Definition
Ecological validity refers to the extent to which any piece of research reflects real life. You could say a study is ‘low in ecological validity’ or ‘not very ecologically valid’ if you thought that some aspect of it makes it very different from what a participant would usually experience or how they would usually react. It may be ‘high in ecological validity’ if it takes place in a natural setting or the participants do not know they are taking part in a research study, for example.

Why is this important?
This is of interest to anyone considering the value of the research because, if the results have only occurred because the participants are taking part in a study, it would probably not tell us a great deal about what they would do or how they would feel in real, everyday life. Psychologists want to find out about people’s natural thoughts, feelings and behaviours, so if the research has created an unnatural situation or environment this will necessarily have an impact on whether the research reveals anything about what people actually do or feel the rest of the time.

Is it a clear-cut issue?
As with all the key issues you will be discussing, ecological validity may not be straightforward. That’s ok, because this is your chance to make a judgement for yourself and justify it by referring to the evidence. It may not be the same as your friends’ or your teacher’s(!) views. You may even want to give both sides of the argument and say that a study is high in ecological validity in one sense but low in another. This is one of the interesting parts of psychology – it’s one aspect where you don’t just ‘learn the answer’ but can apply your understanding to give an individual response.

As no piece of research can be perfect, researchers may choose to sacrifice ecological validity in order to create a reliable study; or to ensure that ecological validity is high by studying in a real-life setting even though this may result in some ethical issues. It’s a balancing act.

Any related issues?
‘Mundane realism’ is a useful term to know when considering ecological validity. It simply means that, although the setting is artificial so the participants know they are participating in research, the task they are doing is real and engaging enough that they ‘buy in’ to what they are doing and treat it as if it were a real task. Demand characteristics are also worth considering in relation to ecological validity. This means that participants change their behaviour according to what they think the experimenters are expecting them to do. This tends to happen when they spot (or think they spot!) what the study is all about.

Applying ecological validity to the core studies
The table below will help you to consider key points about ecological validity in relation to the core studies. It does not provide you with the answers as the judgements are your own. The right-hand column indicates where a similar point occurs in another study. Considering these comparisons and contrasts should help your understanding further.