

The Influence of Speaker Credibility on Information Recall

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ABSTRACT

Several factors affect one's ability to recall information. Two factors of interest in the present study are speaker credibility and the "sleeper effect". Research has shown that participants have better recall for information provided by a credible speaker than by a less credible speaker. Additionally, the "sleeper effect" occurs when the passage of time decreases the effect of speaker credibility on recall. The current research studied the effect of speaker credibility on the amount of information recalled from an audio taped talk. Fifty-seven university students were tested for recall immediately and after a two-week delay. Prior to the second recall test, participants were randomly assigned to a condition where they were either reminded of the speaker's credibility or not. The data were analyzed using a 2 X 2 X 2 mixed ANOVA. Contrary to the prediction, there was no effect of speaker credibility. As expected, a main effect of time was found where Time 1 recall was greater than Time 2.

INTRODUCTION

Frequently, people purchase goods and services without knowing as much as they could about the goods and services being bought. Without fully understanding memory's abilities and susceptibilities, people are signing up for costly memory enhancing seminars, purchasing memory improvement materials from TV infomercials, and taking pills that claim to boost brain power. Research findings in the learning and memory field can easily be sensationalized; however, they are nonetheless credible and worthy of further investigation. Decades of research in this field have revealed a multitude of factors that can affect one's memory, more specifically, one's ability to recall information (i.e., recall memory). Among the factors shown to affect recall memory are motivation, psychoactive drugs, level of knowledge, training regime, age, intelligence, and cognitive and learning styles (Howard, 1995).

Social factors, which have received little investigation thus far, can also impose influence on an individual's memory (Roediger & McDermott, 2000). One social factor of interest is source credibility. For example, Johnson, Hashtroudi and Lindsay (1993) discovered that individuals would most likely believe a doctor over the *National Enquirer* if they were considering nutrition tips. The term credibility is used to describe two speaker characteristics: competence, or expertise, and trustworthiness (Brehm, Kassin & Fein, 2002). Gill and Badzinski (1992) found that participants recalled more information from messages delivered by professors (a higher status, more credible position) than by students (a lower status, less credible position). In addition to the quantity of information recalled, the credibility of the speaker also affects the type of information recalled. For example, a high credibility speaker's comments in a conversation are often times interpreted as being more aggressive than those of an equal status speaker whether the comments were originally spoken in an aggressive manner or not (Holtgraves, Socal & Srull, 1989).

Research on speaker credibility in the social psychology field has focused on attitude change (toward the speaker's position) rather than on recall. After hearing a message from a high-credibility source, the listeners' attitudes changed immediately; more so than the low-credibility source listeners' (Kelman & Hovland, 1953). However, after a three-week time period, the listeners' attitudes were measured again revealing a phenomenon referred to as the "sleeper effect"; the high-credibility source had lost impact and the low-credibility source had gained impact. Interestingly, when the listeners were reminded of where the information came from (i.e., whether the information was from a high-credibility or low-credibility source), the sleeper effect disappeared (Kelman & Hovland, 1953). The discounting cue hypothesis was offered as an explanation of this phenomenon, which essentially states that people immediately discount the arguments made by noncredible (low credibility) communicators; but over time, they dissociate *what* was said from *who* said it (Brehm, Kassin & Fein, 2002). The source of information can also impact the accuracy of information recall. Studies performed by Lindsay and Johnson (1989) suggest that accuracy improves when people are instructed to consider information about the source.

The current research explored two primary questions. First, does speaker credibility affect recall? At Time 1 (i.e., the immediate recall measurement) it was expected that the high credibility speaker group participants would recall more information than would those in the low credibility speaker group. Secondly, can the sleeper effect be replicated with recall memory as the dependent variable of interest rather than attitude change? In the non-reminded group at Time 2 (i.e., the delayed recall measurement) it was expected that there would be no difference in recall between the high credibility and low credibility speaker groups. This evidence would support the idea of the “sleeper effect”; that the effect of the speaker’s credibility had worn off over time. The participants who were reminded of the message source at Time 2 were expected to recall the same amount of information as they had at Time 1, essentially reinstating the effect of the speaker’s credibility.

METHOD

Participants

Fifty-seven General Psychology undergraduate students from the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse voluntarily participated in this study. All participants received two extra-credit points toward their General Psychology course grade for participating.

