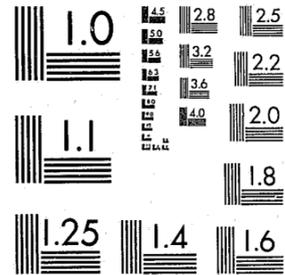


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010 = THE CREDIBILITY OF POLICEMEN

AS MESSAGE SOURCES

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## INTRODUCTION

The Problem.--In the study of law enforcement and the prevention of crime, the problem of the "credibility" of the law enforcement officer is of great interest. One important element in crime prevention is the dissemination of information, and very often the policeman is cast in the role of an information source. His effectiveness will probably be dependent on the credibility or believability of the policeman as a communicator while he works with various groups in his community.

Allegations about the "image" of the policeman are a common subject in contemporary newspapers, magazines, and television reports. Most of these allege that police-community relations are deteriorating, and the reports show an astonishing lack of historical perspective (3). But there is some evidence to indicate that young persons' attitudes toward policemen is probably not what they should be. Portune (12) studied the attitudes of Cincinnati teenagers and discovered that great varieties of positions are held. Socio-economic position, sex, race, school ability, and church attendance were all factors that were related to students' attitudes. But one of Portune's most interesting findings was that older high schoolers had

significantly poorer attitudes toward policemen than did younger ones.

The Dimensions of Credibility --Attitudes in general and source credibility would seem to be closely related, and the early researchers in credibility, such as Hovland and Weiss (6) made this assumption. In 1969, Berlo, Lemmert and Mertz (1) in a study undertaken for the Office of Civil Defense, found that that at least three identifiable factors were at work in credibility evaluations. They were safety, or trustworthiness, competence, or expertness, and dynamism, or activity. The first factor indicates the probability of truth-telling behavior on the part of the source, the second refers to the source's training and experience, and the third refers to the source's confidence and power. These three factors taken together make up a communicator's credibility "profile" which is strongly related to the impact that given messages have.

Subsequent factor-analytic studies have yielded much the same results as those of Berlo, Lemmert and Mertz. Whitehead (11) used different adjective pairs and discovered substantially the same three factors at work. McCroskey (7) has also produced factors of great similarity. These factors have been shown to be related to a communicator's vocal delivery by Hewgill and Miller (5), and have been shown to affect attitude

change by Greenberg and Miller (4). Sereno and Hawkins (10) also identified these three factors as elements in the production of attitude change. In short, most of the subsequent research since Berlo, Lemmert and Mertz's original study has borne out the identification of these three factors and has shown them to be operative in the communicative interaction. Any analysis of credibility, then, should not depend on simple analysis of "attitudes" toward sources, but should study the interactions of the three factors together. This kind of analysis should enable research to pinpoint areas in credibility for given sources that might need bolstering. For example, Ostermeier (8) demonstrated how a change in message content can bring about changes in credibility structure, and such recommendations ought to be possible once the credibility of any given group is known.

Specific Hypotheses --This study was designed to test the following specific hypotheses concerning the credibility of police officers:

1. The factors used in credibility evaluation of policemen will be no different than the factors used for other information sources.
2. Police officers when evaluated as information sources have a credibility profile that is no different from any other professional group.

3. Credibility profiles of police officers are not affected by the race of the officer or the race of the respondent.

4. Credibility of police officers is greater when the officers are communicating in an area which lies within their professional competence.

#### METHOD

Subjects.--Subjects were high school and college students selected from Ohio schools. The high school subjects were approximately equally divided between freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. The college students were primarily freshmen with only a few upper classmen added. A total of 1822 responses were gathered, 818 from college students and 1004 from high schools. The sample of high schools was drawn by dividing towns and cities in Ohio into groups based on population. Each of these groups had a range of 2500 persons--the first group had 2500 and less, the next 2500 to 5000 and so on. A frequency count was then made, and the sample of towns was drawn according to their frequency in the groups. The student sample was drawn from the towns according to the proportion of the state's population that resides in that size town.

An educational directory published by the state

of Ohio was used to obtain the addresses of public high schools located in the towns and cities. A letter was sent to each school requesting permission to visit their classes and collect data for the study. If a school did not respond, the next school on the list was chosen and a letter sent to them. This procedure was followed until an adequate sampling was obtained. Upon visiting the schools, the experimenters requested that an equal sampling from the classes be provided. This was not always possible, and the sample has slightly more sophomores and seniors than freshmen and juniors.

