material you present. You can do this by assessing its validity, reliability and credibility and by comparing it to alternative theories.

- **AO3** - Describe ethical, safe and skilful practical techniques and processes, know how to make, record, and communicate valid observations, analyse, interpret, explain and evaluate the methodology and investigative activities in a variety of ways.

Exam Hint:- The examiner expects you to recall research studies and outline the findings succinctly. In order to gain good marks you must then do something with it, such as analyse and evaluate the material and always, always, always relate it to the question.

Exam Hint:- (1) Notice the number of marks allocated for the question (underlined in the examples shown below). (2) Notice what the question is asking you to do (underlined in the examples shown below). (3) Plan your answer accordingly.

A. Answering short answer questions about relationships:

- (a) Briefly outline one reason for self-disclosure in relationships. (2 marks)

One mark is awarded for stating a reason for self-disclosure; such as a demonstration of developing trust or as reciprocation. One mark is awarded for elaboration of the reason you have given or for giving an example. Keep the answer brief and focused on one reason only.

- (b) Briefly distinguish between romantic and companionate love in the context of the triangular theory of love. (3 marks)

Two marks are awarded for a statement about romantic love, which involves passion and intimacy, and a statement about companionate love, which involves commitment and intimacy. One mark is awarded for any valid distinction between the two such as 'romantic love is usually seen earlier in a relationship whereas companionate love is more typical in a mature relationship'. Candidates often miss out on the extra mark by merely describing the two types of love but not distinguishing between them.

Love?

- (c) Provide a brief explanation of the importance of attachment in human relationships. (3 marks)

One - two marks are for knowledge of attachment in human relationships, such as 'the early infant-caregiver. One - two marks are for explanation of how attachment influences relationships, such as 'a secure infant attachment can be a predictor of more positive adult relationships'. Candidates often miss out on the extra mark by merely describing attachment but not its importance in human relationships.

- (d) There are many factors which affect interpersonal attraction. Identify and briefly outline two possible factors. (4 marks)

This is a reasonably straightforward question in which one mark is awarded for each factor identified, such as proximity, physical attractiveness or similarity, and one mark is awarded for each brief description. Candidates miss out on marks by either identifying and describing only one factor or by identifying two (or more) factors without explanation.



B. Answering scenario type questions about relationships:

(e) **Andrea and Edward went to the same Italian evening class but had never spoken to each other. After the third class, Edward struck up a conversation with Andrea and they discovered that they both enjoyed Italian food. They decided to go to a new Italian restaurant together the following week. At the end of the evening, Andrea told Edward how much she liked him and Edward said he liked Andrea too. Identify three factors affecting interpersonal attraction between Andrea and Edward. Illustrate each factor with reference to the scenario. (6 marks)**

Three marks are awarded for identifying three factors from the text such as similarity, familiarity, proximity, reciprocal liking. Three marks are awarded for linking each factor to the text such as 'similarity: they both like learning Italian and they both like Italian food' and 'familiarity: they have often seen each other before' and 'reciprocal liking: they say they like each other after the meal'. Candidates miss out on marks by identifying factors not related to the scenario, for example, it does not mention physical/sexual attraction. Marks are also lost for failing to relate each factor to the scenario.

(f) **An advert from the lonely hearts column of The Wellingborough Extra newspaper reads: 35 year old, self-employed male, with own house and car seeks attractive fun-loving woman within 5 miles of Wellingborough to share meals in and out, film and travel. Applicants must include photo. Identify two factors affecting personal attraction. Illustrate your answer with reference to the lonely hearts advert above. (4 marks)**

This is a similar question to (d) where two marks are awarded for identifying two relevant factors from the advert, such as physical attractiveness and proximity. Two marks are awarded for linking the two factors to the advert. For example 'physical attractiveness is requested (seeks attractive woman, must include photo); proximity is requested (within 5 miles of Wellingborough)'. In order not to lose marks your answer must be related directly to the scenario.



(g) **Kemi and Wayne have been dating for two years and have recently moved into a flat together. Kemi works long hours as a doctor and earns more money than Wayne, who is studying part time and working in a bar. Kemi contributes more money to the rent and bills. With reference to Kemi and Wayne, discuss the social exchange theory of relationship development. (12 marks: AO1 4, AO2 8)**

Four marks are awarded for displaying a knowledge of social exchange theory including, for example, relationships as implicit social contracts, assessment of the rewards and costs of a relationship, the role of reinforcement (**broad answer**). Or by referring to the stages within the model including sampling - exploring costs and rewards, bargaining - establishing what each should give and receive, commitment, institutionalisation (**deep answer**). Eight marks are awarded for a discussion of the model and reference to the scenario which could include an inability to explain imbalanced relationships or altruism, the negative effects of concern with rewards and costs in relationships and the difficulty of quantifying these.

You should also offer hypotheses about the rewards and costs for Kemi and Wayne such as: Kemi pays in more money and works longer hours but probably does less housework; Wayne pays in less money but is at home more and probably does more housework. The very best answers present evaluative comment in the context of a discussion about Kemi and Wayne rather than present a list of many factors without any elaboration.

