Evaluating studies 1: external validity

This activity applies to all topics

This activity will help you to…

- Understand the concept of external validity
- Distinguish between sampling validity and ecological validity
- Write effective evaluation of studies for exam questions

Validity & evaluation

Psychologists do research studies in order to find out about human behaviour. These studies are used as evidence when psychologists construct and test theories of human behaviour. Consequently, it is very important that we are able to **trust** the information we get from research studies and regard it as **truthful**. In other words, it is important that psychological studies are **valid**.

Many things can render a study untrustworthy. When designing a study a good researcher tries to anticipate the things that might affect its validity and design the study so as to avoid them. When a study has been carried out and its result published, the first thing other psychologists will do is have a good look at how it was carried out to see if the original researchers overlooked any problems with its validity. If they find any, they may themselves publish a critique of the research, pointing out the problems with it and explaining how these problems affect the extent to which we can trust the research. This process is called **evaluation**.

> **Evaluating a study's validity means working out how far we can trust its results, and explaining why.**

External validity

There are two principal types of validity. The one we will look at first is called **external validity** (can you guess what the other might be called?). A study's external validity is defined as:

> **The extent to which the results of the study may be applied beyond the original research situation.**

In other words, if a study has high external validity, its results tell us something about how people think or behave in the real world; we are able to **generalise** the results. External validity breaks down into two main factors:

- **Ecological validity** – the extent to which the participants' behaviour will generalise to other settings. This is likely to be high where the setting and/or task closely resemble the participants' natural setting or activities (i.e. when the study has mundane realism) and low where the setting or task is unfamiliar (e.g. when a study is carried out in a laboratory).
- **Sampling validity** – the extent to which the participants' behaviour will generalise to other groups of people. This will be high if the composition of the group of PPs used (the sample) is similar to the composition of the group the researcher is interested it (the target population). A problem would occur, for example, of the target population consisted of both women and men but the sample contained only men. In that case, sampling validity would be low.

Use your text, notes and the table below to assess the external validity of the studies you have been looking at recently. Name the study, state whether each type of external validity is high or low and give a reason for your judgements.

Study	Validity	Reasons
	Ecological validity	
	Sampling validity	
	Ecological validity	
	Sampling validity	
	Ecological validity	
	Sampling validity	

Writing evaluations of studies

In an exam you might be asked (either directly or indirectly) to evaluate the validity of one or more studies. In order to do so effectively, you need to do the following things:

1. State the problem.
2. Explain the nature of the problem.
3. Suggest the effect it might have had on our ability to generalise the results.

For example:

One problem with Fakedata and Fraud's (1995) study of workplace stress is that it lacks sampling validity. The group of three year old children they used is unrepresentative of middle managers as a whole. Consequently, their observation that stress may lead managers to turn purple, throw themselves on the floor and hurl wooden bricks at colleagues may lack relevance in real-world settings.

Use the assessments you have made above to write evaluations of three different studies.