A systematic sample was more difficult to obtain in the case of college students. Requests were made to allow the experimenters to sample from large introductory required classes. Initial arrangements were made with Ohio University, Ohio State University, Bowling Green State University, Miami University, and Kent State University. Testing began at Ohio University and proceeded well, but by the time the experimenters were at Bowling Green University, the campuses in Ohio were in a high state of disorder, and some subjects were missing from classes. Before trips could be made to Kent, Miami, and Ohio State, these campuses were closed. When Ohio State reopened, two attempts were made to gather data there. The general atmosphere on that campus at that time, however, seemed to preclude any reasonable

attempt to measure attitudes toward policemen. More data were later collected at Ohio, Cleveland State, and Miami from summer session students.

Materials.--The principal instrument used in the testing procedure was a semantic differential form utilizing 45 scales. Concepts were printed at the top of the form. The concepts were:

POLICEMAN

WHITE POLICEMAN

NEGRO POLICEMAN

POLICE OFFICER

MARK THOMPSON, WHITE POLICEMAN

MARK THOMPSON, NEGRO POLICEMAN

In addition, concepts were needed to provide baseline comparisons of the police-related concepts. A communication related occupation was considered to be good contrast, and accordingly "newspaper reporter," "radio newscaster," "television newscaster," and "magazine writer" were used in combination with a neutral name. Appropriate instructions sheets were printed and attached. Each subject received only one semantic differential, and administration time varied between ten and fifteen minutes. Since the cover sheet provided no information concerning race, the experimenters kept Negro high school students' tests separate, covertly marking them. No students were aware of this process.

RESULTS

Factor Analysis.--The first step in examining the results of the study was to determine if the factors delineated in Berlo, Lemmert, and Mertz were operative in the evaluation of police-related concepts. Accordingly, the the data were initially subjected to factor analysis. All 45 scales were employed. The method used was orthogonal rotation of the factor matrix. The resulting factor structure is presented in Table I.

The three factors obtained in this set of data are almost identical to the three factors discovered by Berlo, Lemmert, and Mertz. They used the terms safety, qualification, and dynamism to describe them. While the scales obtained in the present study have substantially the same scales present, the author felt that socialization, competence, and dynamism would be better terms to describe the factors. Accordingly, in the rest of this study, the factors will be referred to as socialization, competence, and dynamism. Eleven scales were used for socialization, six for competence, and five for dynamism. The basic unit used in the further data analyses were the means of these scales. While it would seem that the higher number of scales utilized in the socialization factor would produce a mean with a lower standard error, a preliminary

TABLE I  
Rotated Factor Matrix (3-Factor Solution)

Scales	Factor Loadings		
	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism
Congenial-Quarrelsome	.72	.00	.18
Warm-Cool	.49	-.05	-.04
Friendly-Unfriendly	.69	.30	-.05
Safe-Dangerous	.53	.11	.11
Kind-Cruel	.65	.34	-.05
Gentle-Harsh	.62	.18	-.20
Pleasant-Unpleasant	.69	.38	-.11
Fair-Unfair	.65	.45	.00
Agreeable-Disagreeable	.64	.35	-.10
Cheerful-Gloomy	.59	.39	.09
Just-Unjust	.57	.46	.07
Skilled-Unskilled	.18	.82	.17
Qualified-Unqualified	.21	.81	.09
Informed-Uninformed	.23	.70	.10
Able-Inept	.28	.74	.12
Trained-Untrained	.14	.67	.23
Experienced-Inexperienced	.19	.52	.32
Active-Passive	.09	.05	.70
Forceful-Forceless	-.12	.00	.68
Aggressive-Meek	.00	.12	.65
Timid-Bold	-.10	.17	.64
Energetic-Tired	.08	.34	.54

analysis indicated that this was not true. In fact, the dynamism factor had a lower standard error than did the socialization factor.

Credibility Scores.--When compared with other studies in which credibility ratings were used, the ratings given to policemen in the present study can be termed "moderately high." The overall mean for policemen on all credibility scales was 5.13. This was obtained on a scale which ranged from a low point of 1 to a high of 7, with a neutral rating being 4. In two other studies, where the experimenters used introductions of sources designed to achieve scores as high as could be achieved, the results were only one scale point better. Hewgill and Miller (5) used a source that received a rating of 6.1 and Sereno (9) used a source that received a rating of 6.3. In these studies the sources were given elaborate introductions which specified many high-credibility facts in the source's background. If a particular policeman had been given the same kind of introduction, it is likely that the resulting credibility rating would have been as high.