C. Answering evidence type questions about relationships:

(h) **Discuss two or more factors affecting the breakdown of relationships. Support your answer with empirical evidence. (12 marks: AO1 = 6, AO2 = 6)**

Discuss is a term which means outline and evaluate. Six marks are awarded for demonstrating knowledge of at least two factors and a description of relevant evidence. Factors may include: poor communication, jealousy, sexual problems, inequality in terms of social exchange. Possible studies may include: longitudinal study of factors (Hill et al., 1976), destructive v. constructive, passive v. active (Rusbult, 1987), fatal attraction theory (Femlee, 1998).

Candidates lose marks by presenting a list of many factors without any elaboration. Six marks are awarded for discussion and analysis. For example, differences in reasons for breakdown according to social class, sexual orientation, length of relationship. Credit is also given for methodological issues in the research such as cause and effect, retrospective accounts, use of longitudinal studies. Better answers recognise that whilst a single factor might trigger problems, most relationships break up as a result of multiple factors. Good answers also refer explicitly to relevant research in the discussion. Credit is not awarded for **anecdotal** evidence not grounded in research.

(i) **Discuss the nature-nurture debate in relation to sexual orientation. Support your answer with suitable evidence. (12 marks: AO1 = 6, AO2 = 6)**

Discuss is a term which means outline and evaluate. Six marks are awarded for knowledge of the nature-nurture debate relating to sexual orientation and associated evidence. This could include: reference to genes and heritability; linkage research (LeVay and Hamer, 1994); levels of hormones; and brain structure. Social learning and learning theory could describe the nurture side of the debate.

Good answers present a balanced argument supported by evidence. Six marks are awarded for discussion and analysis of the nature-nurture debate *in this context*. This could include exploration of alternative explanations such as the Freudian theory of universal bisexuality with differentiation occurring at the phallic stage. Discussion could also focus on flaws in the nature hypothesis, such as a lack of evidence for the androgen hypothesis. Good answers consider the wider implications of accepting either argument.



D. Answering theory-based questions about relationships:

(j) Discuss one or more evolutionary explanations of parental investment in humans (e.g. sex differences, parent-offspring conflict). (12 marks: AO1 = 6, AO2 = 6)

Discuss is a term which means outline and evaluate. Six marks are awarded for a description of relevant evolutionary explanations, such as Triver's parental investment theory with related issues of anisogamy, differential maternal and paternal investment and consequent gender differences in mate choice, parent-offspring conflict and cuckoldry. Theories about parental investment also have implications for courtship and mating behaviour. Candidates lose marks if the explanations given do not explicitly link to issues of parental investment.

Evaluation could include reference to studies by Buss and Dunbar on gender differences in mate selection and parental investment. Studies with non-human animals may also qualify for AO2 if used as part of sustained and effective commentary on work with humans. Marks are lost if studies are described but not used effectively to evaluate evolutionary explanations of parental investment. More general commentary might include social and cultural trends, such as the increasing involvement of men in the upbringing of children, the rise in single parent families, and childrearing in understudied relationships. The main pitfall with this kind of question is describing several theories well but not relating the answer explicitly to parental investment.

(k) Discuss the relationship between human reproductive behaviour and sexual selection. (12 marks: AO1 = 6, AO2 = 6)

Discuss is a term which means outline and evaluate. Six marks are awarded for knowledge of theories, including attraction and mate choice, mate competition, sexual dimorphism, jealousy, hidden ovulation, mating relationships, and parental investment. Candidates who draw on studies of mate choice in non-human animals can earn credit if it is linked explicitly to human reproductive behaviour. Credit for evaluation can be achieved by referencing research studies and relevant methodological criticism of these studies, which may reduce the validity of findings. More general commentary could include cross-species comparisons, a consideration of cultural variations in human reproductive behaviour, or the increasing role of cognitive and social factors in influencing patterns of, for instance, mate choice.



The main mistake candidates make is not answering the question. Always refer explicitly to the scenario or behaviour in the question and take notice of the demand instruction (outline, discuss, evaluate) and the maximum number of marks. And remember, time spent reading the question and planning your answer is time well spent.

Glossary

Anecdotal evidence: Evidence based on everyday experience or hearsay and regarded as unreliable from a scientific perspective, unlike **empirical evidence**.

Broad answer: Answers which may be fairly superficial and lacking in detail but show a wider range (there is often a breadth/depth pay off in exam answers).

Deep answer: Answers which are narrower in range but display a depth of knowledge and detail (there is often a breadth/depth pay off in exam answers).

Empirical: Evidence which can be supported or refuted by observation or experimental research, unlike **anecdotal evidence**.

Evaluate: To give value to a theory, hypothesis or study by suggesting positive and negative aspects.

Reliability: The extent to which a piece of research is replicable to give the same results.

Validity: A measure of relevance. The extent to which a piece of research does what it says it does (internal validity) or can be applied to everyday life (external validity).

