Temporal validity

Lesson 7.2.6 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Temporal validity asks whether findings from one time period still apply at a later time.

A study may lose temporal validity when social norms, technology, education, law or everyday behaviour change.

Older findings can still be valuable if the psychological process being studied remains stable and later evidence supports it.

Replication helps test temporal validity by repeating a study or testing the same idea with newer samples.

Historical context matters because participants' responses may reflect the time and setting in which the data were collected.

Strong evaluation avoids dismissing evidence just because it is old; it asks what has changed and whether the finding has been updated or supported.

Key terms

Temporal validity: How far findings remain valid across time.

Replication: Repeating a study or testing the same idea again to check whether findings hold.

Historical context: The social and cultural conditions at the time a study was carried out.

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Continued

Cohort effect: A difference linked to the generation or time period participants come from.

Social norm: A shared expectation about behaviour in a society or group.

Technological change: New tools or media that may change behaviour or research conditions.

Generalisation over time: Applying findings from one period to another period.

Contemporary relevance: How useful evidence is for explaining behaviour in the present.

Further detail and evidence

Temporal validity concerns whether findings apply beyond the period in which evidence was collected. Technology, norms, policies, job design, medical care and advertising exposure can change. It is different from the duration of a study or reliability across repeated measurements.

Older evidence can remain useful if the relevant mechanism persists, while its particular procedure or application needs updating. A theory about interference may remain relevant even when advertisements move from print to phones; an old interface comparison may transfer less directly.

Replication with current samples/procedures can test persistence. Repeated cross-sectional studies compare periods but may change sampling; longitudinal studies follow people but mix ageing with historical change. Record what was kept constant and what changed.

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Applying the ideas

Doctor-clothing preferences in 1991 may differ with newer infection-control norms. Jedetski's early website tools may differ from present shopping platforms. Identify the particular changed feature and explain how it could affect the result, rather than rejecting a study solely because it is old.

Worked example: A 1970s study of bystander behaviour is used to explain how people respond to emergencies recorded on smartphones today. What temporal-validity issue should be considered? The study may still be useful if it identifies a stable process such as diffusion of responsibility, but temporal validity needs checking because modern emergencies can involve phones, filming, online sharing and different expectations about helping. Comparing the original context with today's context, plus looking for newer replications or related evidence, prevents assuming the finding applies unchanged.

Worked example: One classic study is criticised as old, but newer studies using different samples find a similar pattern. How should its temporal validity be judged? The criticism should not stop at saying the study is old. If newer studies find a similar pattern, that supports temporal validity because the finding appears to hold across time. Methods, samples and contexts still need comparison, but replication makes the classic evidence more useful for present-day explanation.

Evaluation and connections

A recent publication is not automatically temporally valid for every future context. Updating a method can improve relevance but reduce comparability with the original. Evaluate stable mechanisms and context-sensitive findings separately. Several replications over time give stronger evidence than assuming either permanent truth or complete obsolescence.