

Outline two studies of obedience and consider whether they show external validity.

External validity is the validity of an experiment outside the research situation itself, the extent to which the findings of a research study are applicable to other situations especially everyday situations.

Milgram's study on electric shocks and learning offers support for external validity in obedience experiments. Milgram conducted his study at Yale University with 40 male participants aged between 20 and 50. A confederate of the experimenter was always the learner and the participant the teacher. The teacher had to administer shocks to the learner every time they gave an incorrect answer and the intensity of the shocks increased on each occasion.

One of the strongest criticisms of Milgram's research was the belief that as it was carried out in laboratory conditions it had low ecological or external validity. Due to the study being conducted in a laboratory it was believed it would be hard to generalise the findings to real life situations. Gross offers a solution to this criticism by claiming that experiments are similar to real life social situations and thus participant's behaviour in the study is similar to how it would be in real life.

However, for many critics this was hard to believe due to the findings that 65% of participants gave the maximum intensity shock of 450 volts. Milgram felt the study was engaging for participants and thus the participants believed the set-up. The study had mundane realism because the demands of an authority figure are the same whether the setting is artificial or occurring naturally. The study is claimed to have experimental realism as participants engaged fully with the situation. This is supported with the case of Pasquale Gino who continued all the way to 450 volts believing the learner to be dead.

Milgram's original studies were carried out in the United States, however research across cultures carried out by Smith and Bond found similar findings of obedience thus offering support that the results are generalisable and that Milgram's study had high ecological validity. Obedience was 65% in America and when later studies were carried out in Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria and Holland obedience had risen to 80%.

However key aspects of the procedure varied from one culture to another so despite the high obedience rates it is difficult to interpret the cross cultural difference in obedience. Further support for Milgram's study was found by Meeus and Kaaijmakers who conducted an obedience study in Holland. They found 22 of the 24 participants delivered the negative remarks they had been instructed to give by the experimenter. So the study is generalisable to other research situations on obedience.

Hofling carried out a study of obedience in a real life situation as a field experiment. The 22 nurses involved were phoned by someone claiming to be Dr Smith. He asked the nurses to administer 20 mg of the drug Astrolen to patients despite the maximum dosage being 10mg. The nurses obeyed despite being instructed never to exceed the maximum safe dose.

Critics argued that Hofling's field study should have greater ecological validity than Milgram's laboratory experiment because it was conducted in a natural environment. However, attempts to replicate it by Rank and Jacobsen failed despite there being many successful replications of Milgram's studies in other countries and cultures. It can be concluded that the obedience in Hofling's study was due to historical differences. In 1974 when the study was carried out nurses were trained not to question a doctor's judgement and since then changing cultural norms has meant the same levels of obedience are not found.

Despite Hofling's field experiment failing to be replicated support for the ecological validity of Milgram's work in a realistic setting was provided to Bickman who found participants were more likely to obey experimenter dressed as a guard than a milkman or civilian. This supports one of the variations of Milgram's findings that obedience can be related to the amount of perceived authority. However, Bickman's study differs from Milgram's in that the orders made by the experimenter were not as unreasonable as in Milgram's study and thus obedience is more understandable.