A more meaningful comparison can be obtained when we turn to the specific test of Hypothesis 1. In this study the test of this hypothesis involved the comparison of police concepts to media concepts--the television, radio, and newspaper reporters. When compared with this

group, policemen are slightly more credible. Table II presents the means in this comparison. The overall mean for policemen is 5.13 and the overall mean for media users is 4.83. The subsequent analysis of variance, presented in Table III, shows that the difference is only significant in the dynamism factor. The "Main effects" are significant, but the "interaction effect" is also significant, showing that the main effects differ differently by level. Examination of the table of means shows that the interaction is one in which there is a large difference present in one area of the table--the dynamism factor. So the difference in policemen and media users should be attributed to the dynamism factor alone.

Types of Police Concepts.--Several analyses were undertaken to discover possible differences in police concepts. The first was a comparison between "policeman" and "police officer." Table IV presents the means in this comparison. The means are so similar as to be almost identical. Table V presents the summary of the analysis of variance. In this table, the factors alone produced a significant F-ratio, and the separate groups term and the interaction effect are not significant. No greater credibility, therefore, is inherent in the use of the term "police officer" as opposed to the term "policeman."

TABLE II  
Credibility Means for Police  
and Media Users

	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism	Total
Police	4.62	5.33	5.25	5.13
Media Users	4.43	5.27	4.77	4.83
Total	4.56	5.45	5.10	

TABLE III  
Summary of Analysis of Variance for  
Policemen and Media Users

Source of Variation	df	ss	ms	F
Subjects	1190	3445.687	2.895	
Groups	1	72.375	72.375	25.510**
Error (b)	1189	3373.312	2.837	
Total (w)	2382	2207.812	.926	
Factors	2	480.062	240.031	332.618***
Groups X Factors	2	11.687	5.843	8.097*
Error (w)	2378	1716.062	.721	
Total	3572	5653.500		

\*p < .05

\*\*p < .001

\*\*\*p < .0001

TABLE IV  
Credibility Means of  
"Policeman" and "Police Officer"

	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism	Total
Policeman	4.47	5.39	5.45	5.10
Police Officer	4.41	5.58	5.42	5.14
Total	4.44	5.47	5.43	

TABLE V  
Summary of Analysis of Variance  
for "Policeman" vs "Police Officer"

Source of Variation	df	ss	ms	F
Subjects	315	761.871	2.418	
Groups	1	0.335	0.335	0.138
Error(b)	314	761.535	2.425	
Total (w)	632	757.167	1.198	
Factors	2	213.527	106.763	123.997*
Groups X Factors	2	2.921	1.460	1.696
Error (w)	628	540.718	0.861	
Total	947	1519.039		

\*p < .01

The next analysis was a comparison of the concepts "white policeman" and "Negro policeman." These two concepts produced credibility scores that were almost exactly the same. Table VI presents the mean scores for these two concepts. "White policeman" has a total mean score of 5.189 and "Negro policeman" has a total mean score of 5.191. The test of significance between these two means is found in the summary of analysis of variance presented in Table VII. The F-ratio produced was 0.00, even when carried to many decimal places. In other words, these two concepts are so close that they are practically identical. Once more, no interaction effect was observed.

The third type of analysis compared the use of a name to see if a personalization of the concept could affect the rating. Table VIII presents the means of the concepts "Mark Thompson, white policeman" with "Mark Thompson, Negro policeman." The analysis of variance in Table IX shows that the interaction term is significant--indicating that there is a difference within one of the factors. Inspection of the table indicates that this difference is probably in the socialization factor alone. The name of the Negro policeman is .32 points lower than the white policeman. While this difference is a significant one, it is certainly not large.

