

## Evaluation of Public Spokespersons<sup>\*</sup>

*Based on empirical studies employing factor analysis, this paper proposes to see the two constructs “credibility” and “charisma” as two separate factors, both of which comprise properties desirable for a public spokesperson. This result contrasts with earlier studies of the credibility construct, which take it to merely be a covering umbrella term for all the properties that a public spokesperson might wish to have. We find credibility to comprise properties like intelligence and competence, but also—which is perhaps more noteworthy—ability to see a matter from different angles, balance, respect for others’ opinions, and ability to admit a mistake. Charisma, in contrast, is comprised of properties including extroversion, passion, dynamism, and self-confidence.*

“...but when I was speaking in America, they told me that there were 105 million TV sets in America ... It is a strange feeling to speak to millions of people. I think one feels it. There is something strange about television, very odd, also in another way. They told me over there that television is dangerous, it gives you away, you can’t hide your true nature, appearing on television. They said that McCarthy, then a very popular person, was ruined in one or two days, after appearing on television. People did not believe him, or they did not trust him any more ... . In general, people who appeared on television over there were kind of “waterproof.”

*(Quotation from radio interview with Karen Blixen, 1955)*

### Background

In our generation, audio-visual media have become a dominant force in the public arena, for political debate, transmission of news, business, and for many other purposes. In this context, the *credibility* of public persons has become an important item in the public sphere. For example, in Denmark the current Prime Minister, Mr Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, is said by

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many commentators to have a severe “credibility problem.” This liability is said to have brought him defeat in the referendum he had called on the common European currency in September, 2000, which was won by the anti-Euro coalition, and it is also cited as grounds for his likely upset in the upcoming general election. Such claims are current in spite of the fact that Mr. Nyrup Rasmussen's administration is admitted to have performed well by objective standards, at least as far as the economy is concerned.

It is not a new fact that credibility is considered important. For the last 50 years or so, communication scholars have studied it intensively. Hovland et al. (1953) initiated this effort, Andersen & Clevenger (1963) summarized work so far, followed by, among many others, J. McCroskey (e.g., McCroskey 1966; Whitehead 1968; Tuppen 1974).

After the heyday of empirical credibility studies, a new facet to the issue came into focus as television became the main source of political and other public communication. The ability to communicate well on TV was highlighted in the 1980's in press commentaries as well as scholarly studies centering on President Ronald Reagan as a “master communicator.” Reagan's masterful handling of the specific demands of this all-important medium were scrutinized. Since then, it has been a standard assumption that the ability to perform well on TV and in other mass-mediated contexts is crucial to success in politics as well as in business and public opinion generally, and there is a strong tendency to equate the notion of a source's credibility with that source's ability to handle TV and other media well and to “come across” in a way that will ingratiate viewers.

That raises the question as to what connection there might be between these two constructs: 1) credibility, as analyzed in the many empirical studies since the 50's, and 2) the status as mass-mediated “master communicator,” as instantiated by Ronald Reagan, or in later decades, Bill Clinton or British PM Tony Blair. Are these two constructs basically the same? Or are they different but correlated? Or are they perhaps clearly separate?

To return to the case of Prime Minister Nyrup Rasmussen, it is generally said not only that his credibility is low, but also that his performance on TV is often toe-cringing. One way to see such a case is to conclude that credibility and the qualities that make a master communicator are closely connected, and that this is why a public figure would rank low in both respects.

On the other hand, there are observations that might suggest a different hypothesis. A point of departure for this study has been the regular appearance of credibility ratings for public persons, media, and organizations. One source of such ratings in Denmark has been the business weekly *Børsens Nyhedsmagasin*, which publishes an annual “credibility barometer.” More than once, we have been struck by the fact that the people and organizations usually considered “master communicators”—for example those politicians most praised by the media and by communication experts as being “telegenic,” capable of “coming across” on TV, of communicating in “headlines,” etc.—are often quite low on the list. Conversely, figures or organizations at the top of the list are generally such as usually appear to lack or to shun these qualities; more typically, they appear reflective, balanced, measured, and even reticent in their media appearances.

From these observations we have built the hypothesis that in this age of mass-mediated communication there might well be more than one dimension on which the public communication of, e.g., politicians and organizations are evaluated by the general public. Further, we hypothesize that these dimensions may well be separate and perhaps even negatively correlated. Specifically, we hypothesize that the “master communicator” dimension might be separate from the “credibility” construct.

