

Perceptions of Authenticity in the Watergate Hearings

Powell L*, Hickson M, McCroskey JC and Amsbary J

Department of Communication Studies, University of Alabama, Birmingham, UK

Abstract

This study looked at perceptions of authenticity of witnesses testifying during the Watergate hearings held by Congress. The participants were students in basic communication classes at a large state university who viewed two video clips of testimony from the 1973 Congressional Hearings on Watergate. One clip was a recording of John Dean testifying about the illegal activities of those within the White House (testimony later revealed to be honest), and another by John Ehrlichman that disputed the charges by Dean. Participants responded to a questionnaire that measured perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, caring and honesty. The results showed that the testimony of Dean was rated as significantly more authentic than that of Ehrlichman. Authenticity was also correlated with trustworthiness, caring and honesty, but was not synonymous with any of the three.

Keywords: Watergate; Authenticity; Politicians; Political science

Introduction

Authenticity has been a major topic in a variety of contexts with the field of communication. For example, authentic communication is the goal of the dialogic approach to interpersonal communication [1]. Similarly, authenticity is a key component of interpersonal friendships [2]. Authenticity has also been identified as a key factor in successful health communication Petraglia [3], intercultural communication MacDonald, Badger, Dasli [4], public relations Molleda [5], advertising Mikkonen [6], religious communication Turner [7], entertainment programs Frosh [8] Pierson [9], Rose and Wood [10], Hart and Woldemariam [11], Guttman, Gesser-Edelsburg and Israelashvili [12], Hall [13], blues music King [14], and instructional communication [15]. A key component in authenticity studies is the concept that authenticity reflects the “real” person or thing, i.e., that authenticity is an expression of truthfulness. This concept is apparent whether authenticity is studied in terms of interpersonal communication Ayres [1] friendships Hughes and Heuman [2], religion Turner [7] or teaching [15].

One area in which authenticity is particularly important is that of political communication. Authenticity in the political context is related to truthfulness, caring, sincerity and spontaneity [16]. Authenticity can be enhanced by having the public figure speak from their own experiences Montgomery [17], while a number of behaviors can undercut the public’s perception of a candidate’s authenticity [18]. The resulting perceived lack of authenticity can doom a candidate’s chance of electoral victory [19]. Authenticity can be a factor whether the analysis refers to a speech by a particular public figure Montgomery [17], the text of a particular speech Hample [20], or a national event [21]. During the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries, for example, some critics questioned the authenticity of Hillary Clinton’s tears following the New Hampshire Primary [22]. Others questioned the authenticity of Barack Obama’s references to his religious beliefs [23].

Despite the importance of authenticity as a variable in political communication, little work has been done to develop a consistent means of neither measuring the concept nor theoretically distinguishing it from other political communication concepts. There is an honesty component to the concept, but authenticity is not necessarily truth telling nor credibility. It appears to be a concept that goes beyond simply telling the truth. Consider Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, for example. Clinton was an expert at parsing phrases to technically tell the truth, but his motives were self-serving, strategic in nature, and not representative of authentic communication

[24,25]. Instead, it was closer to what Simons called rhetorical “sleight of hand”.

This study attempted to address the problem by taking a retrospective look at the Watergate Hearings of 1974. Those hearings garnered significant public interest and media coverage LeRoy, Wotring, Lyle [26], Fletcher [27], Capo [28], Feldstein [29] that, in turn, generated major opportunities for the public to evaluate and form their own opinions of the participants [30-32]. The result was a public relations disaster for the Nixon administration Nolan [33] that impacted the 1974 elections [34]. Not surprisingly, the entire affair became a major topic of communication research [35].

The Watergate controversy was chosen as the stimulus for three reasons: (1) the authenticity of the testimony of many of the witnesses was subsequently established in terms of whether they were speaking authentically and truthfully about their involvement, or whether they were hiding something in their testimony; (2) videotaped versions of the testimony were available for public viewing; and (3) most of today’s students – the universe for the sample – would be unfamiliar with the specifics of individual witnesses. Consequently, two witnesses from the Watergate Hearings – one known to be telling the truth and one known to be lying – were used as the stimuli for this study. The question becomes whether people, who have never seen the speakers and have little experience with the subject, will be able to identify the liar as unauthentic and the truth teller as authentic. Thus, the following research question was tested:

RQ1: Will audience perceive an honest political speaker as more authentic than one who is lying?