Materials

A brief oral report about how to become a smart credit card consumer was read by an adult male and recorded onto one audiocassette tape. The same audiocassette tape was played back to both experimental groups. The oral report had a number of target concepts that were tested for during the recall test (e.g., Never apply for a credit card with an interest rate over 15%). The recall test asked fill-in-the-blank type questions, which pertained to the previously established target concepts (e.g., When choosing a credit card, you should not apply for one with an interest rate over ____ %).

Procedure

For the Time 1 recall measurement, 30 participants were randomly assigned to the high credibility speaker group and the remaining 27 participants were assigned to the low credibility speaker group. After greeting the participants and thanking them for their participation in the experiment, informed consent forms were distributed, completed, and collected. Next, the participants were given a brief, fictitious description of the speaker whose voice was recorded on the tape. The high credibility speaker group was given a description of an independent financial planner. The low credibility group was given a description of a freshman undergraduate college student. The participants were then informed that there would be a recall test to complete after they were finished listening to the speaker. Both groups listened to the same tape.

Following the speaker, each participant was asked to complete one recall test form and was given 15 minutes to do so. After the 15 minutes had passed or the last recall test form had been completed, the tests were collected. The participants were then thanked for their participation and reminded of their next recall measurement time, scheduled for two weeks later.

Two weeks later, at the Time 2 measurement, the 30 participants from the high credibility speaker group and the 27 participants from the low credibility speaker group were randomly assigned into a “no prompt” group or a “prompt” group. The prompt groups were reminded of whom their respective speaker was at Time 1 by having the speaker’s brief description re-read to them. The no-prompt groups received no reminding at all. All participants completed the same recall form as they did at Time 1. The tests were collected and the participants were debriefed and dismissed.

RESULTS

Mean recall scores for the high credibility and low credibility groups at Time 1 can be seen in Table 1. The mean recall scores for Time 2 can be seen in Table 2. Recall scores were examined using a 2 X 2 X 2 (Level of Credibility X Time of Recall X Prompt Group) mixed ANOVA with Time serving as the within-subjects manipulation. The analysis indicated only an expected main effect of Time, $F(1,53) = 21.35, p < .001$. The significant main effect indicates that participants recalled more initially than they did after a two-week delay. Unexpectedly, there was no main effect of credibility or prompt and no interaction.

Table 1. Time 1 Mean Recall Scores

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
High Credibility	5.88	2.65	30
Low Credibility	5.80	2.08	27
Grand Total	5.84*	2.38	57

*p<.001

Table 2. Time 2 Mean Recall Scores.

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
High Credibility			
Prompt	4.97	2.69	16
No-Prompt	3.93	2.80	14
Total	4.48	2.74	30
Low Credibility			
Prompt	4.50	1.83	14
No-Prompt	5.35	1.88	13
Total	4.91	1.87	27
Grand Total			
Prompt	4.75	2.30	30
No-Prompt	4.61	2.46	27
Grand Total	4.68*	2.36	57

*p<.001

DISCUSSION

Contrary to what Gill and Badzinski (1992) found, these results failed to indicate that a speaker's credibility had any impact on the amount of information one recalled. Additionally, this study failed to support the hypothesis that the sleeper effect occurs with information recall in the same way as with attitude change. However, findings from past research combined with a marginally significant interaction among Time, Credibility, and Prompt suggest that a true effect may exist but the current study failed to detect it.

Firstly, the differences between the speakers' credibility is an essential factor in detecting a difference in recall as a resulting from different speakers. To young college students, perhaps a college freshman is not as poorly credible as one may be to an older adult. In other words, the difference between the speaker descriptions in the high and low credibility groups may not have been extreme enough to create as large of an effect on recall as previous experiments have shown.

Although 57 participants was not a terribly small sample for a comparison between the high and low credibility groups, once those groups were split up at Time 2 the number of participants in each group turned into as few as 13. With so few participants in a group, differences between groups that may truly exist are more difficult to reveal. Perhaps with more participants a more accurate depiction of the credibility and prompt effect on recall could be observed.

Furthermore, the recall test itself could have created difficulties for this study. The administered recall test was designed to be difficult in order to avoid creating a ceiling effect with participants' obtained scores. In this study the mean recall score for an individual from any given group never exceeded six out of a possible fifteen points. Given such an abundance of low scores, a floor effect may in fact be hindering the detection of a difference between the groups.

Finally, the chosen topic of interest, credit card consumer information, could have been one of enough interest to all students that they sought the information regardless of the speaker's credibility. Selecting a different topic of moderate interest could have aided in the detection of greater credibility effects on information recall. Despite this study's inability to detect its predicted effects, it has provided a sound starting point from which further research can be founded upon.

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