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Lived Experience and Messenger Credibility: A Replication Study on P/CVE Messenger Credibility in Germany

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ABSTRACT

This study examines messenger credibility in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), comparing lived experience (i.e. former extremist and victims of terrorism) messengers to professional experts using experimental data from a representative German sample ($N = 2004$). Findings suggest institutional messengers may be more credible due to professional expertise, challenging assumptions about lived experience credibility. Replicating a UK study with a refined design, this research enhances understanding of P/CVE messenger credibility, offering key insights for policy and P/CVE communication strategies.

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"Persuasion lies at the heart of political communication," according to Flanagin and Metzger,[1] yet the role of, and differentiation between messenger-types has received relatively less attention in comparison to studies on the persuasiveness of messaging.[2] One determinant of messenger credibility relates to the extent the messenger has expertise on the subject matter or if they are perceived as competent in it.[3] For instance, a significant factor in whether businesses and local government authorities are seen to be credible is the extent they are viewed as competent or performing well.[4] Experts have been shown to be credible when they can draw upon institutional affiliation to signal a command of relevant policy information.[5] It is less clear to what extent expertise translates to persuasiveness, as non-expert messengers have been shown to be equally credible in some instances,[6] nevertheless the expertise a messenger can demonstrate is an important dimension of perceptions of credibility.

Yet existing research on credible messengers has focused on either institutional experts or non-expert messengers,[7] none of which captures the type of expertise that is attributed to 'lived experience' messengers. In some policy domains, expertise is not only associated with elites or holders of institutional power and knowledge. Recent research on credible messengers in criminology has focused on how lived experience messengers have used their unique insights into their own experiences to make them

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impactful messengers in community programs.[8] The belief that people with lived experience are credible messengers also extends to fields of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), as discussed below.[9] Both in the criminology and security literature pertaining to credible messengers in P/CVE, the salience of lived expertise as a form of credibility is often presented in juxtaposition to the low credibility of traditional experts in this policy area.[10] However, most studies on messenger credibility have so far neglected lived experience – as a consequence, understanding of the role of expertise as a factor shaping perceptions of credibility has been overly weighted to institutional forms of experts.

The following study contributes to theoretical debates on credible messengers by broadening the conception of expertise to include non-institutional expertise, specifically lived experience. A wider set of literature across disciplines has conceptualized lived experience as a form of expertise.[11] While a growing literature values 'the everyday' by examining ordinary lived experiences,[12] it is important to distinguish between ordinary citizens within the conception of the everyday and lived experience messengers who draw on specific, sustained unique experiences. Thus, we conceptualize lived experience messengers as distinct from ordinary citizens to avoid losing the category of expertise. In the following article we focus on two types of lived experience messengers within a terrorism prevention domain: former extremists, and victims of terrorism, both of whom have been elevated as important messengers within terrorism prevention work. Little research has empirically tested the widespread assumption that lived experience messengers are inherently perceived as credible messengers. We also contribute to wider communications research by juxtaposing lived experience messengers with institutional expertise messengers.

Replicating and extending a prior UK-based study,[13] we employed a refined experimental design to enhance methodological rigor in Germany. Defined as "a deliberate repetition of a previous study in whole, in part, or conceptually to demonstrate the reproducibility, validity, and generalizability of research results or theory over a specified range of instances and contexts"[14] the present study was planned and conducted well after the first UK study to test and refine its validity in another national context. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of messenger credibility in political communication, criminology and terrorism studies. We advance and compare lived and professional expertise which speaks to debates on the salience of expertise in generating credibility. We provide new insights on correlates of perceived credibility which contributes to advancing theoretical accounts of messenger credibility. Finally, we build upon the rigor of a prior study,[15] underlining the contribution to research in criminology and terrorism research which has primarily operated on untested assumptions on the relative credibility of lived and professional expertise, often with practical implications.

Lived Experience Messengers in the Terrorism Prevention Domain

The present article contributes evidence on differences in the perceived credibility of lived experience and institutional messengers in P/CVE: a policy area that has been particularly influenced by this assumption. Persuading individuals to recognize the dangers of extremist propaganda and recruitment—or encouraging those already

radicalized to reconsider their beliefs—is central to academic discussions, policymaking, and efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. Often this is done through the design and implementation of so-called counter or alternative narrative campaigns[16] or other forms of preventive communication against the appeal of extremist narratives. In this sense, P/CVE messaging may be seen as an ideal type of political communication understood as the "production and impact of persuasive political messages, campaigns and advertising".[17]

The timing, reasons, and effectiveness of campaigns designed to build resilience against extremist propaganda or encourage disengagement and deradicalization remain as relevant today as when the topic gained attention over a decade ago.[18] Unfortunately, the evidence base for the effectiveness of P/CVE narrative campaigns is not robust,[19] despite some advancements in the empirical study of some variables enhancing (or detracting from) their impact.[20] A key question in this debate is: which messenger—for example, a government actor, civil society organizations, individuals with specific professional or lived experience backgrounds—could be most effective in delivering these counter or alternative narratives to the various target groups, as an essential part of counter extremist political communication. Closely connected to this key question is the issue of the credibility of messenger and narrative to achieve the desired impact, a topic that has long been discussed in political communication research.[21] In P/CVE research looking at counter or alternative narrative campaigns, source or messenger credibility is widely seen as an essential factor in achieving impact, for example by creating sustainable resilience against extremist radicalization and recruitment.[22] Since greater source credibility is positively associated with message persuasion,[23] this is an ongoing trajectory of research. Different messenger types are assumed to possess inherent source credibility by scholars and practitioners, such as former extremists or victims of terrorist violence,[24] while others, such as police officers, are assumed to have little source credibility. In both cases, however, these claims are usually made with scant empirical evidence.[25]

A prior experimental study, based on a representative survey in the United Kingdom, compared the inherent credibility of P/CVE messengers among different target audiences and found that far-right former extremists are perceived as neither credible nor lacking credibility among the general population, nor are they perceived as credible among a far-right milieu.[26] Surprisingly, in this study police officers achieved the highest credibility in P/CVE communication.[27] Other messenger types, such as victims of far-right violence and social workers, were not perceived as credible, nor lacking credibility (on average).