TABLE VI

Credibility Means of "White Policeman" and "Negro Policeman"

	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism	Total
White Policeman	4.80	5.61	5.16	5.189
Negro Policeman	4.76	5.65	5.17	5.191
Total	4.78	5.62	5.16	

TABLE VII

Summary of Analysis of Variance  
of "White Policeman" and "Negro Policeman"

Source of Variation	df	ss	ms	F
Subjects	242	537.539	2.221	
Groups	1	0.002	0.002	0.000
Error (b)	241	537.537	2.231	
Total (w)	486	322.593	0.663	
Factors	2	86.585	43.292	88.473*
Groups X Factors	2	0.148	0.074	0.151
Error (w)	482	235.859	0.489	
Total	728	860.132		

\*  $p < .01$ 

TABLE VIII

Credibility Means of "Mark Thompson, White  
Policeman" and "Mark Thompson, Negro Policeman"

	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism	Total
Mark Thompson, White Policeman	4.80	5.53	5.06	5.13
Mark Thompson, Negro Policeman	4.48	5.50	5.17	5.05
Total	4.67	5.52	5.10	

TABLE IX

Summary of Analysis of Variance for "Mark Thompson, White Policeman" and "Mark Thompson, Negro Policeman"

Source of Variation	df	ss	ms	F
Subjects	250	626.914	2.507	
Groups	1	1.128	1.128	0.449
Error (b)	249	625.785	2.513	
Total (w)	502	506.082	1.008	
Factors	2	90.261	45.130	54.845**
Groups X Factors	2	6.031	3.015	3.664*
Error (w)	498	409.789	0.822	
Total	752	1132.996		

\*p <.05

\*\*p <.001

Subject Differences.--One of the principal aims of the study was to discover differences in the various types of respondents. Three basic subdivisions were originally proposed in subjects--rural white, urban white, and urban non-white. In addition, the experimenters felt that the college-high school differences were worth exploring. The rural-urban differences hypothesized at the beginning of the study were non-existent. For the sake of brevity, the means and analysis of variance tables of this comparison are omitted. No differences were found between the college and high school samples, and so these tables are also omitted.

To achieve a clear comparison between white and non-white students, a sample of white students was drawn from the total sample which had approximately the same characteristics as the sample of nonwhite students. This was done at the original sample point--in a sample group, the negro students' responses were kept in a separate category. At the end of each sample day, an equal number of white students' responses were randomly drawn from the total and kept for this comparison.

Since the total sample results indicated no significant differences between the credibility of Negro policeman and white policeman, the first analysis

undertaken was to see if this same evaluation pattern persisted among Negro students. A sample of the Negro students' responses was drawn on three concepts--police-  
man, white policeman, and Negro policeman. Table X presents the means of this comparison and Table XI presents the analysis of variance. No significant differences are present in the analysis, although clear factor differences are still apparent. In other words, Negro students find a Negro policeman no more credible than a white policeman. There is even a slight difference in favor of a policeman that is not identified as either Negro or white, though this difference is not a significant one.

When the Negro students are compared with the white students, however, there is a clear difference. Table XII presents the means of this comparison. The summary of analysis of variance is presented in Table XIII. The groups are significantly different, but there are highly significant factor by group interaction differences, so no overall generalizations can be made. It is clear from inspection of Table XII that the great loss in credibility in the Negro student group is confined to the competence and dynamism factors. The difference between the two groups in the socialization factor is not a significant one. In short, Negro students find that policeman are not

TABLE X

Credibility Means of Negro Students  
On Various Types of Police Concepts

	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism	Total
Policeman	3.87	3.22	3.47	3.52
White Policeman	4.41	2.75	3.04	3.40
Negro Policeman	4.21	2.97	3.13	3.44
Total	4.17	3.01	3.24	

TABLE XI

Summary of Analysis of Variance for Negro  
Students Responding to Various Types of Police Concepts

Source of Variation	df	ss	ms	F
Subjects	41	97.315	2.373	
Groups	2	0.296	0.148	0.059
Error (b)	39	97.018	2.487	
Total (w)	84	157.205	1.871	
Factors	2	28.922	14.461	9.115*
Groups X Factors	4	4.538	1.134	1.715
Error (w)	78	123.744	1.586	
Total	125	254.520		

\* $p < .01$

TABLE XII

Credibility Means of White and  
Negro Students on All Police Concepts

	Socialization	Competence	Dynamism	Total
White Students	4.42	5.59	5.42	5.14
Negro Students	4.18	3.00	3.42	3.53
Total	4.38	5.21	5.13	

TABLE XIII  
Summary of Analysis of Variance Comparing  
White Students with Negro Students

Source of Variation	df	ss	ms	F
Subjects	152	448.632	2.951	
Groups	1	145.898	145.898	72.772 *
Error (b)	151	302.734	2.004	
<hr/>				
Total (w)	306	387.019	1.264	
Factors	2	64.410	32.205	36.576 *
Groups X Factors	2	56.703	28.351	32.200 *
Error (w)	302	265.906	0.880	
<hr/>				
Total	458	835.652		

\*p < .01

credible message sources, but the differences in credibility are only in competence and dynamism, not socialization.

