



# Judging Reality: I've Got to Admit It's Getting Better

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## Introduction

The source-monitoring framework specifies an elaborate set of principles by which people can determine the origin, or context, of how they experienced information and events. The focus of the framework has been on how people determine the origin of their own memories. For example, it would be very important to remember whether one just imagined mailing a bill, or actually went to the mail box and did mail it (called a reality monitoring judgment). By the same token, it is important to remember whether a memory is from a reliable versus an unreliable source in order to evaluate or act on the memory in a particular way. There is, however, another kind of source judgment that has received very little empirical attention, namely, how do people judge the origin (i.e., source) of another person's memory. When someone describes an event, can people determine the veracity of that event? That is the focus of this research project.

This form of source monitoring is actually very important, and has wide-ranging implications. For example, when jurors listen to testimony of various witnesses, they must judge whether the statements being made are real, made up, or just a product of confabulation. The outcome of court cases depends on the ability to evaluate the source of someone else's memory. A judge's sentencing is clearly influenced on an evaluation of people's memory. Less consequentially, everyone needs to evaluate stories that we are told from friends and loved ones. Such reminiscence is a part of everyday life; but we are constantly monitoring how much "stock" to place in such stories.

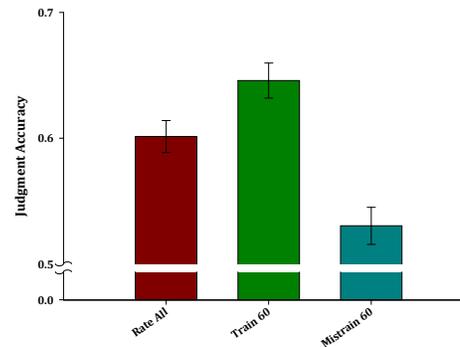
Because of the theoretical and practical ramifications of understanding how we evaluate other people's memory, we undertook the following research. We gave people a set of pictures and a set of concrete nouns. For the latter, they had to imagine the referent. For both sets of items, they had to write a description of the picture or what they imagined. We then gave these descriptions to a different set of people and we asked them to make a judgment of whether the description represented something seen (picture) or imagined. The key question was whether people could perform at above chance levels. We also took the opportunity to understand whether people could *learn* to make such judgments. Consequently, across the two experiments we either trained people to make the judgments or gave them feedback, which is a different form of training. The details follow.



## Experiment 1: Methods

- 180 Descriptions collected from a control condition
- Half were of pictures; half of words
- Descriptions "cleaned" to remove obvious references to source
- All participants made Picture vs. Imagined decisions (binary)
- Three experimental conditions
  1. Make picture vs. imagine judgments
  2. Correct training on the first 60 items then judgments
  3. Incorrect training on the first 60 items then judgments

## Experiment 1: Results



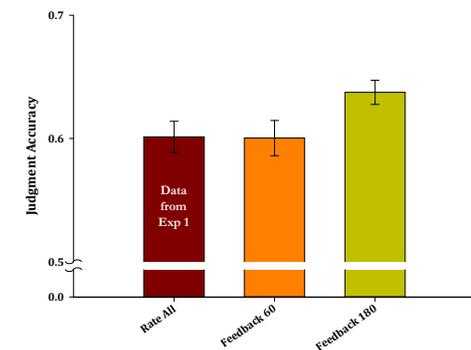
The results are presented as three bars above. The first critical question that we answered was that people can judge the accuracy of other people's descriptions (memories) because the red bar is above chance (50%). So, people are able to ascertain and evaluate subtle cues about how someone else's memory was formed. In addition, this ability can be malleable insofar as we could change the magnitude of this effect experimentally. When we gave people 60 trials of correct training, their next 120 trials of testing performance exceeded what people did on their own with no experience. On the other hand, misinforming people about what descriptions came from an imagined or seen source on the first 60 items reduced their performance to almost chance levels. We conclude from this data that people have a native ability to monitor another person's memory, but that this ability can be influenced.

## Experiment 2: Motivation & Methods

Another way to train people to be sensitive to someone else's memory is to give them feedback when they are correct at a judgment of a particular description. We gave people feedback on just the first 60 trials (out of 180) in one condition and in another condition we gave them feedback on all 180 trials. Based on the results of Experiment 1, we assumed the greater amount of feedback, the greater the improvement in source monitoring would be.

- Descriptions used from Experiment 1
- Two main conditions of interest
  1. Feedback (correct/incorrect) on the first 60 trials
  2. Feedback on all 180 trials

## Experiment 2: Results



We were interested to learn that feedback, being correct or incorrect, on 60 trials did not change performance over the control condition in Experiment 1. However, by the end of 180 trials, participants used the extensive feedback to significantly improve their performance. Across the two experiments, it appears that training, telling people *explicitly* what is a description of what is seen or imagined, is a much more effective way of improving their ability to evaluate someone else's memory than getting feedback after a decision on each trial.

## Conclusions

The source-monitoring framework has specified how we can monitor our own internal memories. This ability is incredibly important as we evaluate what our tasks and goals are through-out a day. However, we need to interact with other people and we need to evaluate what they say. We need to act on other people's memories as well. This latter issue has not been studied very well, and we feel that it should figure more prominently given the practical ramifications of understanding how people make decisions based on evaluations of their memories. For example, a young father asked his child what she had for lunch and the child's answer was pure fiction. The father knew this, and realized that dinner might be a more important issue for his daughter. Monitoring other people's memories is not just important for the issues we raised in the introduction, it also guides our own behavior and decisions.