Two key limitations of that study, which was the first empirical exploration comparing perceived credibility of different P/CVE messengers, are notable. First, the amount of variance in credibility explained by those variables, was a relatively small five percent: suggesting a large yet-unidentified set of variables impacting perceived credibility other than the type of messenger. Second, the United Kingdom context of that study raises the question of how far those results might generalize elsewhere: given, for example, different nations' political cultures and P/CVE landscapes, including (for example) the history of public discourse about P/CVE programs and initiatives. In response, the present study replicates, in Germany, that prior study and provides for—to the best of our knowledge—the first cross-country comparison of P/CVE

messenger credibility to date. We also extend the originally explored independent variables—accounting for other known correlates of support for political violence—to identify other potentially relevant factors impacting the credibility of P/CVE messenger types, and—hence—provide more precise, empirically-informed recommendations for the design of such campaigns and initiatives. Hence, the main research question guiding this study is:

RQ: How far can the findings from the original study on messenger type credibility in P/CVE narratives in the United Kingdom be replicated in Germany and what, if any, differences in outcomes can be found?

Survey of the Literature

The extensive review of the literature, in the original study of the United Kingdom, noted a discrepancy between the widely held (but usually not empirically based) assumptions in the P/CVE field that former extremists and police officers possess inherently high vs low source credibility.[28] Furthermore, other research on credibility predicted almost entirely opposite effects.[29] However, the specific (UK) national context was considered in those original hypotheses. Hence, within the present replication study we examine their probability and plausibility within a German context and determine, if–according to the available literature and scholarly discourse on the field of P/CVE in Germany–different outcomes may be expected.

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Programs in Germany and the Role of Formers and Police

In Germany, one of the world's largest and most diverse P/CVE landscapes has evolved since the late 1980s, when the first governmental reintegration and rehabilitation initiatives targeting left-wing terrorists were introduced.[30] In addition to the long tradition of counter-radicalization and deradicalization work, this field in Germany is also characterized by a high degree of participation by state agencies and civil society organizations (CSO).[31] By 2021, the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) identified 2,291 extremism prevention programs, ranging from primary (resilience building) to secondary (radicalization vulnerabilities, early warning signs) to tertiary (deradicalization, disengagement, reintegration) working levels,[32] of which about 67% were dedicated to combatting right-wing extremism and about 61% were implemented by civil society organizations.[33] Regarding tertiary prevention or deradicalization and disengagement programs, the BKA counted 721 projects (32% of all prevention projects) for 2021.[34] When administered by governmental agencies, deradicalization and disengagement programs in Germany are typically run by police or intelligence agencies.[35] In short, the comparatively large diversity of actors and approaches as well as the long history of these programs and initiatives has resulted in the solid establishment of the P/CVE field in Germany.

This establishment of P/CVE activities in general was facilitated by an overwhelmingly positive and supportive public media discourse over decades that has rarely questioned the efficacy or inherent value of this work and is characterized by a "striking absence of voices in the German media flat out rejecting de-radicalization programs

due to negative social or moral consequences. Surprisingly, not even cases of recidivism among clients of de-radicalization programs had a significant influence on the media discourse".[36] However, the German public discourse on P/CVE (and more specifically on deradicalization and disengagement programs) is dominated by civil society actors as the leading frame sponsors, typically focusing on a claimed lack of effectiveness of security agencies and governmental P/CVE initiatives compared to themselves.[37] Combatting and preventing extremist radicalization is widely portrayed as a task for social work, focusing on the needs of the clients in the German public discourse, while governmental (i.e. police or intelligence led P/CVE programs) are largely absent from the debate.[38]

In addition to civil society organizations as dominant voices in the German public P/CVE discourse, former extremists have acted as P/CVE speakers in schools, media interviewees, expert guests in talk shows or authors of autobiographies and have been a central feature of the German P/CVE landscape since the early 2000s: especially formers of extreme right backgrounds. A study assessing the media's coverage of these engagements of formers using a sample of 151 newspaper articles published between 2001 and 2019, regarding 133 former extremists, found that the reporting was overwhelmingly positive.[39] Despite the limited and contested evidence that former extremists have a significant positive impact on their target groups,[40] they have nevertheless been portrayed in the German public discourse, for decades, as highly credible and effective actors to prevent and counter dangers of extremist radicalization due to their (presumed) inherent authenticity.

Focusing on German scholarly and practitioner discourse regarding the credibility of different actors in the P/CVE field, governmental actors (i.e. police and intelligence services) are typically singled out as particularly problematic. It is widely assumed that security agencies would find it difficult or even impossible to establish a trusting relationship with clients due to their law enforcement and surveillance mandates, thereby being central components of the state system that is rejected in correlation with increased radicalization. For example, some authors claim that:

> …among many members of the target group, a pronounced mistrust of government agencies and especially security authorities [prevails]. These people are correspondingly difficult to reach for employees of programs that are based at the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, for example. Civil society organizations can more easily establish access and build trust here. Since they do not have a security mandate, they can more easily convince these clients of the authenticity of their exit offer and focus primarily on the needs and resources of their clients.[41]

From this perspective, the assumed lack of trustworthiness – which is a dimension of source credibility[42] - is also linked to a lack of authenticity of the governmental P/CVE services.