#### DISCUSSION

It is clear that much of the current clamor over the general relationship of policemen and young people may be exaggerated. There is a real possibility that we may simply assume that young persons are represented by the vocal fringes whose verbal attacks on police are faithfully reported by the mass media, and decide that their utterances represent a problem to society. The data gathered in this study indicate that in general, policemen are as credible as any other message source, and, indeed, are more credible than newspaper reporters.

This optimistic finding cannot be generalized to the nonwhite student population, however. These students definitely find policemen to be non-credible message sources, and, curiously, express this devaluation in terms of competence and dynamism. This means very simply that young Negro students simply do not believe that policemen are competent. The causes of this kind of devaluation are obscure. It may be that the quality of police work in Negro neighborhoods is not as good as it is in white neighborhoods. It might also indicate

that police departments assign less competent officers to Negro neighborhoods. But whatever the reason, the policeman who sets out to communicate with young Negroes might be well advised to play down the socialization factor and play up his competence. This can be done in a number of ways, but the best from a communication standpoint would probably be from a technical point of view. Our society respects technical competence, and a good deal of law enforcement has a technology as demanding as any other profession. Few lay individuals know of this function of law enforcement. The officer who is communicating with young persons could easily refer to specific technological competencies that he holds. In addition, he might refer to specific kinds of skills that he acquired in becoming a policeman. Further research would be helpful in determining if this technique is successful. But until more specific data are available, the policeman who seeks to communicate with young Negroes should realize that his competence is viewed as questionable in their minds--and adjust his behavior accordingly.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the general problem of "credibility" in policemen, specifically focussing on the credibility ratings given to policemen by high school and college students. A technique was designed to measure credibility based on previous research done at Michigan State University for the Office of Civil Defense, and the general dimensions employable for policemen are the same as the dimensions for other message sources.

Specific kinds of police concepts were used for the field sample--adding words like "officer" and specific names to the basic concept. In addition, many students rated Negro and white policemen as a source concept.

The contention often made by the mass media--that policemen and young persons are experiencing extreme communicative difficulties--may be true, but is not borne out by the data collected in this study. Policemen are rather uniformly viewed as a credible message source. In fact, they proved to be significantly more credible than message sources that use the mass media, such as television and radio newsmen. Generally speaking, then, problems in communication probably are not due to any difficulties in credibility.

This optimistic finding was mitigated somewhat by the second phase of the study, which examined specific subgroups in the total student population. No differences were present between rural and urban students, nor were there any between high school and college students. But Negro students found policemen to be much less credible than did white students. This basic evaluation was not altered in the case of Negro policemen--apparently these young persons felt that a policeman was a policeman, regardless of his race. Surprisingly, the "socialization" factor was not given low ratings by Negro students, but the "competence" and "dynamism" factors contributed heavily. In other words, while the policeman seems to be close to neutral on the socialization factor (a rating very similar to that given by white students), he is viewed as not competent and not dynamic by this group.

Another general finding of the study was that policemen are viewed as being slightly more credible when they are communicating in their area of expertise rather than in some other area. This particular finding seems closely related to a commonsense prediction.

The principal conclusions of the study, then, would be that policemen need not worry excessively about building their credibility when speaking to young

audiences--unless those audiences are composed principally of Negroes. To communicate with this kind of audience, the policeman will need to work specifically on his perceived competence and dynamism.

Little help will be available from specific texts in "speech" in message preparation. For example, if a communicator looks at a book like Bettinghaus' Message Preparation: The Nature of Proof (2), all he will see in it is suggestions about "evidence" and "logic." These kinds of suggestions simply do not solve the specific problem indicated by the data in this study. The communicator will need to establish specific competencies, and can probably do that best by referring to first-hand experience. For example, if a policeman is speaking on drug abuse, he should not only allude to the "facts," but should also show his audience that he has had first-hand experience with drugs and addicts. Each specific situation would probably call for a similar kind of adaptation.

It is typical to ascribe personal and individual conflicts to problems in communication. While it would be naive to assume that no communication difficulties exist, it would be equally wrong to assert that solving communication problems will solve the rest of our problems. But it is worth attempting, and it is a start.

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