Internal & External Validity

This activity will help you to:
- Distinguish between internal and external validity
- Apply validity concepts to unfamiliar situations
- Comment on the validity of psychological research

Validity in Psychological Research

Evaluating the validity of a piece of psychological research requires you to do a number of things. If you are evaluating a study you need to:

- **Identify** the features of the study that threaten its validity (e.g. a poor sample)
- **Explain** the impact these features might have had (e.g. limiting generalisability)
- **Assess** the seriousness and/or likelihood of this impact

It may be important for you to explain which aspect of the study's validity is poor. Remember, we can distinguish between internal and external validity. Each of these relates to certain key features of how the research was conducted.

Internal Validity
- Were variables properly operationalised?
- Were extraneous variables adequately controlled?
- Were researcher effects and demand characteristics addressed?

External Validity
- Was the sample representative of the target population?
- Did the setting (and the task used) resemble the setting/tasks to which researchers wished to generalise?

Each of these research scenarios has at least one feature that potentially reduces its validity. Read through each scenario and try to identify the problematic feature(s). Make a note of (1) what the feature is; (2) the type of validity it threatens and the effect it might have; and (3) how serious a flaw you judge it to be.

Dave is doing an observational study of shopping behaviour. He has positioned himself outside a shop that sells both women's and men's clothing and is timing for how long male and female shoppers look in at the window before entering the shop or moving on.

Jeanette is conducting an experimental study of memory. She has recruited a sample of A-Level students and given them a word-learning task. They first do the task while music is playing and then in silence. She has operationalised memory in terms of the number of words recalled from the learning task.

Peter is doing a correlational study on the impact of ICT on learning. He is looking for a relationship between two variables: (1) the amount of time students spend logged onto the college network; and (2) the result they obtain in their course. Both measurements are to be obtained from college IT systems.