

## **SESSION 4 : ASSESSING CREDIBILITY**

Assessing the Credibility of evidence and sources is a vital skill – arguably even more so in the Internet Age where conspiracy theories rage and friends re-post unsourced photoshopped images that are not what they appear to be.

The acronym CRAVEN is useful in helping to assess people’s claims

**C**-Corroboration  
**R**- Reputation  
**A**-Ability to perceive  
**V**-Vested Interest  
**E**- Expertise  
**N** –Neutral or biased

### **1. Criteria that analyse motive**

This is concerned with **possible reasons to tell the truth or to tell a lie.** .

#### **Neutrality**

Here the source has no motive to distort what is being reported. For example an external Health and Safety Inspector would have nothing to gain from telling a lie when passing judgement on the safety of a piece of machinery in a factory. Their lack of involvement with the outcome would normally ensure that they would be unbiased/neutral.

#### **Or Bias**

The source has a motive to lie or distort the truth for example by being selective or incomplete in what they report. The motive could be to protect someone close to them such as a colleague or alternatively to blame someone whom they are prejudiced against or dislike such as an opposing business team. (**Key Question:** *Are they before the event happens, predisposed to think in a certain way?*)

#### **Vested Interest**

Here the motive to lie or tell the truth has an outcome from which the source will possibly benefit. Vested interest can therefore weaken or strengthen evidence. For example a motorist involved in an accident would have a vested interest to lie if guilty, to avoid such things as an insurance claim against them. This would weaken the credibility of their evidence.

However a police officer would have a vested interest to tell the truth when reporting an accident, as a lie or a selective report might jeopardise their job. This would strengthen the credibility of their evidence. (**Key Question:** *Is there anything that they may gain by the way that they report?*)

### **2. Criteria relating to Perception**

The ability to perceive an event correctly and therefore to report it correctly can depend upon the following:

#### **Ability to observe (to see or hear)**

Eye—witness accounts are normally seen as a stronger source of evidence than second hand accounts. For example a pilot’s account of a plane crash would normally be seen as more accurate than that of someone to whom he had reported the event. However, accounts given by those who were present still have to be evaluated. Questions that need to be asked are: How much of the incident did they see or hear? Was their vision impaired by distance, angle, age, distraction?

### **Relevant Expertise**

In a technical situation there may be a source whose claims are more credible because they have the relevant expertise to interpret the situation correctly. For example a referee assessing a foul in a football match, or traffic police assessing an accident, or a doctor assessing an injury. This evidence would normally be seen to have strong credibility, although even experts do get things wrong.

### **3. Criteria relating to Reputation**

Again this can weaken or strengthen evidence.

#### **Reputation**

An organisation or occupation can have the reputation for providing accurate evidence, eg information from the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, or a reputation for good practice. These will make their claim more credible, although not necessarily true in this instance.

Alternatively, a reputation for distorting evidence or a past history of negative performance might make their evidence less believable on this occasion.

The Communist Party under Stalin had the reputation of distorting evidence to support their cause. This might make their claims less credible.

**The above criteria need to be applied collectively to a source of evidence to build up a balanced picture of strengths and weakness.** For example the evidence of a neutral authority may as such be strong, but be weakened by not having experienced the full incident.

#### **An Example**

The report of a prison officer judging who had started a fight in the prison might have strong credibility. There would be vested interest to tell the truth, as not doing so *might* risk their professionalism. Also they would *probably* have had training to be able to interpret who were the aggressors. However, if there was any doubt that the first blows that they saw were not actually the start of the fight, then this would weaken their evidence.

### **3 further criteria**

1. **Plausibility-** is what is claimed reasonable or might there be other explanations. No matter how respectable and unbiased a witness may be, could what is claimed have actually happened? How likely is it that time stood still for everyone except one person and dinosaurs emerged out of a hole in the college canteen
2. **Corroboration-** Do witness accounts agree with each other. Who agrees with whom? What is the same? Where do accounts differ?
3. **(In)consistency-** Relates to corroboration but not only looking at differences between accounts but also at inconsistencies within an account. A student who claims that a teacher pushed him over at the front of the room and also that he was sitting minding his own business at his desk is being inconsistent.