

Obedience Research: Internal Validity



This activity will help you to:

- Understand what is meant by internal validity*
- Understand and recall the criticisms of Milgram's research raised by Martin Orne*
- Write more effective discussions in your psychology essays*

What is Internal Validity?

Validity relates to the truthfulness of a psychological research study. It is important for research studies to have validity because otherwise the theories we come up with to explain human behaviour will be wrong. Specifically, validity is:

“The extent to which a test or research study measures what it was designed to measure.”

Internal validity is one particular kind of validity. It relates to whether the researcher conducted the study in such a way that the outcome was a truthful representation of what was being investigated. A number of questions relate to the internal validity of any given study, including:

- Did anything unexpected affect the behaviour of the participants?
- Did the measurements taken by the researcher give an accurate representation of the process being investigated?

Demand Characteristics

When you put people in a situation where they know they are being investigated, they often try to work out the experimental aim. If they do this, one of three things can happen:

- They may deliberately try to produce the outcome that the researcher was expecting.
- They may deliberately try to ruin the experiment (Abraham Maslow called this the ‘screw you’ effect)
- They may simply reflect more than usual on their behaviour, and consequently act in ways other than they usually would.

Any of these outcomes results in uncharacteristic behaviour. If the participants behave uncharacteristically, then the research has no internal validity. Participants typically look for clues that will help them work out the research aim. These clues are called the **demand characteristics** of the research situation.

The Blind Study Technique

In an effort to remove demand characteristics, participants are often not informed about the aims of the research in which they take part until after the study has finished. The researcher generally will do other things to remove demand characteristics, like concocting a cover story (as Milgram did) to lead the participants away from the real purpose of the research. In a **blind study**, the participants are kept unaware of the aims.

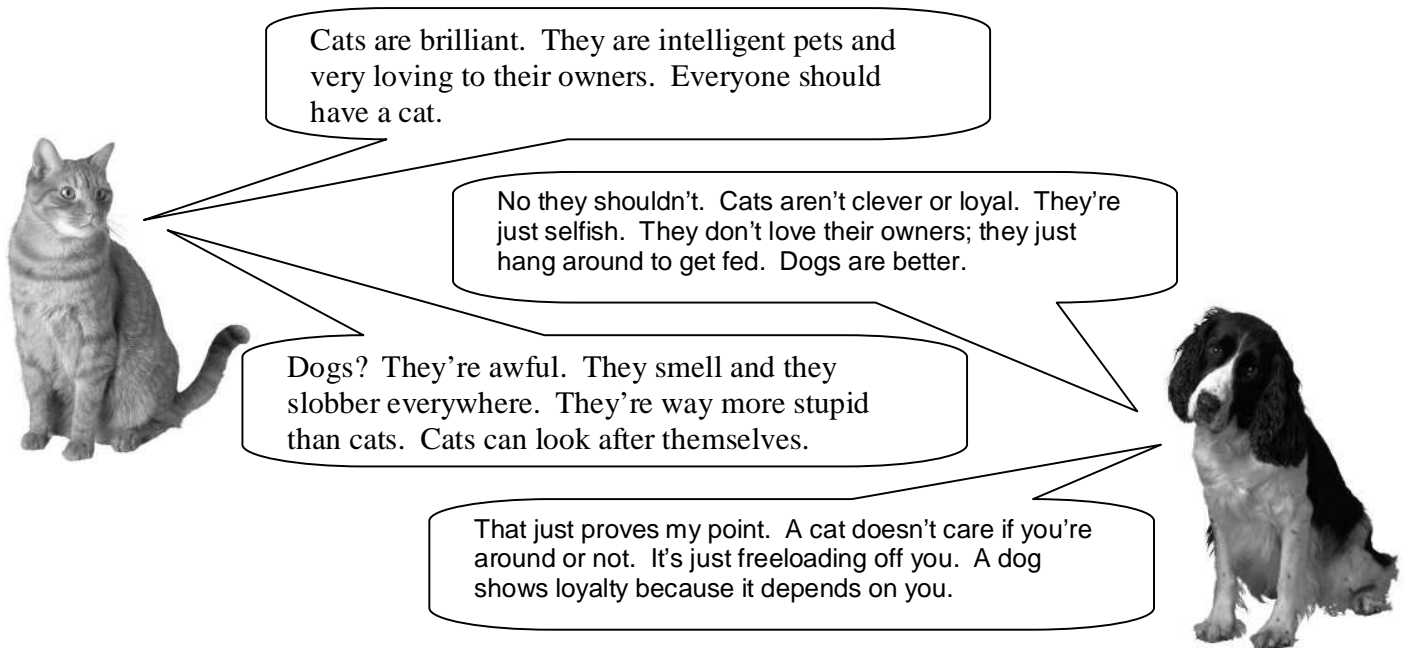
However, conducting a blind study does not guarantee that the participants will not pick up on demand characteristics. There is always a danger that the PPs will work out the aim and consequently change their behaviour.

Martin Orne's Criticisms of Milgram's Research

Orne (1966) was interested in how participants in psychological research respond to the situations in which researchers put them. He thought that the participants in Milgram's research were not really fooled by the situation they were in. This is important, because if they did not believe in the set-up, then they did not really believe they were hurting Mr Wallace. Consequently, Milgram's research would tell us little or nothing about destructive obedience in the real world.

How Do You Write a Discussion In An Essay?

A discussion is a sort of argument. The key feature of a discussion is that at least two different points of view are represented. In a good discussion, each side makes its points clearly, and offers evidence to support its views. Here is an example:



A discussion in a psychology essay works in the same way. For a particular issue, there may be two or more different points of view. If you are discussing the issue in an essay, you need to lay out clearly the different points of view and the evidence they have in their favour. You should then try to draw a conclusion about which of the two views wins the argument.

Discussing the Internal Validity of Obedience Research

To return to the psychology, we can use the issue of Milgram's research and its internal validity as an issue that could be discussed. Orne gets us started, with the following proposition:

Milgram's study lacks internal validity because the participants were not fooled by the set-up. They didn't really believe that they were hurting the victim, so the study actually tells us nothing.

Obviously, the opposing point of view is that Milgram's study *is* useful, because the participants *were* taken in. What we need is some evidence to support that view.

We can imagine the discussion as an argument between Orne and Milgram (this is, in fact, what happened, but in the pages of books and journals rather than in the pub).

Your participants weren't fooled. They knew they weren't hurting the victim, so the result doesn't mean anything.

If they weren't fooled, why did they get so upset and stressed? This proves they were fooled, so they were really obeying against their wishes.

No it doesn't. They were stressed by the experience of playing along with your ridiculous set up, not by the thought they were hurting the victim.

Do you really think so? In that case...

What You Need To Do...

- (a) Looking back at some of the variations in Milgram's research, come up with a response to Orne's second point. What could Milgram have said? Which evidence could he have offered in favour of his view?
- (b) Now translate this exchange into the sort of discussion you might put into a psychology essay. You will need to use more formal language, and you should **not** make your points by asking questions. Rather you should simply state the point and the evidence that supports that view. Use the following phrases to start each point you make:
 - a. Orne (1966) criticised Milgram's study by suggesting that...
 - b. Milgram replied by pointing out that...
 - c. Orne dismissed this, saying...
 - d. In response, Milgram pointed to...

Once you have finished this, write a concluding sentence or two, explaining which of the two points of view (Orne's or Milgram's) was the stronger.