Outside of the P/CVE discourse however, it is noteworthy in the context of the present study that general trust in the police within the German population is very high: typically between 70 and 80% reported by various surveys.[43] A small, positive correlation is also reported between right-wing authoritarian attitudes and trust in the police.[44] It is noteworthy, albeit perhaps not surprising, that trust in police is negatively impacted by other factors including conspiracy mentality.[45] For the UK, surveys have shown a significantly declining public trust in the police. From 2017/18

to 2021/22, the number of people in the UK who think the police are doing a "good" or "excellent" job fell from 62% to 52% and overall confidence in local police fell from 78% to 69%.[46] As of January 2025, a YouGov poll does show a slight increase in public trust levels. However, the combined number of people having "a lot" or "a fair amount" of confidence in the police is still much lower than in Germany with 53%.[47]

Theorizing the Correlates of Source Credibility: Ethnocentrism, Conspiratorial Beliefs and Political Efficacy

As noted in the original study,[48] scholarship connecting strategic communication findings to P/CVE programs is largely silent on key specific predictors of source credibility in P/CVE contexts. To this end, we extend that original study to consider four additional correlates which have demonstrated relevance with respect to P/CVE messaging: authoritarianism, conspiratorial beliefs, political efficacy, and trust in institutions. First, literature on authoritarianism has linked that construct with both ethnocentrism and downstream effects of source-credibility. Specifically, individuals high in authoritarianism are more likely to act, or adopt attitudes, in accordance with a high-credibility source.[49] Critically, both ethnocentrism and authoritarianism are common attributes of individuals within the far-right milieu.[50] Consequently, failing to consider individuals' degree of authoritarianism could obfuscate the relationship between messenger, ethnocentrism, and source credibility. Likewise, research has found that individuals holding conspiratorial beliefs are fundamentally less trusting of government authorities (e.g. police officers), less likely to comply with government guidelines,[51] and—under certain conditions—are more prone to deleterious and non-normative behaviour.[52] Moreover, many conspiratorial narratives often target the victims of extremist violence or natural disasters,[53] suggesting that those who hold conspiratorial beliefs may be prone to perceive victims as uncredible.

Third, we note that political efficacy may serve an important role in understanding why certain (especially governmental or institutional) narrators may be perceived as more credible than others, since internal (i.e. the belief that one can understand politics and therefore participate in politics) and external (i.e. that the government will respond to one's demands) political efficacy are linked to political involvement, participation and trust in institutions.[54] Finally, policing research has found that trust in institutions aids in securing citizen compliance. That is, when individuals believe that government institutions and agents are acting in good faith and consider their feedback, the institutions are imbued with a greater perception of legitimacy, and citizens are more likely to adhere to official decisions.[55] This has been extended to policing terrorism,[56] as trust in institutions (policing in particular) fundamentally conditions how communities—even those targeted for intense counter-terrorism measures—perceive government action.[57] Insofar as these covariates may influence *why* individuals may find a given P/CVE messenger to be credible (or may jointly inform assessments of credibility and ethnocentrism), incorporating them into the present study enables us to determine the inherent credibility of actors more precisely.

Credibility itself is often defined as a set of perceptions that receivers hold toward a specific source, medium or message, with the outcome being the acceptance of the speaker and of the message by the audience.[58] This has resulted in research exploring each of these three subcategories of credibility (source, medium or message credibility). Within

source credibility research, dimensions such as expertise, trustworthiness, reliability, composure, sociability, similarity to the source, dynamism, safety, likability and goodwill play central roles.[59] One of the most widely used scales for measuring source credibility is Meyer's credibility index, which operationalizes credibility through five components: trust (or trustworthiness of the source), accuracy of the information, fairness of the source's arguments, completeness of the information and the perceivable lack of bias.[60]

There is no reason to assume that determinants of source credibility necessarily differ between the United Kingdom and Germany. Much scholarship in the field of political communication has focused on ethos or source credibility, referring to Aristotle's original triad of persuasion:[61] for example, its role in election results or performance rating of political candidates.[62] Larger source credibility is positively associated with persuasion.[63] Hence, it is likely that those P/CVE narratives and messengers with higher source credibility will be more successful in persuading target audiences of, for example, the negative effects and dangers of involvement in violent extremism and terrorism. Known factors that moderate the impact of source credibility are, for example, issue involvement and how closely the position advocated by the source matches the receiver's position and his or her own expectations.[64] Consequently, political persuasion, including those within a P/CVE context, are also more likely to result from high credibility sources.

Within the P/CVE communication field, the perceived expertise, qualifications and credentials of the messenger are typically seen as the key to successful outcomes.[65] Former extremists and victims usually draw their expertise from lived experience whereas police and social workers tend to have formal qualifications and are linked with institutions which may give them access to information that other messengers would not have. Hence, we distinguish the four messenger types in the present study between two classes: lived experience vs. institutional expertise (though messenger types were analyzed separately where relevant).