In studies done over the last decades, scholars have tended to find that credibility has as one of its dimensions a factor revolving around “dynamism” or “charisma.” The work of Berlo *et al.* (1969) has been influential in this respect. What Berlo and his associates did was to compile a set of semantic differentials (statements) by asking a number of people to name qualities that would be found in people of whom they might say (rather vaguely perhaps), “If it’s good enough for him, it’s good enough for me.” They then had a number of individuals rate a set of “message sources” along these differentials and subjected the data to factor analysis. Other researchers, working largely along similar lines, included a growing number of differentials in their studies.

The problem with this tendency was that it became increasingly unclear whether all these differentials were actually relevant to the concept of credibility, or whether the construct whose factors were being studied was a larger, less coherent one. Berlo *et al.* chose, in the title of their paper, to use the term “Acceptability of Message Sources,” a term which leaves some obscurity as to whether this is the same as “credibility” or perhaps a vaguer, more inclusive concept.

An impressive number of studies on credibility and ethos continued to appear in the Seventies, designed largely along the same lines: more and more semantic descriptors were selected and subjected to increasingly sophisticated factor-analytic procedures. At the same time, however, one of the originators, and perhaps the key figure, of this whole line of research, J.C. McCroskey, was beginning to doubt the soundness of the direction it was taking (McCroskey and Young, 1981). He felt that credibility scholars, including himself, had distorted the credibility construct by including an ever wider battery of descriptors, while still assuming that they were dealing with the same concept: credibility (or as McCroskey preferred to call it: *ethos*). By doing this they confounded credibility with other source characteristics unrelated to it. Source credibility, McCroskey now found, was merely a subset of a much larger construct of “person perception,” and scholars would have done well to limit their factor analysis of it to the original Aristotelian *ethos* construct, with its main factors of competence (*phronesis*), moral character (*arete*), and good will towards the audience (*eunoia*)—a formula which had proved its robustness in one empirical study after the other, including McCroskey’s own.

The present study is based on a hypothesis that heeds McCroskey’s warning: credibility, we hypothesize, is a quite narrow concept that is separate from other important and desirable source characteristics. Among these other desirable characteristics are, for example, “telegenic” qualities enabling a person to come across well on TV, as well as such personable qualities which might easily allow audiences to relate to and identify with that person.

In order to test this hypothesis, we have assembled a set of scales that might be involved in creating either of the overall impressions of a source that we wish to analyze. Among these are a number of statements that are typically used to refer to a public person’s media performance. This is one respect in which our study differs from the long line of pre-1980 studies, in which media performance was not a specific issue in relation to credibility. A further difference is that in a methodically simple but perhaps debatable move, we have included our main dependent variable, credibility, in the list of scales. We did this in order to see how the other scales would correlate with it, and whether a factor would actually emerge that might meaningfully be called “credibility.”

Just as we believe that there is a tendency to confound unrelated aspects of source evaluation under the term “credibility,” we also hypothesize that differentiation is called for in another respect: credibility, for different

categories of public persons, may depend on different characteristics. This should really be a rather obvious point, yet is one that was not explicitly made in credibility research until Cronkhite and Liska (1976).

It is likely that credibility and overall source evaluation for different public persons depend upon quite different characteristics of the source. The present study presents an attempt to develop an instrument which can give a more precise and more detailed picture of the way in which public spokespersons are perceived. At the same time it is an initial attempt to establish data that can show how such evaluations look in an European (Danish) context.

### **Hypotheses**

To sum up: In the present study, we want to test the following hypotheses.

H1. Evaluation of public persons is made along several dimensions, among which credibility is one and just one.

H2. The dimension of credibility is separate from the dimension that might characterise telegenic “master communicators.”

H3. Different public persons are evaluated differently, along evaluative dimensions.

H4. In particular, credibility depends, for different public persons, on different aspects of the overall impression made by that person.

In testing these hypotheses, ideally, a large number of different public persons should be evaluated along a large number of scales. To do so would require a questionnaire so extensive that it was feared that it would influence the response-rate and the quality of the responses.

