

# Judgments of Source Credibility as Measured by Source Attributions and Explicit Ratings

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## Introduction

In order to navigate the modern world, people must process information from a wide variety of sources, concerning subjects on which they may have a minimal understanding. They use this information to make important economic, political, medical, and other personal decisions. How do people determine whether and how much each piece of information can be trusted? One way is by judging the credibility of the source that delivers it.

Earlier work on source credibility identified a variety of factors influencing judgments, including dynamism (how entertaining and energetic the source appeared), trustworthiness, and expertise (e.g., Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Wiener & Mowen, 1986). However, these early studies rely on participants' explicit judgments of credibility, a method subject to both demand characteristics and failures of introspective accuracy. More recent studies have used behavioral measures in the context of juries judging eyewitness credibility (e.g., Johnson, Bush, & Mitchell, 1998) or consumers choosing to trust advertisements (e.g., Jain & Posovac, 2001).

People tend to attribute accurate statements to sources they believe to be credible, and inaccurate statements to noncredible sources (Fragale & Heath, 2004). This attribution can be used as a behavioral measure of credibility judgment, one not dependent on the contextual quirks of a particular application, and flexible enough to accurately reflect shifts in perceived credibility level.

## Methods

### Participants

37 students at Illinois Institute of Technology participated for extra credit. All participants were fluent in English.

### Procedure

Participants were introduced to two sources and saw a series of predictions, 10 from each source. For each of these, they were told whether or not the prediction came true. In the high-difference condition, one source predicted with 80% accuracy (8 correct out of 10), while the other predicted with 20% accuracy (2 correct out of 10). In the low-difference condition, respective accuracy rates were 60% and 40%.

After these introductory predictions with sources named, participants saw 20 sourceless predictions that either turned out to be correct or incorrect, and were asked to say which source was most likely to have made each of them. Participants also produced explicit ratings of credibility for each of the two sources.

## Results and Discussion

Explicit ratings and attributions both demonstrated that participants were able to judge source accuracy based on past record of correct and incorrect predictions. Participants' ability to make this judgment was not influenced by the size of the accuracy difference between the two sources. It does appear, at least for this type of information, that explicit ratings accurately reflect participants' behavior when applying their perceptions to new data.

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