Whether lived experience of former extremist translates into perceived expertise depends on the level of that expertise and whether the audience perceives such experience as conferring such expertise. There is, however, little evidence that lived experience or first-hand knowledge of issues contributes to perceptions of credibility.[66] Furthermore, Koehler et al.[67] argued that formers and victims are potentially viewed as engaging in 'cheap talk', or rather, that they struggle to generate 'costly credibility' because audiences cannot perceive how speaking out against extremism places costs on their interests, as opposed to serving their own interests. They acknowledged that formers and victims face serious harm in acting as messengers but that they also may benefit: a major criticism of former involvement in P/CVE, since some formers are motivated by financial gain or publicity.[68] Subsequently, it is unclear whether formers and victims are capable of clearly signalling costly credibility. Third, it is doubtful whether partisan credibility and ethnocentrism would help formers generate credibility with an extremist audience (as often claimed in P/CVE discourse) because it is unclear whether formers, by virtue of being a 'former,' would be viewed as part of the (former) extremists' in-group. If either general audiences, or the far-right milieu, view former extremists as still part of the extremist movement, their criticism of right-wing extremism would likely increase perceptions of source credibility. However, the dynamic of exiting an extremist movement is to

break away from attitudes and symbols associated with the movement, yet formers also face extensive social stigma and struggle to be accepted back into society.[69] For these reasons, formers are theoretically more likely to be perceived as *not* belonging to the extremist in-group by either general audiences or far-right milieus, and—therefore—struggle to generate partisan credibility. In summary, the theoretical literature on source credibility provides little indication that former extremists or victims would be perceived as credible, either among a general audience, a far-right milieu, or relative to other messengers.

Regarding potential credibility of police officers and social workers, research on source credibility suggests the opposite. Perceived expertise is likely to be higher for those two messengers due to their qualifications, credentials, and access to information unavailable to other messengers.[70] Institutional authority and perceptions of fairness could also potentially compensate or dampen effects of being perceived to engage in 'cheap talk'. Beyond the general audience, the far-right subgroup (who likely score high in ethnocentrism) are also more likely to perceive the police as credible due to (assumed) partisanship and support for authority and hierarchy.

However, given the fact that, in Germany, former extremists have been a central part of the public P/CVE discourse for decades—for example, when they are presented as experts in media reporting or as regular speakers in P/CVE workshops in schools—and, since civil society actors are the predominant frame sponsor in the German discourse (i.e. widely highlighting the social work nature of P/CVE work and criticizing the role of the authorities), it is to be expected that both formers and social workers are seen as more credible messengers compared to the original study.[71] Hence, we have slightly adapted the original study's hypotheses regarding the perceive credibility of formers, social workers and police officers:

H1: Former extremists and victims will be perceived as credible messengers *among a general audience*

H2: Former extremists and victims will *not* be perceived as credible messengers *among a far-right milieu*

H3: Social workers and police will be perceived as credible messengers *among a general audience*

H4: Social workers and police will be perceived as more credible messengers *among a far-right milieu*

H5: Former extremists and social workers will be perceived as more credible messengers compared to victims and police messengers among both a general audience and a far-right milieu.

Materials and Method

Design

The present study employed a 5-level (messenger type), between-groups design. With an additional factor, ethnocentrism, measured as a continuous covariate. Additionally, models were estimated with authoritarianism, conspiratorial beliefs, political efficacy,

and trust in institutions as covariates to determine a more comprehensive and precise treatment effect.

Participants

Participants were ($n = 2{,}004$) German citizens (over age 18), recruited through the German survey firm "forsa," between March and April 2023, using a pre-registered online panel, representative of the German population. Hence, the sample corresponds with the audiences of primary and secondary P/CVE campaigns and interventions, which are the main focus of this study. The survey was financed by the Competence Center Against Extremism in Baden-Wuerttemberg. The final sample afforded the study 99.63% power to detect even small effects: 19.63% more power than conventional standards.

Materials & Procedure

The dependent variable of this study was Meyer's credibility index.[72] During the experiment, participants were presented with one of five short vignettes (four attributed statements and one unattributed statement [control condition]) that presented a brief P/CVE narrative targeting the threat posed by extreme right-wing recruitment and radicalization in Germany. In the experimental conditions, the vignettes—similar in every other respect—were attributed to the perspective of A) a former right-wing extremist, B) a victim of right-wing extremism, C) a social worker, and D) a police officer (the full vignettes are available upon request from the authors). After reading the vignette, the participants were instructed to evaluate the provided statement by selecting a number between each pair of descriptive words that best represented their feelings. The scales used were as follows: Trustworthiness, ranging from "Can't be trusted" (1) to "Can be trusted" (5); Accuracy, ranging from "Is inaccurate" (1) to "Is accurate" (5); Fairness, ranging from "Is unfair" (1) to "Is fair" (5); Completeness, ranging from "Doesn't tell whole story" (1) to "Tells the whole story" (5); and Objectivity, ranging from "Is biased" (1) to "Is unbiased" (5).

For the subsequent analyses, these five scores were aggregated into a single composite item (centered about the mean, whereby zero represents the midpoint of credibility, translatable to "neither credible nor uncredible"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.90).[73]

Independent Variables

Aside from experimental condition, the primary moderating variable - ethnocentrism - was measured using the following three items (also, aggregated to a summed measure):

- All in all, how interested are you in the customs and values of other cultures?
- What do you think: Is it more of an enrichment or more of a burden for German culture to allow immigration?
- What would you say, can people from your culture learn a lot, rather a lot, rather little, or nothing at all from people from other cultures?

Each item was measured on a 4-point Likert-style scale (1 = very much to 4 = not at all) where higher values correspond to greater levels of ethnocentrism. These three items were combined into an additive composite and the resulting score was centered about the mean such that positive values indicated greater than average ethnocentric ideas and negative values corresponded to less ethnocentric ideas. We further note here that, given the observed overlap between far-right beliefs and ethnocentrism, this measure indicates potential vulnerability to far-right movements and groups. In other words, those higher on this scale correspond to potential secondary prevention targets whereas the general public reflects primary PCVE audiences.