For this reason, it was chosen to limit the study to five different public persons, with expectedly very different profiles.

### **Methodology**

For the study, a battery of statements were developed, covering items that might be used meaningfully in describing public spokespersons.

Inspiration came from past studies of source effects (McCroskey et al. 1972), from corporate image studies (Worcester 1972), and from other evaluative measurement instruments, such as Osgood's Attitude scales (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1963). After some sorting and testing, a

battery of 45 items was decided upon. The battery includes statements of the type: “is informative”, “is eloquent,” etc.

In the study, five high-profile public figures were included. These were two well-known political leaders with very different political orientations: Mr. Svend Auken (57), a leading Social Democrat, currently Minister of the Environment, and Ms. Pia Kjærsgaard (53), leader of the right-wing, anti-immigration Danish People's Party; Denmark's most notable businessman, Mr. Maersk McKinney Møller (87), owner of the huge and successful A.P. Møller group; Ms. Bodil Nyboe Andersen (60), Governor of the National Bank; and a celebrated sports personality who has moved into politics: Mr. Ulrik Wilbek (42), former manager of the Danish ladies' handball team, which he led to a series of international triumphs in the 90's. Each of these persons was rated on a five-point Likert scale for each of the 45 statements. Respondents were 78 students in a graduate class of Marketing and Communication.

### Data analysis

Self-rating of the respondents' awareness of the five spokespersons was also included in the questionnaire. Since the respondents were graduate students in business economics, we find it surprising that Mr. Møller and Ms. Nyboe Andersen were judged by several to be “not very well-known.”

	Svend Auken	Pia Kjærsgaard	Mærsk Mckinney Møller	Bodil Nyboe Andersen	Ulrik Wilbek
Others	1	1	1	5	1
1			11	28	3
2	4	1	10	19	9
3	15	9	18	12	16
4	20	23	17	9	15
5	25	31	16	4	23
6	13	13	5	1	11

*Table 1: Awareness. 1-6 reflect degrees of awareness, 6 being the highest, and 1 = do not know.*

In the following analysis, respondents' ratings of persons they do not know, or do not know very well, are excluded. Awareness and average scores on self-rated credibility for the five public figures are shown in Table 1. It is obvious that considerable variation in the data exists. The two most credible figures, by far, are the non-political Governor of the National Bank

and the leading business personality, but they are also the least known.

Factor analysis was conducted for each of the five persons. For a description of this technique, applied in the manner done here, see, e.g., Green and Tull (1978).

It appears that the solutions emerging here has significant similarity across individuals. This we take as an indication that the dimensions along which the different public persons are evaluated are similar, even though the precise evaluation of the persons may differ markedly. For this reason, we decided to define the dimensions based upon a combined analysis for all five public spokespersons. In this manner, the number of observations on which the analyses are based is increased from 78 to 391. The stability of the solution thereby improves significantly.

With three factors, 47 percent of the total variance in the data is accounted for. Adding more variables only slightly increases the amount of explained variance. As in other analyses of this kind, “noise” in the raw data (the ratings), combined with effects of skewness of the distribution of answers for many of the items, may account for this. It is a common observation that one can rarely explain more than 50-60 percent with factors which each accounts for at least as much variance as one single question. In the present case, to reach this level, the inclusion of nine factors would be required (64 percent explained variance). However, each of the last six factors explains only a little more variance than any single question. For this reason—and since the three-dimensional solution lends itself easily to a meaningful interpretation—we chose to focus on this. The solution is shown in table 2.

The first factor, accounting for more than half of the explained variance, centers on credibility, which comes out with the highest loading of all statements. This lends support to the notion that “credibility” is indeed a separate factor, and that its name is an apt one. Moreover, the loadings of the other statements on this factor suggest some of the aspects that enter into the perception of credibility. On average for the five public figures, to be “irritating” (not surprisingly) detracts from credibility, whereas the perceptions that a person is intelligent, objective, and competent add to it. These are clearly representative of the Aristotelian “phronesis” dimension (cf. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*). Further, it is noteworthy that being able to see matters from different angles and being balanced and respectful of others’ opinions are properties with high loadings. These represent a dimension that bear some resemblance to the Aristotelian *arete* and *eunoia* dimensions, but

which may more properly be described as standing for judge-like qualities—independence, objectivity, incorruptibility, etc.

