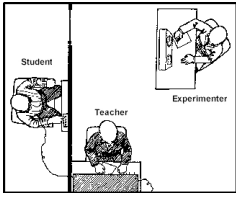


Obedience Research: External Validity



This activity will help you to:

- Understand what is meant by external validity
- Distinguish between ecological and sampling validity
- Elaborate on and assess criticisms of research studies
- Write more effective discussions in your essays

What Is External Validity?

Validity, you should recall, relates to how truthful a study is. **External validity** is a type of validity that relates to how well a study's findings apply outside the research situation or, in other words, how well we can **generalise** a study's findings. Two main factors determine whether results can be generalised:

- The setting.** If this closely resembles the real world setting we are interested in, then it is usually possible to generalise. Laboratory studies may run into problems because of this, because the lab is a very artificial environment. In other words, they can lack **ecological validity**.
- The sample.** If this contains the same sort of people as can be found in the **target population** the researcher is interested in, then it is usually possible to generalise. Studies where a restricted sample was used (e.g. all men, or all university students) can run into problems because of this. In other words, they can lack **representativeness**.

External Validity and Obedience Research

Issues of external validity can be used as criticisms of the validity of Milgram's research. In particular, we can point out that:

- Milgram's research was **lab-based**. It does not automatically follow that the PPs would behave in the same way in a real-world situation.
- Milgram's sample consisted primarily of **men**. It does not automatically follow that women would behave in the same way.

Discussing The Validity Of A Study

When we looked at internal validity, we saw that the critical process does not end with just making a criticism. Many criticisms can be answered with counterpoints, and evidence can usually be found in favour of both sides of the argument. Here is an example of a student discussing the external validity of a study you know about:

The student states and explains the criticism they are making.

They draw a conclusion that accommodates this new evidence

One criticism of the Asch study is that it used an unrepresentative sample. The PPs were all male social sciences students, who may not behave in the same way as other groups. For example, when Perrin & Spencer (1981) repeated the study with science and maths students they found almost no conformity, suggesting that the nature of the sample does matter. Furthermore, when they used young offenders as their PPs and probation officers as the confeds, conformity was much higher. This suggests that conformity is not an automatic response to group pressure but depends on the nature of those being pressured and their relationship with those exerting the pressure.

They use evidence from other sources to show that the criticism is valid.

Note that in the above example, the student does not simply dismiss Asch's study out of hand; rather, they show that the conclusions that can be drawn from Asch's study are limited in the light of the criticism and other evidence.

The Ecological Validity of Milgram's Study

One way of assessing whether a criticism of a study is valid is to **triangulate** with other findings. So the effectiveness of any criticism of Milgram's study's ecological validity can be assessed by looking to see if other evidence obtained in a more natural setting agrees or disagrees with Milgram's results.

- Remind yourself of the studies by Hofling et al (1966) and Bickman (1974).

Now complete the following criticism paragraph by explaining the criticism and then assessing it against other evidence.

One criticism of Milgram's study is that it lacks ecological validity. This is because

..... (explain the criticism)

Against this, it could be pointed out that

..... (outline the relevant findings)

In conclusion,

..... (is the criticism valid or not?)

The Representativeness of Milgram's Sample

We can go through a similar process when criticising the representativeness of Milgram's sample. We can also go a bit further, and starts raising more points and counterpoints, to develop a proper discussion (where two different points of view are represented, and each puts forward evidence in favour of their position). Use the sentences below to develop a discussion of the representativeness of Milgram's research.

You will need to use the information in the table below to construct a valid and well-evidenced discussion.

- One criticism of Milgram's study is...** (state and explain)
- In response to this...** (Milgram's findings with female PPs)
- However...** (a finding that contradicts Milgram)
- But against this, the evidence as a whole suggests...** (look at all the studies)
- In conclusion...**

Study	Location	Sample	Result (% obedience)
Milgram (1963)	USA	Male general population Female general population	65 65
Rosenhan (1974)	USA	M & F students	85
Kilham & Mann (1974)	Australia	M students F students	40 16
Burley & McGuinness (1977)	UK	Male students	50
Miranda et al (1981)	Spain	M & F students	90
Shanab & Yahya (1978)	Jordan	Students	62
Schurz (1985)	Austria	M & F general population	80
Meeus & Raaijmakers (1986)	Holland	M & F general population	92

And If You Finish That...

Another criticism of Milgram's research could be that it was only conducted with Americans, and so lacks **cross-cultural validity**. Write another short discussion, addressing this criticism. You should use the evidence in the table to inform your discussion. You should use the format above to structure your discussion.