Authoritarianism, conspiratorial beliefs, and perceived political efficacy were likewise measured *via* additive composites of 5-category Likert-style indicators (ranging from "Agree Completely" to "Totally Disagree"). While the raw sum scores are shown in Table 1, these scales were mean centered for the purpose of analysis such that 0 represents the average respondent, positive values indicate above average, and negative values indicate below-average.

Finally, the institutional trust composite captured trust in seven different institutions of German society; federal government, state government, political parties, city government, police, judiciary, and public media. Each institution was evaluated individually and respondents indicated trust *via* a four category Likert-style item ranging from 1 = "No Trust at All" to 4 = "Very High Trust". These items were collapsed into a mean-centered additive measure such that positive values indicate greater than average trust in institutions overall, whereas negative values correspond to 'worse' than average institutional trust.

Prior to full analyses, exploratory factor analysis was conducted on each of the six scales to determine whether they reflected a single latent concept in the present-population. All six scales were optimally aggregated *via* a one-factor solution.[74]

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by experimental condition.

Characteristic	Control[a]	Former Extremist[a]	Victim[a]	Social Worker[a]	Police Officer[a]	p-value[b]
Ethnocentrism (centered)	−0.03 (1.69)	0.02 (1.74)	−0.02 (1.77)	0.02 (1.72)	0.01 (1.69)	>0.9
Authoritarianism	25 (6)	25 (7)	25 (6)	25 (6)	25 (6)	0.8
Conspiratorial Beliefs	11.2 (4.5)	12.1 (5.2)	12.1 (5.3)	12.2 (5.0)	11.8 (4.6)	0.12
Perceived Political Efficacy	11.7 (3.7)	11.0 (3.9)	11.5 (3.8)	11.5 (3.7)	11.1 (3.7)	0.081
Trust in Institutions	18.1 (3.5)	18.0 (3.9)	17.7 (3.9)	17.6 (3.9)	17.8 (3.6)	0.4
Gender						>0.9
Female	197 (49%)	204 (51%)	200 (50%)	199 (50%)	191 (48%)	
Male	203 (51%)	198 (49%)	198 (50%)	203 (50%)	211 (52%)	
Age						0.3
18-29	37 (9.3%)	30 (7.5%)	40 (10%)	34 (8.5%)	27 (6.7%)	
30-44	80 (20%)	76 (19%)	87 (22%)	63 (16%)	66 (16%)	
45-59	117 (29%)	120 (30%)	112 (38%)	131 (33%)	138 (34%)	
60+	166 (42%)	176 (44%)	159 (40%)	174 (43%)	171 (43%)	
Credibility (centered)	−0.31 (1.01)	0.16 (0.95)	−0.14 (0.99)	0.11 (0.97)	0.14 (0.90)	<0.001
N	400	402	398	402	402	

[a]Mean (SD); n(%).
[b]Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test; Pearson's Chi-squared test.

Results

The analyses commenced by describing the sample and assessing balance across the five conditions, then by estimating a series of ordinary least squares models, and finally by considering whether the effect of the narrator on credibility depends on individual levels of ethnocentrism. All regression models reported below were estimated under four conditions: 1) naive (no survey weights, listwise deletion), 2) weighted naive (survey weights, listwise deletion), 3) imputed unweighted, 4) and imputed and weighted.[75] These conditions were identified to leverage existing survey weights in the data (to yield nationally representative estimates), account for potential missingness (with a more conservative assumption with respect to the cause of missingness), and illustrate the robustness of findings to estimation approach.

Table 1 presents the descriptive results by experimental condition. Of note, Kruskal-Wallis rank sum and Pearson's Chi-Squared tests did not indicate imbalance across conditions prior to exposure to the vignettes. Finally, respondents indicated a modest degree of trust in German institutions on average (mean = 17.84, std. dev = 3.74, α = .86). Demographically, there was no evidence of imbalance across the five conditions supporting the design assumption that any observed differences in the outcome variable (Credibility) would be due to the intervention and not underlying, confounding differences.

Briefly considering the composite credibility measure, the un-centered mean of credibility for the full sample was 3.55 (std. dev = 0.98, α = .90) - similar to the average un-centered mean reported in the original study.[76] Beyond this, naive cross-group comparisons (absent covariates or sampling weights) indicated important differences. On average, respondents assessed both the control condition (unattributed) and the "victim" condition to be less credible than the sample mean. By contrast, the three remaining conditions (former, social worker, and police officer) were more credible on average, and the Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test[77] indicates that this is a statistically reliable difference.

While in the original study all experimental conditions were compared to the unattributed statement, we recognized a valuable opportunity to improve ecological validity of the findings by, instead, drawing contrast between attributed statements – here by comparing conditions to the victim narrator. Since the victim condition was perceived to be less credible than the sample mean (and similar to the unattributed statement), the models moving forward treat the victim as the reference category and interpretations are adjusted accordingly.[78]

Turning to the regression findings, Table 2 presents the results of the study across four panels. Of note, the findings presented here are for the weighted naive model.[79] First, we estimate a simple mean comparison across the five conditions of the study (in reference to the "victim" condition). Model 1 shows that on average statements by social workers, police officers, and former far-right extremists are viewed as more credible than the same statement made by victims of far-right extremism. Curiously, the unattributed condition was estimated to be not less credible than the victim statement.

