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# In Defense of External Invalidity

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*ABSTRACT: Many psychological investigations are* monographs have been written about its proper nur-

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*accused of "failure to generalize to the real world"* ture and checklists of specific threats to its well-

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*because of sample bias or artificiality of setting. It is argued in this article that such "generalizations" often are not intended. Rather than making predictions about the real world from the laboratory, we may test predictions that specify what ought to han-*

being are now appearing in textbooks. Studies unescorted by it are afflicted by—what else?—*external invalidity*. That phrase has a lovely mouth-filling resonance to it, and there is, to be sure, a certain poetic justice in our being attacked with our own.

that is closely "applicable to the real world" perhaps allow that one particular situation to stand for the unrespec-

because it was conducted there (e.g., Bickman's, 1974, studies of obedience on the street corner), will have *some* limits to its generalizability. Cultural,

ified circumstances in which an individual could be altruistic. . . . the social psychologist as experimenter is content to let a particular situation stand for an indefinite range of possible testing situations in a given and

fact comfort was a powerful determinant of "of" of the representativeness of the setting? Real mon-

There are a number of other things we may be are a trivial guide to a person's intelligence and are

*can* happen, rather than whether it typically *does* happen. Second, our prediction may be in the other direction; it may specify something that ought to happen *in the lab*, and so we go to the lab to see whether it does. Third, we may demonstrate the power of a phenomenon by showing that it happens even under unnatural conditions that ought to preclude it. Finally, we may use the lab to produce conditions that have no counterpart in real life at all, so that the concept of "generalizing to the real world" has no meaning. But even where findings

On the other hand, is it not worth knowing that such a bias *can* occur, even under restricted conditions? Does it imply an implicit "theory" or set of "heuristics" that we carry about with us? If so, where do they come from?

There are some intriguing issues here. Why should the person's wearing eyeglasses affect our judgments of his or her intelligence under any conditions whatever? As a pure guess, I would hazard the following: Maybe we believe that (a) intelligent people read more than less intelligent ones, and (b)

mal conditions.”

Indeed. The threat of electric shock can hardly be “representative” of the dangers faced by anyone except electricians, hi-fi builders, and Psychology 101 students. What then? It depends! It depends on what kind of conclusion one draws and what one’s purpose is in doing the study

tension and, perhaps, to certain settings. In short, we could advance our understanding. And the “artificial” laboratory findings would have contributed to that advance. Surely we cannot reasonably ask for more.

It seems to me that this kind of argument characterizes much of our research—much more of it

we observe ought to do that. And the prediction is disconfirmed.

of interest because they are not representative of a language-using species. And with all the quarrels

Brown and Hanlon studied went on to acquire Bos-

seem them challenged as "unrepresentative chimps,"

As an example, consider dark adaptation. Psychophysical experiments conducted in restricted

environments explore a known phenomenon, but to determine whether such and such a phenomenon exists or can

All of this—which is perfectly true—comes in a discussion of how “laboratory research can produce the wrong results” (Awards, 1960, p. 10). The

cognitive escape hatch available to them. If Milgram’s subjects did say “It must not be dangerous,” then his conclusion—people are overwhelmingly willing

wrong results! But that is the whole point of the results. What Milgram has shown is how easily we

to inflict danger under orders—is in fact weakened. The important thing to see is that the absolute



ple characteristics the characteristics of some population? Or am I trying to draw conclusions not

with the cold creepies with which my students assault research findings: knee-jerk reactions to "ar-

ident these subjects ought to do? Or (as in linguistic and "unnatural settings") and now, tongue-in-cheek im