Evaluating The Credibility of Sources of Information

How can you tell if something you read or hear is believable? Newspaper stories, information on the web, government reports, and the statements of public officials are sometimes proven to be wrong.

The problem of evaluating the credibility of historical sources of information is especially challenging. Information may be incomplete, and persons with knowledge about an event or situation may no longer be available.

Sociologists, historians, and other social scientists have developed some ways to evaluate the credibility of sources of information. These are not perfect. There are no ways to guarantee the accuracy of information sources, but the answers to the following questions can increase the believability of information.

- **Who is the source of the information?** A person who has relevant expertise on or experience with an event or situation is generally, but not always, more credible than one who does not.
- **What are the motives of the person providing the information?** No one is totally objective, but some people may have motives that make their information especially questionable. People may report things to raise their status or to benefit financially and may have a bias, personal grudge, or "axe to grind."
- **How many people provided the information?** Multiple sources of information are usually more credible than single sources.
- **Are the sources of information reputable by other knowledgeable persons?** In general, information is more credible if knowledgeable people are willing to vouch for the sources.
- **How detailed and specific is the information?** General descriptive words (for example, "inhumane," "substandard") represent someone's interpretation or conclusions. Different people have different standards for reaching conclusions. Detailed and specific observations and quotations are more credible than general interpretations.

- **Are there different types of information?** An account is more credible if it is based on a variety of sources of information, including verbal accounts, different forms of documents, and photos.
- **When was the information recorded?** The closer to an event or situation that information is recorded, generally the more credible it is.

Steven J. Taylor, Ph.D.
©Syracuse University, 2003. All rights reserved.