Model 2, adding the centered ethnocentrism scale, finds that on average - regardless of messenger - individuals who were higher on ethnocentrism viewed all P/CVE

Table 2. OLS Models incorporating survey weights.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Condition: Control	−0.16	−0.18*	−0.29***	−0.29***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.09)
Condition: Former FR Extremist	0.28**	0.27**	0.19*	0.19*
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Condition: Social Worker	0.24**	0.26**	0.19*	0.19*
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Condition: Police Officer	0.27***	0.26***	0.24**	0.24**
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Ethnocentrism		−0.24***	−0.09*	−0.11
		(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.07)
Authoritarianism			0.01	0.01
			(0.03)	(0.03)
Conspiratorial Beliefs			−0.24***	−0.24***
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Perceived Political Efficacy			−0.02	−0.02
			(0.03)	(0.03)
Trust in Institutions			0.17***	0.17***
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Control*Ethnocentrism				0.05
				(0.09)
Former FR Extremist*Ethnocentrism				−0.01
				(0.09)
Social Worker*Ethnocentrism				0.04
				(0.10)
Police Officer*Ethnocentrism				0.00
				(0.08)
R2	0.03	0.09	0.21	0.21

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. The outcome variable is in its original units. Standard errors are heteroskedastically robust.

***$p < 0.001$;

**$p < 0.01$;

*$p < 0.05$.

messages as less credible. Additionally, police, social workers, and former extremists were viewed as more credible than the statement attributed to the victim. However, in this model, unattributed statements were viewed as less credible than statements by victims of far-right violence.

Model 3 incorporates the personality-level variables (authoritarianism, conspiratorial beliefs, perceived political efficacy, and trust in institutions). The substantive findings of Model 2 remain, however this specification additionally finds that holding all else constant, individuals who hold more conspiratorial beliefs on average find P/CVE messaging to be less credible. Conversely, individuals who report greater trust in German institutions, on average, found P/CVE messaging more credible. Notably, adding these individual-level covariates increased the proportion of variance explained in the outcome from 9% (Model 2) to 21% (Model 3).

Finally, Model 4 assessed whether the effect of P/CVE narrators on perceived credibility depends on levels of ethnocentrism: attempting to reproduce the core finding of Koehler et al., (2023). To do so, the mean-centered ethnocentrism measure was multiplicatively interacted with each of the experimental conditions. In Model 4, the coefficient for ethnocentrism is interpreted as the effect of ethnocentrism on credibility within the reference condition (victim narrator). All listed interaction coefficients are interpreted as deviations from this conditional effect (that is, the 'main effect' of ethnocentrism is

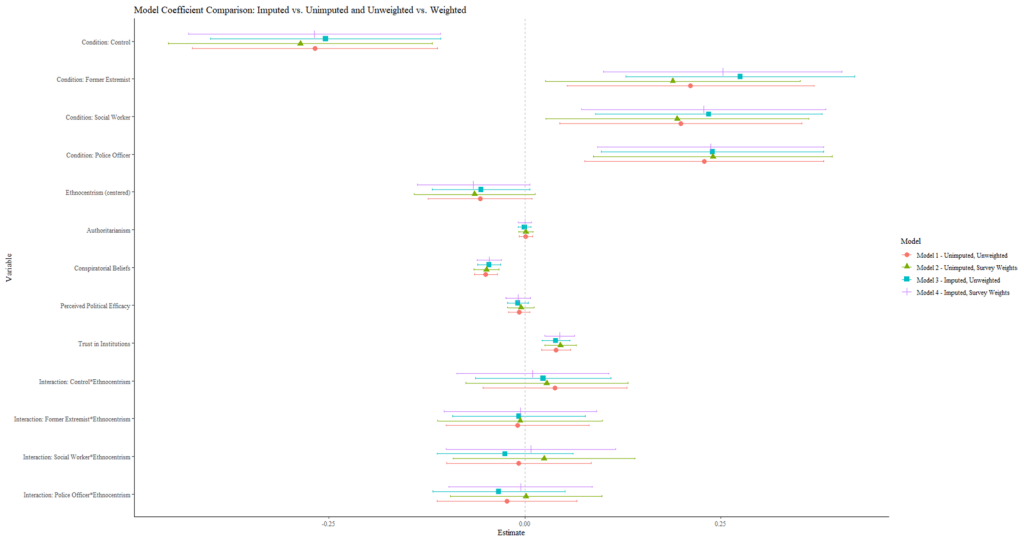

Figure 1. Model coefficient comparison: Imputed vs. unimputed and unweighted vs. weighted.