Method

Participants

Participants were students in basic communication classes at a

*Corresponding author: Larry Powell, Department of Communication Studies, University of Alabama, Birmingham, UK, Tel: (205) 934-3877; E-mail: lpowell@uab.edu

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large state university. The sample size was 175 (88 males, 87 females) and included participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Procedures

The participants viewed two video clips of testimony from the 1973 Congressional Hearings on Watergate. One clip was a recording of John Dean testifying about the illegal activities of those within the White House, including that of John Ehrlichman. The second clip was one of Ehrlichman disputing the charges by Dean. Both clips were five minutes in length. The witnesses chosen as the stimuli were used because 1) they were unknown in large part to audience; and 2) their testimonies were essentially the same in length and on same topic; and 3) history has identified which one was lying and which one was telling the truth.

Measurement

After viewing each clip, the participants rated each of the speakers using a series of adjectives. The participants were instructed to rate each speaker in terms of the extent to which each term applied to the person in the clip. The rating for each term was scored using the following instructions: strongly agree (1), agree (2), undecided (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5). The terms used were: genuine, rehearsed, spontaneous, manipulative, candid, fake, earnest, above board, guaranteed, scheming, explicit, contrived, sincere, coached, sophisticated, simple, trustworthy, caring, competent, distorted, open, honest, crooked, fictitious, legitimate, assertive, responsive, versatile, competent, flexible, authentic, stupid, and sneaky.

Statistical analysis

Two statistical analyses were performed. First, the 33 items were subjected to factor analysis to determine a factor structure for the construct “authenticity.” Second, those items that loaded on the authenticity factor were then scored to see if statistically significant ratings would be obtained for responses to Dean (who was testifying truthfully) as compared to Ehrlichman (whose testimony was not truthful).

Results

Factor analysis

The data were subjected to a factor analysis using principle component analysis. The resulting analysis identified ten items – four positive terms and six negative terms – that loaded on an authenticity factor and accounted for 59 percent of the variance. These ten items had an alpha reliability of .85 (Table 1).

Validity test

To test the ability of the items to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic speaking, the data was subjected to a *t-test* comparing the scores for the two speakers. As predicted, the clip featuring the truthful testimony of John Dean received higher ratings for authenticity (27.47) than did the ratings for the testimony of Ehrlichman (24.91). The difference was significant ($t=2.41, p<.05$). In terms of similarity to other communication variables, authenticity was correlated with trustworthiness (.57), caring (.51) and honest (.61), but was not synonymous with any of the three.

Discussion

The authenticity scale developed in this study is both reliable and valid. Its reliability estimate is relatively high at .85, and it discriminates

Item	Loading
genuine	-.739
fake	.762
contrived	.584
sincere	-.734
coached	.580
crooked	.663
fictitious	.548
legitimate	-.631
authentic	-.734
sneaky	.572

Table 1: Authenticity Factor.

between two subjects of known variation in authenticity. The only problem is that both of the individuals used in the study scored below the mid-point (3.0) on the authenticity scale. Dean (27:5) was rated significantly more authentic than Ehrlichman (24.9), but still fell below the 3.0 midpoint. One possibility is that both speakers were low on the spontaneity element identified by Liebes [16]. Both subjects read from prepared scripts, and that likely lowered their ratings.

Another potential reason for the low scores for both individuals may be a function of their being identified as “politicians.” A large proportion of the American people do not see politicians as honest in their behavior and hence they may also see politicians’ speeches as not authentic. In this situation the nature of the speakers and their need to read their speeches rather than speak without reading may have reduced the evaluations of general authenticity perception of both speakers. Further research should include speakers who both read and do not read their speeches to determine whether this factor impacts perceptions of authenticity for both speakers who are politicians as well as other speakers.

Further, authenticity seemed to be distinct from credibility – despite some common overlaps. Credibility distinguished the two speakers only on the trustworthiness dimension ($p<.05$), but the scores were close even on that dimension (3.69 vs 3.39). As a set of predictors, the credibility items accounted for 42% of the variance for authenticity. Thus authenticity appears to be related to credibility, but it’s not the same concept. At best, it may be related to trustworthiness, and authentic communication probably increases trustworthiness, but it still appears to be a different concept.

Another possibility is that authenticity may represent an emotional component of trustworthiness. Truth itself may be about the facts of the issue under discussion, while authenticity may represent the audience’s perceptions about the speaker’s emotional attachment or positive value to what facts he or she may be saying.

Another factor which must be considered is that there was a confessional element in Dean’s presentation. In the absence of spontaneity from either witness, Dean’s confessional factor may have contributed to his higher ratings. That raises the question as to whether the act of confessing increases the perception that the speaker is more authentic. That issue warrants further research.

Future studies should examine the concept further. This should include additional analyses of the reliability and validity of the authenticity concept. Such studies would allow for the addition of authenticity as a means of testing reactions to public figures.

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