The second separate dimension in the evaluation of the five persons can be labelled “charisma.” Public spokespersons having this characteristics are extrovert, entertaining, telegenic, passionate, and able to explain things in a down-to-earth manner. Such people are the darlings of talk-show hosts and debate moderators on TV because they come across so well on the screen.

It is no surprise that this is a dimension in source evaluation. The interesting thing is that this dimension is separate from credibility proper. This finding may explain the observation which originally instigated this study: that political and public figures high in telegenic qualities and the ability to “sell tickets” on the screen (to translate a favourite Danish term) often ranked low in credibility ratings, while precisely people like Ms. Nyboe Andersen—high in expertise, independence, and balance, but soft-spoken and low in media magnetism—were invariably rated most credible.

Credible	0.88	
Irritating	-0.85	
Professional	0.80	
Intelligent	0.79	
Competent	0.78	
Unappealing	-0.77	
Person I often agree with	0.76	
Realistic	0.76	
Appealing	0.75	
Can see matters from different angles	0.72	
Pleasant	0.71	
Calm	0.70	
Balanced	0.69	
Stupid	-0.69	
Seen to often	-0.66	
Sincere	0.65	
Dishonest	-0.64	
Respects other people's opinions	0.60	
Artificial	-0.56	
Eloquent	0.55	0.48



## Evaluation of Public Spokespersons

Informative	0.54	
Exciting personality	0.52	
Not able to lie	0.46	
Extrovert		0.68
Entertaining		0.67
Straightforward		0.59
TV appeal		0.58
Passionate		0.55
Brings matters down to earth		0.54
Has charisma	0.41	0.51
Imaginative		0.51
Good popularizer	0.45	0.50
Lacks TV appeal		-0.50
Good at making debate		0.49
Dynamic		0.48
Self-confident		0.47
Dull personality		-0.45
Knowledge		0.44
Sensitive		0.62
Warm		0.60
Unassuming	0.41	0.53
Capable of admitting mistakes	0.48	0.49
Incapable of admitting mistakes	-0.39	-0.47
Doesn't respect other people's opinions	-0.40	-0.43

*Table 2: Three-dimensional solution*

The third dimension has a more emotional side to it. Important traits of persons scoring high on this factor are: sensitive, warm, folksy, plain, and able to admit mistakes. The common denominator for these perceptions might be a homey, “one-of-us” quality.

### **Three-dimensional evaluation of spokespersons**

Having determined three dimensions along which people evaluate public

persons, we may try to profile the five public spokespersons individually on the three dimensions. This we could do by averaging each person's scores on the more important items belonging to each of the three factors. A more sensitive and elaborate procedure, however, is to compute factor scores for each respondent's evaluation of each public person on each of the three dimensions. The average factor score for each dimension then represents the degree to which each of the three public persons is associated with that dimension. These scores are shown in table 3:

	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III
Svend Auken	-0,24	-0,24	0,29
Pia Kjærsgaard	-0,91	0,43	-0,51
Mærsk McKinney Møller	0,70	-0,19	-0,54
Bodil Nyboe Andersen	0,52	-0,50	0,00
Ulrik Wilbek	-0,07	0,51	0,77

*Table 3: Average factor scores on each dimension for each person*

It is evident that the way in which the five spokespersons are regarded is very different. Mærsk McKinney Møller is most credible, but he scores less well on the other factors. Least credible is Pia Kjærsgaard. However, along with sports celebrity Ulrik Wilbek, the right-wing party leader scores highest on charisma. This dimension is one that the low-key National Bank Governor, Bodil Nyboe Andersen, completely lacks. On the other hand, she is the only one to come anywhere near Møller on credibility. On the emotional "one-of-us" dimension, Auken and especially Wilbek stand out.

### **The nature of credibility**

The way the five spokespersons achieve such credibility as they have varies significantly. At one end of the scale, we find Nyboe Andersen, at the other end Kjærsgaard (Table 3). But as we shall see, what explains the degree of credibility that each of the five persons has varies much between them.