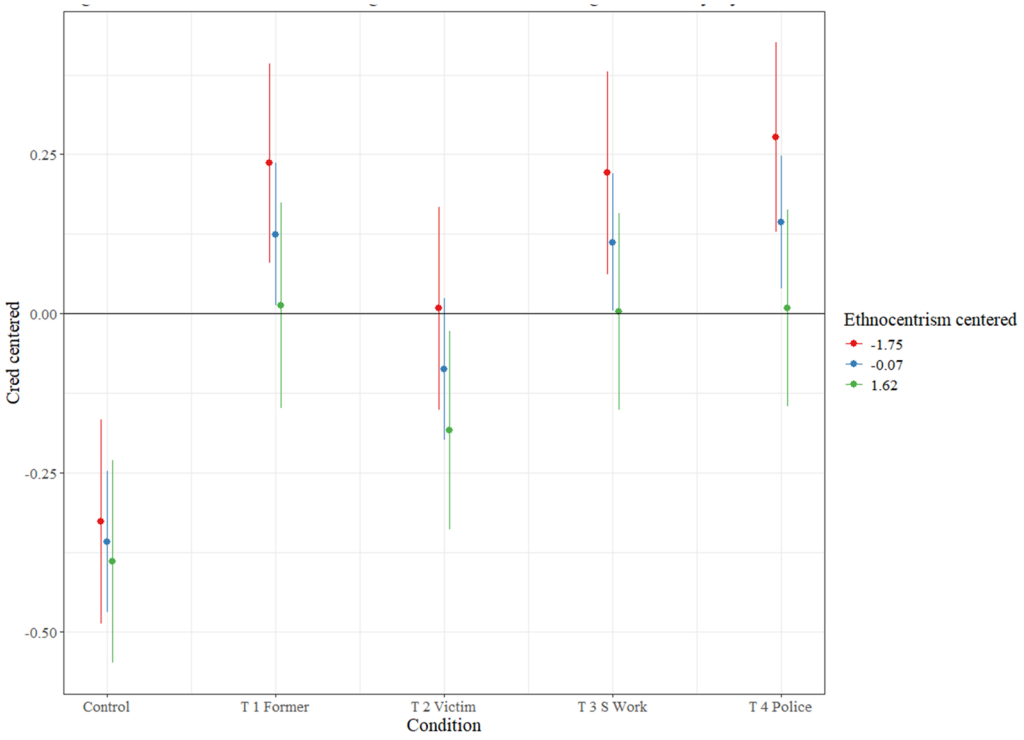

Figure 2. Mean effect of messenger on perceived credibility by level of ethnocentrism.

no longer in the model). Beyond the findings of Model 3, we find no evidence of an average protective or deleterious effect of ethnocentrism on messenger credibility: either with respect to the reference category or the other P/CVE narrator conditions.

For ease of interpretation, Figure 1 illustrates the coefficients of the final model. Additionally, Figure 2 illustrates the interaction effect by plotting the mean effect of messenger on perceived message credibility at three levels of ethnocentrism (mean and ±1 SD). While Figure 2 shows no evidence that the effect of the narrator on P/CVE message credibility depends on individual levels of ethnocentrism, it shows meaningful differences for individuals at "high" and "low" levels of ethnocentrism. Notably, with the exception of the victim condition, the three attributed statements were all perceived to have above-average credibility among individuals with low ethnocentrism. By contrast, only the victim-attributed statement was determined to be of lower than average credibility when respondents were high in ethnocentrism.

Taken together, this suite of models shows that—at average levels of ethnocentrism—unattributed statements were (unsurprisingly) viewed as less credible than those attributed to former extremists, police officers, and social workers (though not victims). Moreover, ethnocentrism has, on average, a negative relationship with perceived credibility of P/CVE messengers and their messages (Model 2 & 3). Beyond this, however, the lion's share of variation in perceived credibility was driven by other individual-level attributes (conspiratorial beliefs and trust in institutions; Model 3 & 4).

Discussion

Our findings contribute to debates on lived-experience messengers. Research on credibility in communications studies indicates that lived experience messengers would be less credible than experts that can draw upon their position as experts in a subject matter, accentuated by their institutional position. On the other hand, criminology and terrorism studies research has emphasized that messengers with lived experience will be comparatively more credible due to distrust of the institutions that traditional experts are associated with. Our findings do not support either of these positions. On one hand, lived-experience messengers can be viewed to be equally credible as institutional messengers, however their perceived credibility cannot be solely linked to their status as lived or institutional messengers: victims messengers were the only messenger to not be viewed as credible and the type of messenger only explains a certain amount of the variance, with pre-existing trust in institutions, conspiratorial beliefs and ethnocentrism functioning as significant correlates of messenger credibility.

Compared to the original United Kingdom context, in Germany, three of the four messenger types (i.e. former extremist, social worker, and police officer) are perceived to be equivalently credible P/CVE messengers. In contrast, victims were perceived, on average, as least credible. Former extremists are still not perceived to be significantly more credible compared to the other messenger types, while police officers are not seen as significantly less credible than other messengers. Likewise, Social workers are not perceived to be significantly more or less credible by a general audience.

These findings are somewhat surprising, since in Germany – as described in the survey of the literature – former extremists and civil society/social workers dominate the public P/CVE discourse as purported experts on P/CVE: a landscape that simultaneously portrays security agencies as lacking the necessary credibility and skills for this work. Given that this discourse has persisted for over two decades, the differences between Germany and the UK—with respect to the perceived credibility of formers and social workers vis-à-vis police officers—are surprisingly small: that, in Germany, police officers were perceived

to be equivalently credible as other messengers stands in stark contrast to decades of public discourse to the contrary. Hence, our study indicates that general determinants of source credibility, such as professional expertise and institutional access to information, apparently are powerful factors that are very difficult to reverse or nullify, even if prolonged and consistent elite and public discourses argue contrary positions.

Far-right audiences – measurable, in part, by their ethnocentrism and authoritarianism – are an important target group for secondary and tertiary P/CVE messages (i.e. trying to cause critical self-reflection and ideally reconsideration of ideological positions and involvement in extremist milieus, for example through voluntary participation in governmental or civil society deradicalization and disengagement programs). Therefore, it is important to use effective messengers to reach them. German scholarly, practitioner and public discourses have argued quite consistently, for decades, that law enforcement actors such as police officers are likely to be less credible compared to civil society (especially social work) actors. The present replication study was not able to verify this claim. To the contrary, police officers still were perceived to be equivalently credible compared to the other messenger types: and more credible than victims (and the unattributed control group), even though such credibility tends to be reduced among those with far-right attitudes. Taken together with the original study from the United Kingdom, there now exists powerful cross-national evidence that police agencies indeed have an important role in primary to tertiary P/CVE, due to their relatively strong and consistent source credibility: even among audiences who might sympathize with radical ideologies.

