

Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior

See examples from each of the four sections of the MCAT® Exam. The passage in each example provides the context for the questions. The correct answer is provided as well as an explanation that refers to the Foundational Concepts and skills tested.

Passage

The illness experience shapes the way that people use health information. For patients with a rare health disorder, which is defined as a medical condition that affects fewer than 200,000 individuals living in the United States, online sources of information tend to be particularly important.

An example of a rare disorder is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as “Lou Gehrig’s disease.” ALS results from the progressive loss of motor nerves and affects about 1 out of 100,000 people. About 10% of people with ALS have a familial form of the condition, which is caused by an inherited genetic mutation. Aside from the familial form, the cause of ALS is largely unknown, though it is believed that the disorder results from both genetic and environmental factors.

Having a rare medical condition, such as ALS, can make it difficult to meet and interact with others who have the same rare disorder. Despite great distances, online communication provides a form of social interaction for those facing an uncommon health problem. Virtual peer networks provide vital social support for those who are affected by a rare disorder.

Research has found that women with rare disorders are more likely to access online support networks than men with rare disorders. Relationships formed through online support networks often become a meaningful part of a person’s identity. Individuals with rare disorders report that relating to others who have the same condition is often easier than trying to relate to friends or family members who do not share their condition.

Questions:

1. Which statement best represents a threat to social identity? A young woman with a rare disorder:

A) believes that others treat her as less capable, and then she starts to see herself as deficient.

B) becomes discouraged when she hears that others with rare disorders are treated as less capable.

C) hides her disorder from others in order to project more confidence in social situations.

D) reveals her disorder to friends, who mistakenly assume that it is a social limitation.

Answer

Correct Answer is B) becomes discouraged when she hears that others with rare disorders are treated as less capable.

Rationale: This Psychology question assesses the “Knowledge of Scientific Concepts and Principles” skill with a concept that is part of the content category of “Self-identity.” Social identity addresses the feelings that individuals derive from, or that are associated with, their membership in a group. Self-esteem can be undermined by threats to social identity, which is represented in the correct answer, Option B. The incorrect options do not clearly identify the connection between an individual’s sense of self and their perceived membership in a group.

2. Over the course of ten years, a rare disorder increases in prevalence such that it eventually affects more than 200,000 people in the United States. Based on the passage and this scenario, which prediction is most consistent with the sociological paradigm of symbolic interactionism?

A) As the number of affected individuals increases, government research funding increases.

B) Affected individuals are less likely to conceal their condition as it becomes less stigmatized.

C) As more people with the condition are treated, it receives less attention as a health concern.

D) Insurance coverage for the condition becomes more likely as more people require treatment.

Answer

Correct Answer is B) Affected individuals are less likely to conceal their condition as it becomes less stigmatized.

Rationale: This is a Sociology question that evaluates the skill of “Scientific Reasoning and Problem Solving” with a theoretical paradigm that is listed under the content category of “Understanding Social Structure.” Symbolic interactionism focuses on how meaning is constructed through small-scale social interactions. As a concept that is relevant to social interactions and the illness experience, social stigma is also closely associated with symbolic interactionism. Thus, the correct answer is option B, which rests in reasoning from the perspective of symbolic interactionism to make a prediction about social interaction and stigmatization. The incorrect options make predictions about large-scale social changes or about the disease itself, which are not consistent with the paradigm of social interactionism.

3. Which research project best represents a macrosociological approach to studying the social support networks mentioned in the passage?

- A) A researcher follows the conversation of participants who post messages in an online support forum.
- B) A researcher interviews patients who participate in a local hospital's support group for rare disorders.
- C) A researcher surveys patients for reasons that they joined an online support group for their disorder.
- D) A researcher tracks how the number of websites dedicated to rare disorders has changed over time.

Answer

Correct Answer is D) A researcher tracks how the number of websites dedicated to rare disorders has changed over time.

Rationale: This Sociology question tests on "Reasoning about the Design and Execution of Research" with material that is covered by "Understanding Social Structure." Option D is the correct answer because tracking changes in websites would provide data on the availability (growth or decline) of information about rare disorders. This type of project is aligned with a macrosociological approach because it would allow a researcher to determine how the organization of health information in a society changes over time. The other options are incorrect because they are more similar to a microsociological approach, as each would result in data that is based on small-scale interactions or individual decisions.



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