The *overall* nature of credibility can be inferred from the statements that load high on the credibility dimension in the analysis shown in Table 2. It is, however, possible to analyse credibility in a slightly different way as well. By using the credibility score as a dependent variable in a correlation

analysis, and using answers to the 45 statements as independent variables, it is possible to single out exactly what constitutes credibility for each spokesperson. To achieve this, a regression analysis for each of the five persons was carried out. Here the amount of explained variance in the credibility score varies from 85 to 99 percent.

From this analysis, it is obvious that credibility for the different spokespersons has to do with different perceived qualities in them. Findings are shown in table 4. Only few statements correlate significantly with credibility for more than one of the five spokespersons

Clearly, each of these public figures has a different “credibility profile”; credibility has a somewhat different meaning depending on whose credibility we are talking about. The perceived credibility of Svend Auken, the Minister of Energy and the Environment, seems to have to do with his being realistic, respectful of the opinions of others, and informative, but not with any willingness to admit mistakes nor—surprisingly perhaps—with his being eloquent or extrovert. Many people would probably agree that Auken has these qualities; it seems, then, that there might be a tendency for his eloquence and extroversion to strike people as “too much,” detracting from his credibility. For Pia Kjærsgaard, the right-wing, anti-immigrant party leader, the most significant findings are that those who find her credible also perceive her as disrespectful of the opinions of others, and that they do not see her as warm; they do not agree that she is unable to admit mistakes (but, somewhat contradictorily, will not go so far as to agree that she is able to admit them). For Mr Mærsk Møller, the business tycoon, those who find him credible tend to find him intelligent, pleasant, and objective, while they reject the notion that he is dishonest. National Bank Governor Bodil Nyboe Andersen is seen as credible by people who see her as calm, competent, pleasant, and, perhaps surprisingly, entertaining; they feel that she is not dishonest, nor is she warm or someone they often agree with. For Ulrik Wilbek, the celebrated sports personality, credibility seems to depend on his being seen as straightforward, calm, and unable to lie; those who see him as credible do not feel that he is telegenic or charismatic, nor that he is stupid.

## Evaluation of Public Spokespersons

Regression Analysis	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
<b>Svend Auken</b>						
(Constant)	2,25	1,32		1,71	0,10	
Capable of admitting mistakes	-0,35	0,13	-0,31	-2,60	0,01	
Eloquent	-0,26	0,12	-0,27	-2,16	0,04	
Informative	0,36	0,10	0,37	3,60	0,00	
Respects others opinions	0,25	0,12	0,24	2,17	0,04	
Dull personality	-0,23	0,11	-0,27	-2,02	0,05	
Realistic	0,41	0,10	0,40	4,10	0,00	
Extrovert	-0,21	0,10	-0,20	-2,16	0,04	
Knowledge	0,18	0,09	0,15	1,91	0,06	
<b>Pia Kjærsgaard</b>						
(Constant)	1,84	1,52		1,21	0,24	
Doesn't respect others opinions	0,19	0,09	0,27	2,07	0,05	
Warm	-0,24	0,13	-0,22	-1,77	0,09	
Not capable of admitting mistakes	-0,17	0,09	-0,23	-1,94	0,06	
<b>Bodil Nyboe Andersen</b>						
(Constant)	1,38	1,75		0,79	0,44	
Professional	0,23	0,15	0,26	1,50	0,15	
Pleasant	0,26	0,17	0,29	1,51	0,15	
Dishonest	-0,29	0,16	-0,25	-1,89	0,07	
Intelligent	0,33	0,19	0,29	1,69	0,10	
<b>Bodil Nyboe Andersen</b>						
(Constant)	0,51	1,44		0,36	0,73	
"I often agree with"	-0,48	0,12	-0,48	-3,87	0,00	
Competent	0,54	0,15	0,58	3,61	0,00	
Entertaining	0,50	0,12	0,45	4,30	0,00	
Warm	-0,45	0,15	-0,31	-3,06	0,01	
Apealing	0,32	0,11	0,37	2,88	0,01	
Dishonest	-0,36	0,10	-0,32	-3,50	0,00	
<b>Ulrik Wilbek</b>						
(Constant)	0,86	1,33		0,64	0,53	
Positive TV appearance	-0,15	0,11	-0,21	-1,34	0,19	
Entertaining	0,18	0,11	0,28	1,58	0,13	
Is straightforward	0,16	0,11	0,24	1,52	0,14	
"Not able to lie"	0,19	0,10	0,26	1,89	0,07	
Charisma	-0,25	0,13	-0,32	-1,88	0,07	
Calm	0,22	0,13	0,32	1,69	0,10	
Stupid	-0,19	0,12	-0,22	-1,58	0,13	