While research has predominantly focused on the assumed credibility of former extremists in P/CVE, there has been far less focus on the role of victims, despite their growing presence in the P/CVE field.[80] In terms of the perceived credibility of victims as P/CVE messengers, the victim category was perceived as less credible than the other three messenger-types, including former extremists. While this was not found in the United Kingdom study,[81] the trend is consistent with theoretical and empirical research on messenger credibility that suggests lived experience messengers tend to generate less credibility simply through their role-type. However, the fact there is a difference between former extremists and victims underlines the point that messengers do not generate credibility from their lived experience uniformly – possible explanations may be the historically greater visibility of former extremists in Germany making their expertise clearer through association with institutions, the relative 'costs' of a former extremist speaking out may be more familiar, or perhaps former extremists generate credibility by audiences perceiving them through a partisanship lens.

An additional contribution to the wider literature is made through this replication study by explaining a greater percentage of the variance (20% up from 5%) in perceptions of source credibility in P/CVE narratives, in which 15% of the variance was accounted for by respondents' personality factors: in particular, conspiracy beliefs and trust in institutions. The original study[82] suggested that many unidentified variables, pertaining either to the messenger (e.g. personality and charisma) or to the situation and larger context (e.g. audience personality) might play a significant role. As a contribution to communication studies and criminology literature, the salience of trust will not be a surprise. However, it is unexpected that the salience of institutional trust and conspiratorial beliefs also impacts the perceived credibility of lived-experience messengers that are not typically associated with elite or institutional messengers. In the context of terrorism studies literature, we now have evidence that the personality

profile of the target audience(s) of P/CVE messages must be considered in the design and delivery of these narratives to achieve the desired impact.

This apparently essential aspect of successful (i.e. perceived as credible) P/CVE messages has been essentially absent from the P/CVE narrative literature so far. In this replication, conspiracy beliefs and trust in institutions negatively and positively impacted the perceived source credibility (respectively) for all messenger types: even though such constructs are not necessarily connected to, for example, social workers and formers. This is even more surprising since these two messenger types, as shown in the survey of the German literature and discourse, are portrayed (or position themselves) as almost opposite alternatives to governmental P/CVE work. The widely communicated claim of formers and civil society/social work actors as different and independent from security agencies apparently does not protect these messengers from a loss of credibility, if target audiences have little trust in institutions and/or relatively high conspiratorial beliefs). This indicates that trust or mistrust towards institutions and the government impacts P/CVE activities in general, regardless of the actor or messenger and even if the 'face' of the message communicates a strong disconnect to state institutions. In our view, this might be due to the hybrid nature of the P/CVE concept, which always blends security with social work logics and frames, regardless of the actor in charge of the narrative or intervention.[83] This in turn suggests that communication strategies, by civil society actors in the P/CVE field, attempting to critically distance themselves from security agencies, may be relatively useless in the eyes of some of their (low-trust in institutions and/or conspiratorial thinking) target audiences. This is especially important, given that deradicalization and disengagement programs, family counseling or community-based P/CVE initiatives require public trust and at least some form of credibility among their target audiences (for example, persons who want to exit extremist environments) to achieve long term success.

Conclusions, Future Research and Limitations

The present experimental study replicated, in Germany, and expanded upon an original study from the United Kingdom regarding the source credibility of different messenger types within the P/CVE domain.[84] The present findings demonstrated cross-national differences in perceived source credibility of social workers and former extremists, whereas the credibility of police officers remained consistent: indicating the reliable influence of professional expertise and institutional access to information. In this first cross-national comparison of messenger source credibility in P/CVE work, the most significant findings were the following:

1. Police agencies have a legitimate place in primary to tertiary P/CVE work, since they are clearly seen as credible messengers.
2. Messenger type and background have relatively small predictive power with respect to perceptions of credibility. Much more important appear to be audience personality profiles such as their degree of institutional trust and/or conspiracy beliefs: factors which should be seriously considered in the design and delivery of P/CVE messages.

3. These findings lend empirical support to the theory that P/CVE is a hybrid concept, always including security and social work logics, as evidenced by reduced source credibility for all messenger types (including non-governmental) when audiences' institutional trust is lacking.

Of course, the present study comes with notable limitations. First and foremost, this study – akin to the original version – focused on P/CVE narratives targeting the far right. One might expect different results, if the focus was a different (i.e. less ethnocentric) form of violent extremism such as Incel, or eco-terrorism, for example. Additionally, we note that our findings most meaningfully apply to primary and secondary prevention targets; there are key demographic differences between the general public, at-risk individuals, and those actively involved with extremist groups. Accordingly, these results may not extend to the relatively younger, and overwhelmingly male criminally involved tertiary prevention targets.

Consequently, future research should explore the impact of other ideological and/or national contexts. We strongly recommend conducting further replications in other countries, for example the United States, France or Canada (i.e. countries with robust and controversial P/CVE discourses), and recommend expanding the focus to other forms of violent extremism. Furthermore, future research could test whether audiences who (for example), are low in trust of institutions and/or relatively high conspiratorial thinking, can be primed in ways that mitigate the negative effects of those personality variables, with respect to perceptions of (P/CVE-relevant) messenger credibility.

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73. Descriptive statistics for the component items of all scales available upon request.
74. Factor diagnostics and scree plots are available upon request.
75. While the comparison of the coefficients and standard errors are illustrated below, full model outputs for each specification are available upon request. In all cases, imputation was performed using multivariate imputation by chained equations (MICE) with 5 imputed datasets.
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77. The Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test is a test that does not require the predictors or outcome variables to conform to a normal distribution, and—hence–is robust against any such violations of normality.
78. Models estimated with the unattributed statement as reference category (and indeed, all other messengers as reference) are available upon request. Importantly, none of the alternative reference categories yielded substantively distinct findings, however given the present design we are able to directly contrast credibility *among* the conditions rather than remaining unaware of potential 'rank'.
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