*Table 4: Regression analysis—significant items in relation to credibility*

## Discussion

The analysis clearly suggests that our evaluation of public persons takes place along several separate dimensions. Here, it has been proposed to work with a three-dimensional analysis: credibility, charisma, and “one-of-us” emotional appeal. This analysis supports our hypotheses 1 and 2: credibility is just one factor in the evaluation of a public communicator; and more specifically, credibility is separate from other qualities that public communicators may also wish to possess, such as a) charisma and b) “one-of-us” emotional appeal. To be even more specific: the much vaunted charismatic, “master communicator” quality that politicians and other public figures are often said to need in order to “come across” on TV is not the same thing as credibility.

To say this is not tantamount to saying that credible “master communicators” do not exist, or that the “mastery” they possess is not a valuable and important one. That claim would fly in the face of facts, e.g., the case of Ms. Kjærsgaard, who is undoubtedly, in some way, a master communicator with charismatic traits. Such a figure is clearly effective and persuasive in terms of building popular support. That raises the intriguing question of what the different *kinds* of persuasiveness or effectiveness are that we find in communicators who are strong on each of our three dimensions: credibility, charisma, and “one-of-us” appeal, respectively. The present study gives us no basis for theorizing on that. However, the question calls to mind a perspective raised by an empirical study of persuasion in which one of the authors was involved (Jørgensen, Kock and Rørbech 1994; 1998; this volume, Chapter 12). In that study, it became clear that we may distinguish between two different kinds of persuasive effectiveness, each corresponding to a separate persuasive strategy. These are *vote-shifting* and *vote-gathering*, respectively. Vote-shifting is the ability to win over votes from the opposite side. Vote-gathering is the ability to mobilize latent followers from the “undecided” group and to galvanize the enthusiasm of followers already mobilized. The typical vote-shifter, it turns out, is very reminiscent of the typical “credible” person of the present study; the typical vote-gatherer has most of the qualities that constitute our “charisma” factor. In fact, a public debate featuring Ms. Kjærsgaard was a key case in the earlier study, and it turned out then that in persuasive strategy as well as in measurable persuasive effect she was perhaps the most typical vote-gatherer of all debaters studied (out of 74).

We began with a reference to the case of Denmark’s Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen. Looking back, we may now state that although in

many people's estimate he has neither credibility nor charisma, this should not lead anyone to think that the two dimensions are the same. They are identifiable and separate dimensions in the evaluation of public communicators.

However, when that is said, it also seems likely that these dimensions involve somewhat different qualities for different communicators. For example, our everyday judgement of the credibility of different communicators relies upon different traits. This lends support to our hypotheses 3 and 4. When we look for reasons why this should be so, it is natural to point to the fact that these five figures belong to very different spheres. First, we may assume that respondents have not rated their credibility *in abstracto*, but on the assumption that they should be seen as communicating within the particular sphere in which they are active. When Mr. Møller communicates to the public at all (a rare event), he talks about business and how various policies will affect it, not about sports. So the credibility ratings he achieves refer to what he says within that sphere. Secondly, it is natural to assume that the qualities which make Mr. Møller credible on business matters are different from those which make Mr. Wilbek credible on (certain) sports. Our readers may explore our tables for themselves to look for qualities that may be constitutive of credibility in politics, business, sports, etc., respectively. Suffice it here to conclude that differences in what makes for credibility in people from different life spheres are to be expected and have indeed emerged, yet the more interesting fact is perhaps that in spite of these differences there is a relation and an overlap between the credibility profiles of these very different figures—enough to allow us to conclude that credibility is an identifiable and separate construct, as are the other two factors in our analysis.

Based upon the present study, it would be possible to devise a meaningful instrument of manageable size for the profiling of spokespersons along the three dimensions suggested here. To estimate someone's credibility, one would concentrate on those items in the analysis that contribute strongly to the credibility of at least one of the spokespersons. With regard to the second and third dimension, it would be advisable to work with at least three statements for each, providing a total battery of 16-20 statements, to be used for each person to be evaluated.

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